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BOOMTOWN'S YOUTH: THE DIFFERENTIAL IMPACTS OF RAPID COMMUNITY GROWTH ON ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS*

WILLIAM R. FREUDENBURG

Washington State University

When adolescents from a rapidly growing community are compared to counterparts in three nearby communities that are expecting growth of their own, the young persons in the rapidly growing community have significantly lower evaluations of their community, more negative attitudes toward growth, lower levels of satisfaction, and higher levels of alienation. None of these differences are found when adults from the growing community are compared to adults in the same three control communities, and none can be explained by sociodemographic background factors (including length of community residence). The study's ethnographic data strongly suggest that the reasons for the anomalous findings are predominantly social and cultural in nature and are not strongly affected by the types of economic and logistical factors that have been the focus of most analyses to date.

The merits and drawbacks of industrialization, urbanization, and modernization have been debated at least since the time of Durkheim, yet the debate has still not reached closure. In part, this reflects the near impossibility of ob-

taining definitive answers on questions as complex as the overall societal advantages and disadvantages of industrial and technological developments. But if the issues involved cannot be "settled" on the basis of any single study or group of studies, neither can they be better understood without further empirical evidence.

*Direct all correspondence to: William R. Freudenburg, Department of Rural Sociology, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99164-4006.

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Recent large-scale energy developments in the Rocky Mountain region of the western United States offer a valuable context for examining these questions empirically. The communities of this region are neither "backward" nor isolated from the larger body of American culture; residents are well educated and are served at least to some degree by mass media. The communities experiencing rapid growth, however, are among the most geographically isolated in the nation, being separated by hundreds of miles (and several mountain passes) from the nearest metropolitan areas, and sometimes having fewer than a dozen other communities of any size within a

hundred-mile radius. The effects of large-scale industrial developments in this region can thus be direct, concentrated, and relatively easy to trace.

Methodological and conceptual difficulties, however, have sometimes limited the value of past research on these communities (Wilkinson et al., 1982; Finsterbusch, 1982; Albrecht, 1982; Freudenburg, 1976, 1982). Particularly serious problems have included lack of controls, limited availability of individual-level data, and a resultant inability to examine the impacts of rapid growth on specific segments of the population. The present paper takes initial steps toward overcoming these difficulties. It summarizes data from a rapidly growing community and from three nearby communities that were expecting "boom" growth of their own at the same time. In examining competing hypotheses about the impacts of rapid growth, the paper devotes particular attention to the expectation that rapid growth will be beneficial for adolescents.

LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES

Two bodies of literature are relevant to the present study; the broader and older one includes classic sociological works, while the more recent literature focuses more specifically on rapid community growth.

Some classic sociological writings, such as those of Toennies and Durkheim, suggest that rapid growth would result in substantial disruption for local residents. In particular, Durkheim ([1893] 1933, [1897] 1951) noted that rapid social change had considerable disruptive potential, especially in the short run, causing an individual's world to become more complex and less predictable, and altering established customs and social patterns without providing immediate substitutes for them (see, e.g., Durkheim, [1893] 1933:241-42). At the social level, the results could include anomie or normlessness; at the individual level, they could include bewilderment and various indicators of "social pathologies" up to and including suicide. Particularly in the case of more recent work in the "modernization" tradition, however, the broader sociological literature can also point to the opposite expectation, drawing attention to the stifling characteristics of traditional systems and to the openness as well as the economic advantages of industrialization and related forms of development (see, e.g., Inkeles and Smith, 1974:4-5).

The modernization literature and the classic sociological theorists both discuss the advantages and disadvantages of development at an aggregated level, offering little guidance on what to expect for more specific groups. The

literature on rapid community growth is more specific, yet it displays the same kind of disagreement and reflects roughly analogous reasoning: Some authors emphasize the negative consequences of disruptions in existing systems, and others emphasize the beneficial consequences of expanded opportunities (for a review, see Freudenburg, 1982).

