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**Boom Town Victims: Social Work's Latest Clients**

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The current energy crisis appears to be presenting social work with a new breed of client as the profession moves into the decade of the 1980's. This new clientele—the boom town victim—may be an individual, a group, an entire community or even a geographical region. Accordingly, an effective response to these victims may well require the entire repertoire of social work's helping functions (e.g., clinical, research, community organization, social planning, social action, policy formulation). Since the energy crisis gives every indication of not only continuing, but intensifying, it behooves the social work profession to devote more attention to the social consequences and human costs of energy development. This paper will examine the magnitude of energy development; it will discuss the social consequences and human costs of such development; and it will suggest possible responses by the profession of social work.

MAGNITUDE OF ENERGY DEVELOPMENT

The national emphasis on energy self-sufficiency has affected every part of the United States. However, this paper will essentially focus on the West since that region is experiencing the most development, and since that region may be the least prepared to cope with and manage rapid change. Small towns and rural areas, when faced with burgeoning energy-related growth, encounter dramatic increases in such social indexes as alcoholism, delinquency, and child abuse. Social work could be in a unique position to help.

Energy development in the West generally refers to the development of such resources as oil, oil shale, coal, gas and uranium. The region also possesses hydroelectric, solar and geothermal potential. Additionally, rapid development of these resources results in substantial growth in the construction and transportation industries. A 1979 report by the U.S. Department of Energy covering Region VIII (Colorado, Montana, Utah, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming) indicated that some 325 communities in that region alone were either "currently or imminently impacted" by over 900 energy resource impacts.¹ Region VIII, which represents 16 percent of the nation's land area and three percent of the national population, has 46 percent of the nation's coal reserves, almost half of the uranium and all of the high grade oil shale deposits.²
According to the Department of Energy report:

From 1970 through 1980, the population of 17 percent of the communities surveyed will increase by over 100 percent and 43 percent of the communities will experience a population increase of over 40 percent. The greatest impacts will be experienced in Wyoming where 58 percent of the communities will double in size from 1970 to 1980. Wyoming is followed by Colorado—34 percent, Utah—12 percent, Montana—7 percent, North Dakota—5 percent and South Dakota—5 percent.

Sufficient energy-related growth is also occurring in other Western states such as Arizona, Idaho, New Mexico and Nevada. Furthermore, these statistics and projections were compiled prior to President Carter’s national address on energy. His plans to continue the expansion of nuclear power, to step up the process of converting factories to coal rather than oil-fueled power, and to stimulate the development of synthetic fuel can only serve to increase rapid growth in the energy-rich West.

Several specific examples should serve to illustrate the degree of growth being experienced in states such as Colorado and Wyoming. Wheatland, Wyoming, a small ranching-farming town of 2,498 residents in 1970, grew to an estimated 3,705 in 1977, and an estimated 6,000 plus in 1979. Gillette, Wyoming, which saw an oil gas boom followed by a coal boom, went from 3,500 in 1967 to 7,200 in 1970, an estimated 9,000 in 1976, and will reach an estimated 35,000 in 1985. Craig, Colorado grew from a population of 4,500 in 1973 to 10,000 in 1978. And as a final example, Rock Springs, Wyoming skyrocketed from 11,500 people in 1970 to between 40,000 and 48,000 in 1978, with a projected 1980 population of 80,000.

SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES AND HUMAN COSTS

Social workers and other human service providers from many parts of the nation may be unfamiliar with the social consequences and human costs of such rapid development and change. Those who have wrestled with the problems of economically declining Northeastern cities or economically depressed areas in Appalachia may well be surprised to learn that growth has negative as well as positive consequences.

