



PROPERTY CRIMES INVESTIGATION IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES


A Law Enforcement Investigation Toolkit — National Native Justice Institute | www.nativejustice.us


■ PROPERTY CRIMES IN INDIAN COUNTRY

Property crimes — burglary, theft, vandalism, arson, motor vehicle theft, and fraud — are among the most commonly reported offenses in tribal communities and represent a significant quality-of-life and economic burden on tribal members and tribal programs. Despite their frequency, property crimes are often under-investigated in Indian Country due to limited investigative resources, jurisdictional complexity, and the prioritization of violent crime. Effective property crime investigation protects community members, holds offenders accountable, supports insurance and restitution claims, and generates the evidence base needed for federal and tribal prosecution.

 Property crime — particularly residential burglary and theft — disproportionately impacts tribal elderly, low-income households, and housing authority properties.

 Drug-motivated theft and burglary are directly linked to substance use crises in tribal communities. Property crime investigations frequently uncover drug use, trafficking, and other serious offenses.

 Property crimes in Indian Country may be subject to tribal, federal, or concurrent jurisdiction depending on the parties involved. Determine jurisdiction at intake.

 Thorough, documented property crime investigations are essential for successful prosecution, insurance recovery, restitution orders, and community accountability.

■ PROPERTY CRIME INVESTIGATION FUNDAMENTALS

Burglary Investigation

- Secure and document the scene before the victim or others disturb it. Photograph all points of entry and exit, interior disturbance, and any items out of place.
- Identify and collect evidence at the point of entry: tool marks, fingerprints, footwear impressions, broken glass, and biological evidence (blood, hair, skin cells).
- Interview the victim thoroughly: what is missing, estimated value, any serial numbers or identifying marks, recent suspicious persons or vehicles in the area, and any known individuals with access to the property.
- Check neighboring surveillance cameras, ring doorbells, and tribal or facility cameras within 24 hours of the report. Footage is often overwritten quickly.

Theft Investigation

- Obtain a complete written list of stolen items with descriptions, serial numbers, approximate values, and any identifying marks from the victim as soon as possible.
- Enter stolen property with serial numbers into NCIC immediately. This is the single most effective tool for recovering stolen property and identifying serial offenders.
- Check pawn shops, online marketplaces (Facebook Marketplace, OfferUp, Craigslist), and known drug dealers and users who may have received or sold stolen property.
- Identify patterns: multiple thefts in the same housing area, same type of property stolen, or similar entry methods indicate a serial offender who should be the focus of investigation.

Vandalism & Graffiti Investigation

- Photograph all graffiti and vandalism in full context and close-up before any cleanup occurs. Graffiti may provide gang intelligence, tagging signatures, or identifying information.
- Estimate or obtain an estimate of the cost of damage for charging purposes. Felony thresholds matter for jurisdiction and sentencing.
- Check for surveillance coverage of the vandalism area. Many vandalism incidents occur near existing cameras that were not initially checked.
- For graffiti indicating gang activity, share photographs with your tribal police intelligence function and regional gang units.

Motor Vehicle Theft

- Enter the stolen vehicle into NCIC immediately with a full description, VIN, plate number, and any distinguishing characteristics.
- Document the point where the vehicle was last known to be and any witnesses to its presence. Canvass the area for surveillance footage.
- When a stolen vehicle is recovered, process it as a crime scene: fingerprints, trace evidence, and any items left by the thief before the owner retrieves the vehicle.

Arson Investigation

- All fires with suspicious origin must be treated as potential arson crime scenes until ruled otherwise. Preserve the scene and contact your tribal fire marshal and state fire investigation resources.
- Arson is a Major Crimes Act offense when committed by an Indian in Indian Country. Notify the FBI for any suspected arson that results in bodily injury or death.

- Document the fire’s origin point, burn patterns, and any accelerant indicators. These observations by first responders are critical to the fire investigator’s work.

Fraud & Financial Crimes

- **Tribal Program Fraud** – Theft or misuse of tribal program funds is a federal offense under 18 U.S.C. §1163. Notify the FBI and BIA OJS for any suspected embezzlement from tribal organizations.
- **Identity Theft & Elder Fraud** – Financial exploitation and identity theft targeting tribal elders are priority offenses. Coordinate with the FBI’s Financial Crimes unit and elder justice resources.
- **Insurance Fraud** – Document any suspicious patterns in tribal property claims and report concerns to your tribal insurance carrier and, where appropriate, tribal law enforcement.

■ TIPS FOR TRIBAL PROPERTY CRIME INVESTIGATORS

- **Enter Everything into NCIC Immediately** – Stolen property with serial numbers entered into NCIC is the most reliable tool for property recovery and connecting cases across jurisdictions. Do not delay entry.
- **Work Patterns, Not Just Individual Cases** – Serial property offenders commit multiple crimes before they are caught. Build a pattern analysis function in your department — it produces far more arrests than individual case work alone.
- **Check Pawn and Online Secondhand Markets** – A significant percentage of stolen property moves through pawn shops and online resale platforms within 48 hours of theft. Regular pawn shop checks and online monitoring are high-yield investigative tools.
- **Photograph Before You Touch Anything** – At every property crime scene, complete photographic documentation before any item is touched or moved. You cannot re-create the original scene after it has been disturbed.
- **Notify FBI for Arson & Tribal Program Fraud** – Both are federal offenses in Indian Country. Contact the FBI and document the notification time, agent name, and response.

RESOURCES, GRANTS & SUPPORT

Funding, Training, and Support Resources — Tribal Property Crimes Investigation Programs | www.nativejustice.us

■ FEDERAL GRANT RESOURCES

Investigation & Law Enforcement

- **FBI Indian Country Programs** – Federal investigation of Major Crimes Act property offenses including arson and tribal program fraud. fbi.gov
- **BIA Office of Justice Services** – Federal law enforcement support and coordination for property crime investigations in Indian Country. bia.gov/bia/ojs
- **COPS Tribal Resources Grant (TRG)** – Funds tribal law enforcement capacity including investigative staffing and equipment. cops.usdoj.gov/tribalresources
- **CTAS – Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation** – DOJ consolidated tribal funding for law enforcement and investigation capacity. justice.gov/tribal

Fraud & Financial Crimes

- **FBI Financial Crimes Unit** – Federal investigation of tribal program fraud, elder financial exploitation, and identity theft. fbi.gov/investigate/white-collar-crime
- **DOJ Elder Justice Initiative** – Resources and prosecution support for financial crimes against tribal elders. justice.gov/elderjustice
- **IRS Criminal Investigation – Tribal Programs** – Federal tax and financial fraud investigation resources including tribal program fraud. irs.gov/ci

■ STATE & ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **State Insurance Fraud Bureaus** – State insurance fraud units may assist with investigations involving fraudulent tribal property or vehicle insurance claims.
- **Regional Pawn Shop Reporting Programs** – Many states have formal pawn shop reporting databases accessible to law enforcement. Contact your state attorney general’s office for tribal participation options.
- **Tribal Law & Order Act (TLOA) Resources** – TLOA expanded tribal investigative authority and DOJ technical assistance for property crime case management.
- **Grants.gov Tribal Search Tool** – Search all federal grants available to tribal entities. grants.gov (filter: Tribal Government eligibility)

■ PARTNER WITH NNJI — WE ARE READY TO SUPPORT YOUR COMMUNITY

TAKE ACTION TODAY — Contact NNJI at www.nativejustice.us to schedule training, consultation, or access resources.

Strengthening Tribal Justice — One Community at a Time