With respect to the population growth of particular interest here, however—the younger persons in the growing communities—a general consensus is evident. Perhaps the most common conclusion is that "employment for local young people" is a key advantage of community growth (Andrews and Bauder, 1968; Summers et al., 1976; Dixon, 1978; Uhlmann, 1978; Freudenburg, 1976). This literature also suggests that young persons benefit from development for nonemployment reasons such as adaptability (Denver Research Institute, 1979; Johnson and Weil, 1977), ease of social integration (Gold, 1978), and increased excitement and activity (Dixon, 1978). Federal reports on western energy developments also note the increased options that can be made available by an increased population. Social science research has often been excluded from these federal policy documents on the grounds that it is "too speculative" or "insufficiently scientific" (Friesema and Culhane, 1976; Meidinger and Schnaiberg, 1980), but existing thought on young people in energy boomtowns has been adopted in numerous environmental impact statements (e.g., U.S. Department of Interior et al., 1974; U.S. Department of Interior, 1975; U.S. Geological Survey and Montana Department of State Lands, 1979).

Yet it is also possible that the implications of industrial development are less beneficial for local young people than has commonly been assumed. Industrial development may not actually slow the rate at which young people leave rural areas (Cortese and Jones, 1979:122; Lovejoy, 1977:16), and available evidence suggests it has not done so (Gates, 1981:16; Fernandez and Dillman, 1979; Andrews and Bauder, 1968:19-21). In addition, Farber and Newton (1974) found significant apprehension among youths that growth would fragment or depersonalize their social and interpersonal relationships and would force restricted freedom of movement. Finally, the tendency for children of newcomers to be accepted more readily than their parents (Gold, 1978) might actually be an additional source of stress: Freudenburg (1980) reported that adults in a boomtown were often shielded from disruption by "social buffering"—the fact that established friendship groups remained largely intact.

Overall, then, it is possible to draw competing hypotheses either from the broader

sociological literature or from work focusing specifically on rapidly growing communities. The first is the hypothesis that rapid growth leads to disruption in established community social structures, bringing negative consequences for local residents. For this hypothesis to be supported by this study's survey data, persons experiencing rapid community growth should have relatively negative attitudes toward their locality and its growth, and should show a similarly negative assessment of their quality of life—e.g., a relatively low level of satisfaction and a high level of alienation. The second hypothesis, by contrast, is that growth is beneficial because it expands economic and other opportunities. For this hypothesis to be supported, persons experiencing rapid community growth should have relatively positive attitudes toward their locality and its growth, and should have relatively high levels of satisfaction and low levels of alienation. With respect to adolescents in particular, authors to date have tended to conclude that social disruptions, if any, will be less severe for this group than for the adults of a growing community, while the expansion of economic and other opportunities is generally seen as having special importance for those who have recently entered the job market or are about to do so.

THE STUDY

Methods

Data testing these competing hypotheses are drawn from a study of four communities in western Colorado, all of which had pregrowth populations between 1,000 and 5,000, and all of which were identified by Garrett and Webb (1977) as "energy-impacted communities." In three, however—the control communities—little growth had taken place at the time of this study, while the fourth became a "boomtown," roughly doubling in population (from approximately 5,000 to 10,000 persons) during three years that included this study's survey-data collection period. Most of the growth was due to the construction of a coal-fired power plant, which was under construction for approximately five years and eventually had a construction workforce of slightly over 1,900 persons.

The study included three types of data collection: (1) sixteen months of firsthand, ethnographic research, supplemented with numerous additional visits to the study communities over an additional eight-year period; (2) the use of publicly available statistics and existing historical documents; and (3) two separate surveys.

In the first survey, questionnaires were completed by randomly selected adults from

within a probability sample of households in each of the four communities. The total size of this adult sample was 597 cases, reflecting a response rate of approximately 81 percent. The second survey was conducted in the (single) high school of each of the four communities. Students were brought together during normal school hours to hear an explanation of the study and to fill out a questionnaire. The total size of the high school sample was 441 cases, reflecting the responses of all available sophomores and seniors in each school, except for the 34 students whose questionnaires were unusable.

The analysis will focus on three items and one multi-item scale that were identical across the two surveys. The first two items, adapted from Jobs and Parsons (1975), measure attitudes toward development and the locality, and the third is the measure of overall life satisfaction used by Campbell et al. (1976). The scale is the anonymity or alienation scale of McClosky and Schaar (1965). (Further methodological details and summaries of other survey results can be found in Freudenburg, 1979.)