One phenomenon related to rapid growth frequently goes by the sobriquet of boom town, defined by Weisz as "a community which is undergoing rapid growth and rapid change," by Cortese and Jones as "the rapid and extreme growth of population in communities adjacent to mines and construction sites," and by the authors as:

1. a community experiencing above average economic and population growth,
2. which results in benefits for the community (e.g., expanded tax base, increased employment opportunities, social and cultural diversity),
3. but which also places or results in strain on existing community and societal institutions (e.g., familial, educational, political, economic). ¹⁰

These definitions, and most others, tend not to affix a specific percent in population growth since communities vary in their capacity to absorb change. However, the Denver Research Institute concluded that a small town could accommodate a five percent increase in annual growth rate, that an annual growth rate of ten percent strains local service capabilities, and that a growth rate above 15 percent seems to result in breakdowns in local and regional institutions. ¹¹

Problems in impacted communities appear similar to those of any area undergoing rapid industrialization. ¹² In fact, Cortese and Jones state that "the boom town experience as it affects preimpact community residents can be better understood within the theoretical constructs of urbanization and modernization." ¹³

These problems, however, are accentuated by the relatively small population base in many western communities. For example, a metropolitan area might experience minor problems in accommodating one or even several industrial plants or business organizations. But the ensuing problems (e.g., need for more classrooms) are manageable within a framework of planned and orderly growth. On the other hand, the construction of a power plant or the opening of a mine requiring several thousand new workers and their families might all but overwhelm the typical western town of several thousand inhabitants. Such projects result in significant changes in the physical, social and cultural environment. These changes, while perceived and defined somewhat differently, affect both "old timers" and "newcomers."

Bates, a Montana social worker, examined the people problems of western boom towns and asserted that frontier expansions were consistent in their crash, unplanned development and that boom town results:

... seem always to leave in their wake the grim statistics of spiritual depression, family disorganization, emotional damage and alcoholism, impaired social development of children, delinquency, suicide, dissipation and death. ¹⁴

Hanks, et. al., described the socio-physical problems associated with impacted communities thusly:

... superinflation by which the already critical national inflation is exacerbated with the special added inflation of boom towns arising from high labor costs, shortages (such as in housing and shopping facilities and services), and quick-buck exploitation by "get-rich" entrepreneurs: the inundation of demands from the markedly increased population on government and related facilities and services, such as law enforcement, courts, streets, sewers, schools, hospitals, retailers, and supportive business services and all social services, such as mental health, senior citizen programs, vocational rehabilitation, employment services, and Social Security District services. ¹⁵
Inflation rates vary by boom town, but a rule-of-thumb used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development holds that "the prices of lots and houses double during the course of construction, while the rents for housing double or triple." There are some workers, of course, who locate housing elsewhere and commute. However, the immense distances between most western towns and extreme weather conditions frequently make commuting a less than viable alternative.

According to Hanks, et. al., some of the social consequences associated with the socio-physical problems include: alcoholism and substance abuse; prostitution; depression; family crises such as desertions, separations, divorces and parent-child troubles; school difficulties such as truancy, drop-outs and rapid student turnover; and the special vulnerability of the aged existing on fixed incomes. These problems, for the most part, exist to a degree in any community. However, available evidence supports the contention that they are compounded and intensified by the boom town environment and experience.

Kohrs, a social scientist and former clinical director of the Central Wyoming Counseling Center in Casper, Wyoming, gained much attention and generated considerable debate by characterizing many boom town problems as the "Gillette Syndrome," based on the problems of impacted Gillette, Wyoming. This syndrome can perhaps be best illustrated and understood through Kohr's graphic description of life in an energy production boom town.

A housewife, after fighting mud, wind, inadequate water and disposal systems, a crowded mobile home and muddy children all day, snaps at her husband as he returns from a 16-hour shift. He responds by heading back downtown and spending the night at a bar drinking and trading stories with men from similar circumstances. Divorce, tensions on children, emotional damage and alcoholism were the result. Children went to school in double shifts; motels turned over linens in triple shifts. Jails became crowded and police departments experienced frequent changes in personnel in the tradition of frontier justice. Out of frustration with the quality of living, it appeared that mayors shuttled in and out of office like bobbins in a loom. Depression was rampant with suicide attempts at a rate of one per 250 people. Suicide attempts were rarely fatal but they became the tool to regulate the lack of human concern. It was the ultimate method to express that something was wrong and needed changing.