Findings

Table 1 presents the overall findings for both adults and adolescents. Two points are worthy of note. The first is that the adults generally have more positive attitudes, and lower levels of alienation, than do the adolescents. The second is that only one boomtown/other difference is significant for the adults, while all four are significant for the adolescents, with students in the boomtown having significantly more negative attitudes toward development and the locality, a significantly lower level of satisfaction and a significantly higher level of alienation than do their counterparts in the three comparison communities.

With one exception, the findings reported in Table 1 are not materially affected by imposing controls for any of the usual sociodemographic background variables.¹ The exception is length of residence in the community—the variable found by Shaw and McKay (1942) to be negatively correlated with community juvenile de-

¹ For example, when multiple-classification analysis is used to control the categorical factors of sex, grade in school, whether or not the student belonged to a church and whether or not he/she was still living with both original parents, along with the interval-level variables of age, number of siblings, father's occupational prestige and degree of difficulty reported by the student in answering the questionnaire, all four of the variables reported in Table 1 show slightly greater boomtown/other differences than when no controls are present.

linquency rates and by Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) to be a major factor in urban community attachment. Several authors have also suggested that the apparent "pathologies" found in western energy boomtowns could be due to "newcomers" who differ substantially from the long-time residents (or "oldtimers") of the same communities (see Thompson, 1979; Mountain West Research, Inc., 1980; Murphy/Williams Urban Planning and Housing Consultants, 1978; Milkman et al., 1980; U.S. Department of Interior, 1975; U.S. Department of Energy, 1979).

When length of residence is actually controlled, however, the results differ significantly from what earlier writings would suggest. Only two of the relationships from Table 1 are significantly affected, and both are reported in Table 2. First, the only difference shown to be due to newcomers alone is the one significant boomtown/other difference among *adults*. It is only among the newcomers that we find the lower level of locality satisfaction that led to the one significant adult difference reported in Table 1. For adolescents, by contrast, the boomtown/other difference among long-time residents is as significant as the difference among newcomers. Second, length of residence affects the adolescents' alienation totals, but in an unexpected way: the newcomer youths in the boomtown actually have a *lower* level of alienation than the newcomers in the three comparison communities, albeit by a nonsignificant margin, while the boomtown/other difference among long-time adolescent residents is even stronger than would have been expected on the basis of community-wide data.

Other Survey Findings

As noted elsewhere (Freudenburg, 1979, 1981), other adult data also show few significant differences between the boomtown and the three comparison communities. Numerous other differences exist for the adolescents, however. In brief, further analyses show that the boomtown students report a significantly different social milieu than do the students in the other three communities, that they are significantly more likely to have experienced hostility and to have feared for their safety, and that they have significantly lower ratings in many domains of the quality of their lives.

When the students were asked, "What does it take for a person to be accepted around here?" the boomtown students were significantly less likely to say it was important for a person to be friendly, honest, or confident, have a good sense of humor, or "just be himself," than did the students in the comparison communities. Boomtown students felt it was significantly more important to be good looking, have money, be a "party" type, show off, have a car and have parents in the "right" occupations. All differences were significant beyond the .001 level. When asked about the level of hostility that existed among different "groups" of students, the boomtown students were thirty percent more likely to place the difference on the top half of the scale ($p < .001$) and were roughly twice as likely to say that they had experienced times when they "felt physically threatened in this high school." In regard to various domains of life quality, boomtown youths felt significantly worse about the school (as well as about teachers, administrators and studying); they felt signifi-

Table 1. Boomtown vs. Control Comparisons of Mean Scores, Adults and Adolescents

Variable	Adults		Adolescents	
	Boomtown	Three Control Communities	Boomtown	Three Control Communities
Support for Energy Development ^a	3.59	3.54	2.93	3.29
	Tau _c = .0004, $p > .45$		Tau _c = .1169, $p \doteq .01$	
Satisfaction with Locality ^b	3.67	3.92	3.09	3.65
	Tau _c = -.087, $p \doteq .01$		Tau _c = -.306, $p < .0001$	
Overall Quality of Life ^c	5.34	5.41	4.92	5.23
	Tau _c = -.026, $p > .25$		Tau _c = -.148, $p < .005$	
Alienation ^d	9.70	9.36	11.30	10.33
	F = .529, $p > .45$		F = 7.03, $p < .01$	
(N)	(148)	(434)	(175)	(246)

^a "In the long run, I'm sure that people in this area will be better off if our energy resources are developed" (Strongly agree = 5, strongly disagree = 1).