When neglect went beyond tolerable limits, divorce was the natural consequence. Fatigued men working long shifts and driving long distances to work came home to equally fatigued wives coping with a mud-spattered world.

Trailer courts offered only a mud patty for children's play as they raced between trailer houses and trailer court traffic. Even schools
were in trailers similar to those in which the children lived. Nothing seemed permanent. Difficulty in coping with transient living, angry school personnel teaching under less than adequate conditions, and parental conflicts led to poor school adjustment and achievement, then truancy, then delinquency, and finally a residential environment.

Jails often became a protection of wives from beatings by drunken spouses rather than detention for real crime. Psychiatric and alcoholic withdrawal problems were maintained in the jail because of overworked medical personnel and inadequate medical facilities. The hospital was a first aid station to maintain life until transported to a hospital in Casper, Billings, or Denver.

The pattern of depression, delinquency and divorce was so well documented that the consequences were predictable. Kohr's "Gillette Syndrome," which gained wide recognition, was not favorably received by everyone.

Thompson, a sociologist, and others questioned the validity of some of Kohr's data and the existence of the "Gillette Syndrome." Thompson's research did not tend to substantiate all of Kohr's findings, and at the very least, he maintained that social scientists should eschew such colorful phrases as the "Gillette Syndrome" and even "boom town" in favor of more objective and scientific terminology.

The middle ground between the "Gillette Syndrome" and the "Myth of the Gillette Syndrome" may have been found by Weisz and associates at the Campbell County Office of the Northern Wyoming Mental Health Center. Weisz, a community psychologist, used the concept of stress as a bridge between public health, mental health, medicine, sociology and other relevant human service disciplines. During the summer and fall of 1977, his mental health center conducted "a study of stress and mental health-related consequences of energy-related impact in the town of Gillette and Campbell County."

The study found that:

... at least in 1977, the population of Gillette experienced high levels of stress generated not only by the amount of change in their lives, but also from the needs and frustrations produced by deficits in community services, the demands of adjusting to life in a new community, family needs, plus a variety of other stresses stemming from a boom town situation.

Since high levels of stress are associated with mental health problems, Weisz analyzed mental health records covering 1974-1978 to see if the expected increase in mental health problems had actually occurred. A comparison of Campbell County with four nonimpacted counties indicated that:
1. the total increase in mental health center admissions in Campbell County was well above the increase that might be predicted from population changes; and

2. the admission figures from the Wyoming State Hospital out of the Northern Wyoming Mental Health Center's other counties, when compared with Campbell County figures, seem to strengthen the hypothesis that highly stressed communities generate more than their share-by-population of severe illness.\(^\text{23}\)

While additional research is necessary, stress theory appears to offer much in terms of understanding and dealing with many of the immediate human problems in boom towns.

However, some social scientists, including Cortese and Jones,\(^\text{24}\) and Gold,\(^\text{25}\) perceive long-range problems which require much more attention and concern. According to Cortese and Jones:

... our investigations clearly show that the social impacts of boom-town growth involve changes far beyond the mere increase in population, strain on municipal services, and the mental health problems usually attributed to such strains and which constitute the bulk of 'socio-economic' impact assessments. Less visible but considerably more important for the long range are the underlying changes in the social structure and cultural systems that are, and will continue to be, precipitated by energy-related boom town developments.\(^\text{26}\)

They believe that these changes require more than the usual provision of more adequate housing, more professionalized police departments or more mental health centers. Instead they see such solutions as parts of the problem since "such innovations add to the process of increasing anonymity, differentiation, bureaucratization, centralization, impersonalization, specialization and orientation of local community units toward extra-community systems."\(^\text{27}\) They further believe that communities facing impact should possess a knowledge of the possibility of major social and cultural changes before making a decision for or against development.

These concerns over major structural changes in the community are shared by staff of the Western Action Training Institute in Denver, who perceive the danger as nothing less than social and cultural genocide. Their vision of the future is as follows:

Within the next decade, the people of the Rocky Mountain and Northern Plains region not only face the loss of the beautiful and awe-inspiring physical environment in which they live, but also — and of great impact — they face social and cultural genocide, the destruction of their way of life. The social disruption affects everyone, even the new arrivals, people often working in resource
development, who find themselves in fractured environments hostile to them, the 'newcomers,' and difficult in which to set down roots. There is a widespread sense of hopelessness, a feeling of being trampled in the stampede to strip the land of its resources.

The physical communities grow and change. So, too, do the social and governmental organizations of the communities. Each person becomes a smaller part of the larger community . . . the social networks, presently a source of community strength and personal individual support, will be unable to respond to the massive influx of people. The social systems will break down, leaving oldtimers and newcomers alike in a sick community, glutted by growth.

The list of symptoms is long, the magnitude, awesome; and the meaning clear. The social and cultural community values are being overwhelmed. Longstanding informal social support and networks are broken. The sense of community, of belonging, is gone. The nature and quality of life have been destroyed. Craig and Rock Springs are pictures of the future for more than 200 communities in the region unless action is taken to help residents organize themselves to deal with the issues which growth is forcing upon them.

Indeed, unless the powerless organize themselves into effective local, state, and regional coalitions to advocate for their interests, they may as well start packing, for the boom will surely and literally blow them out of their homes and communities, socially, culturally, spiritually and physically.28

In sum, the vast amount of energy development in the United States, especially in the West, has significant social consequences and human costs. While experts differ in their definition and classification of these, several major problem areas seem to receive the most attention: (1) superinflation from the demands of large numbers of incoming energy-related personnel and families; (2) demands for all types of services, including human services, exceeding the capacities of local systems to meet them; (3) increases in incidence and nature of many "people problems," commonly referred to as the "Gillette Syndrome" and probably associated with stress related to rapid change; and (4) structural changes in the community which change its very nature, and which have even been characterized as social and cultural genocide. A SOCIAL WORK RESPONSE

While individual social workers have struggled with the problems created by energy development, the social work profession as a whole has been slow in responding to the crisis. A partial explanation might lie in the fact that most energy development has been in rural areas and social work has had a
definite urban bias and preoccupation. A related explanation is that graduate schools of social work, which tend to generate research and publications, are not especially numerous in the West. Region VIII, for example, has only the urban-oriented University of Denver and the University of Utah with graduate programs. An immense area covering Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming has no graduate program within it.

These circumstances, and perhaps others, have prevented or retarded the development of social work responses to problems created by energy development. This is unfortunate since the knowledge, skills and values of the profession seem ideally suited to these problems. Additionally, boom town victims are not served most effectively when non-social workers must take time to "rediscover the wheel" in planning and delivering human services. For example, the Wyoming Human Services Project is a relatively effective blend of a number of standard social work and human service approaches. However, its non-social work directors have claimed such "innovations" as a multidisciplinary team approach, a systems perspective on problems, and the concept of the community as client.

A cursory examination of the literature would have revealed that variations of multidisciplinary teams can be traced back to at least the Charity Organization Societies and Settlement Houses in the 1870's and 1880's, and that the annals of community organization abound with examples, especially in O.E.O. and Model Cities endeavors. Literally thousands of social workers who used the Pincus and MinaHan textbook would be astounded to learn that the application of systems theory to human problems is new. And a number of social work community organization practitioners who have gone to their reward would turn over in their graves to hear that viewing the community as the client is a new concept. Nevertheless, the absence of a solid social work commitment to energy impact problems permits such situations to exist.

The social work profession would do well to develop a coordinated and comprehensive strategy toward preventing and mitigating impact problems. The National Association of Social Workers could allocate staff and fiscal resources, including funding of chapter programs dealing with impact; it could devote coverage to impact-related stories in N.A.S.W. News; it could publish articles in its journals, perhaps even devoting one issue of Social Work to this theme; it could make this issue a priority topic for the 1981 Professional Symposium; and its advocacy, legislative and lobbying activities could include an emphasis on impact problems. Since much energy development occurs in rural areas, N.A.S.W. could incorporate at least some of these measures into its increasing emphasis on social work in rural areas, perhaps utilizing the assistance of the Rural Social Work Caucus and the N.A.S.W. Rural Task Force.