^b "This part of Colorado has just about everything that's needed for a happy life" (Strongly agree = 5, strongly disagree = 1).

^c "How satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?" (Completely satisfied = 7, completely dissatisfied = 1).

^d Nine-item anomaly scale of McClosky and Schaar, 1965 (possible range from no "alienated" responses = 0 to maximum alienation = 18).

Table 2. Boomtown vs. Control Comparisons of Mean Scores, Adults and Adolescents, Controlling for Length of Residence (Ns in Parentheses)

Variable	Residence Status ^a	Adults		Adolescents	
		Boomtown	Three Control Communities	Boomtown	Three Control Communities
Satisfaction with Locality ^b	Newcomers	3.35 (49)	3.77 (66)	2.74 (62)	3.48 (42)
	Oldtimers	3.84 (97)	3.95 (370)	3.27 (124)	3.68 (209)
		F = 4.34, p < .05		F = 10.90, p = .001	
Alienation ^c	Newcomers	8.56 (50)	8.13 (67)	10.39 (62)	11.28 (40)
	Oldtimers	10.28 (98)	9.58 (374)	11.77 (122)	10.15 (206)
		F = 0.22, p > .50		F = 1.16, p > .25	
		F = 1.63, p = .20		F = 15.39, p = .0001	

^a In this table, as in the text, "newcomers" are those who have lived less than three years in their communities while "oldtimers" have lived in their communities for three years or more.

^b "This part of Colorado has just about everything that's needed for a happy life" (Strongly agree = 5, strongly disagree = 1).

^c Nine-item anomaly scale of McClosky and Schaar (1965) (possible range from no "alienated" responses = 0 to maximum alienation = 18).

cantly worse about the quality of their social life, how much fun they were having, the federal government, the local government, and the quality of the local physical environment. Even at statistically nonsignificant levels, there was literally nothing about which the boomtown's youths felt "better." Finally, there was a clear pattern in unusable questionnaires obtained from the high schools. In the three comparison communities combined, there were a total of four unusable questionnaires; in the boomtown there were 30. If the results from these questionnaires could have been included, the differences reported above undoubtedly would have been much stronger, since most of the unusable questionnaires were extremely negative in tone. (Further details are available in Freudenburg [1979], or in a longer version of this paper that can be obtained directly from the author.)

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS

While previous works have often disagreed about the impacts of rapid growth on adults, the implications for adolescents have generally been seen as beneficial. Closer examination reveals, however, that this general agreement has been based on plausible conjecture rather than on empirical findings. The present study appears to be the first to compare adolescents in a rapidly growing community with those in control or comparison communities; its results clearly contradict the conventional viewpoint, and they cannot be explained on the basis of previous writings. Economic growth and the expansion of opportunities clearly did not lead

to an improvement in the experienced quality of life of the boomtown's youths. The Durkheimian perspective is consistent with the pattern of findings encountered among the adolescents, but the same perspective does not explain the lack of differences among the adults. A straightforward "compositionalist" argument—i.e., that the presumed "social pathologies" of an energy boomtown are due to newcomers, perhaps because they are less bound by local norms than are the long-time residents—also receives no support.

Ethnographic Data

It is obviously not possible on the basis of a single study to provide a definitive explanation for the unexpected findings encountered here. As noted above, however, the present study included 16 months of firsthand, ethnographic observations in addition to the two surveys, and while such observations are rarely reported in sociological journals, these ethnographic data provide an important source of insights that could not be obtained from any other source. Observations from the four communities are thus summarized here as a tentative explanation, subject to further testing in future research (for fuller details, see Freudenburg, 1979, 1980).

The problems of the boomtown students do not appear to have been due to the local high school administration, nor to overcrowding or the other types of facility problems that are the common focus of federal decision-making documents (Freudenburg, 1976). Several hundred conversations and extensive firsthand obser-

vations of day-to-day behaviors suggest two other factors—one social, the other social psychological—as better explanations for the present study's findings.