Another professional social work organization which should focus on this area is the Council on Social Work Education. C.S.W.E. could encourage the development of educational and training material via the provision of staff and fiscal resources; it could give coverage of impact-oriented educational activities in the Social Work Education Reporter; it could publish articles in the Journal of Social Work Education; and it could feature boom town papers and workshops at the Annual Program Meeting.
Since both C.S.W.E. and N.A.S.W. are not overly endowed with fiscal resources, they could secure grant and foundation monies for special education, demonstration and research projects. Jointly sponsored programs with agencies, institutions and state units actually located in impacted areas might be an excellent undertaking. Projects could range from developing educational modules to research and demonstration programs on the needs of sexual assault victims in boom towns.

Individual social workers, as well as professional organizations could initiate and/or support efforts to mitigate the confusion, fragmentation of efforts and lack of coordination in the burgeoning number of impact-related activities. One approach, which would incorporate a variety of social work functions, entails the creation of state and regional institutes on energy impact and the human services. These institutes, which would have a broader prospective than just social work, might possess some or all of the following functions: library, clearinghouse, research, consultation, planning and coordination, and education and training.\(^{31}\)

Social workers involved in advancing the interests of such vulnerable groups as women, minorities and the aged should be aware that these groups experience added difficulties in boom towns. National policies and programs affecting these groups should include an equitable focus on boom town victims.

New endeavors should build on the work of the few social workers active in this field. These would include Bates' structural approach,\(^{32}\) Agte's focus on the aged,\(^{33}\) Jirovec's emphasis on community planning and organization,\(^{34}\) and the Davenports' contributions in the areas of team approaches,\(^{35}\) women's issues\(^{36}\) and proposals for state and regional institutes.\(^{37}\)

Furthermore, since urban models of social work intervention are not always easily and effectively transferred to rural or sparsely populated locales, much valuable information could be gleaned from the developing knowledge base of rural social work. Of special value would be the newsletter-journal Human Services in the Rural Environment, the proceedings of conferences focusing on education and practice for rural areas.\(^{39}\)

**SUMMARY**

Concluding, this paper has examined the magnitude of energy development in the United States, especially in the American West; it has discussed the social consequences and human costs of this development, especially the boom town effect; and it has suggested possible responses by the social work profession. An underlying message has been that while social work has not played an active role in this crisis, the profession is uniquely equipped to deal with the social and human problems of energy impact, and the time for action is now!
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2. Ibid., p. iii.

3. Ibid., p. 1.


7. Ibid.


12. An excellent analysis of problems related to industrialization and how social welfare services were developed to meet those needs may be found in Harold L. Wilensky and Charles N. Lebaux, Industrial Society and Social Welfare (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1958).

13. Cortese and Jones, op. cit., p. 87.

15John W. Hanks, Keith A. Miller, and Julie M. Uhlmann, "Boom Town Interdisciplinary Human Services Project," paper presented at the Fifth Biennial Professional Symposium of the National Association of Social Workers (San Diego, California, November, 1977), p. 3.


17Hanks, Miller, and Uhlmann, op. cit., pp. 3-4.


21Weisz, op. cit.

22Ibid.

23Ibid.


26Cortese and Jones, op. cit., p. 87.
27 Ibid.

28 Western Advocate, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

29 See, for example, Julie M Uhlmann, Providing Human Services in Energy Impacted Communities (Laramie, Wyoming 1978).


32 Bates, op. cit.


37 Davenport and Davenport, "Regional and State Institutes: Rx for Human Services in Boom Towns," op. cit.


39 See, for example, Lester I. Levin, (ed.), Educating Social Workers for Practice in Rural Settings: Perspectives and Programs (Atlanta, Georgia: Southern Regional Education Board, 1974); Patrick G. McGill and Carolle A. Bell (eds.), Helping People in Rural America (Logan: Utah State University Department of Sociology, Social Work and Anthropology, 1977); and Lynn R. Hulen, (ed.), Educating for Social Work Practice in Rural Areas (Fresno: California State University, 1978).