Social buffering. While the boom led to significant changes in the social structure and functioning of the community, most adults adapted by making relatively minor behavioral adjustments. They learned to shop and drive at different times to avoid traffic jams, to stay out of certain bars on Saturday nights to avoid fights, etc., but they were able to continue the more intimate portions of their lives relatively unchanged. For the most part, the adults tended to continue hunting, fishing, "visiting" and sharing other times with the same relatively small groups of close friends with whom they had always shared those same activities in the past.

These friendship groups appear to have played a significant role in the maintenance of morale for most adults of the boomtown, as they evidently do in more urban situations as well (see, e.g., Henderson, 1977; Litwak and Szelenyi, 1969; Fischer, 1981). Many of the adults who were long-time residents of the boomtown had essentially no contact with the community's newcomers, and even those who actually encountered newcomers often did so in a relatively limited and well-defined context—e.g., as employees dealing with newcomers who shopped at local retail establishments. This highly effective form of social buffering, however, was simply not available to most of the same community's high school students: they were surrounded by new students almost every day they attended classes.

Social-psychological vulnerability. At the same time the youths' interpersonal contacts exposed them to more social changes than were experienced by the community's adults, those youths also appear to have been more susceptible—not less—to the potentially disorienting consequences of a given level of change. The common wisdom, which is widely shared in the study communities, is that young people are more "flexible" than their elders, but the present study's ethnographic fieldwork indicates that a better word might be "unformed" or even "vulnerable." While adolescence may generally be a process of transition, firsthand observations provided considerable evidence that the youths in the three comparison communities were aided in making that transition by the fact that they did so in communities that were relatively stable at the time, while the students in the boomtown were undergoing a significant transition in their personal lives at the same time that the social world around them was going through a substantial change of its own.

The combined effects of adolescent vulnerability and direct contacts with newcomers were noted by a number of teachers and administrators and were often evident in the students' conversations. School personnel noted that a subset of the newcomers had moved very frequently—some of them never having completed a full year in one school—and had developed compensatory mechanisms that included not only drug use but a tough, "know-it-all" presentation of self. Adolescent sensitivity to peer influence, meanwhile, meant that the local students had what a mental health professional called a "kid-in-the-candy-store reaction" to the newcomers' familiarity with drugs and other forms of deviance. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that the community's traditional means for controlling adolescent deviance, which had been quite effective in earlier times when "everybody knew everybody else," could no longer work as effectively in a time of rapid population turnover (Freudenburg, 1980).

Students reported considerable stress in dealing with the newcomers. Local norms emphasized being friendly and helpful to people who would normally be expected to "need a little help getting started," as one student put it, and yet the newcomers were often seen as spurning the offered help and as having a cynical form of sophistication that one student said "makes me feel like a dope in my own school." The net result was that, while relationships with peers were salient in all four study towns, students in the boomtown expressed insecurities, self-doubts and fears about their inadequacies with a frequency and intensity that were simply not present in the other three communities. Their responses to open-ended questions about the growth often focused on interpersonal concerns, as illustrated by comments such as the following (for a more extensive report, see Freudenburg, 1979):

I've hardly ever gotten very far from _____ in my whole life. When you get right down to it, I probably don't know that much about the rest of the world. A lot of newcomers have moved around a lot, been all sorts of different places. . . .

I try my best to be nice to them or to make friends with them, but I'm not sure how to *do* that. And another problem is, if you try too hard to be friendly with the new people, the kids who're your friends already will think that you don't like *them* that much.

I do try to be friendly, and I've even started to try to say "hi" to them first, like when I see a new person in the halls or something. But you know what? I haven't gotten my

nerve up to do that too often yet, but sometimes I have, and the other person just turned away . . . they didn't say *anything*. They just turned away.²

In short, rather than suggesting that the elderly residents of the boomtowns suffered from being "set in their ways," as the common wisdom would have it, evidence suggests that the boomtown's youths may have suffered in part precisely because they were *not* yet as "set in their ways." In most cases, in fact, they did not appear at the time of the survey to know yet just what those "ways" were to be—they did not yet have a firm sense of self. Unlike their grandparents, these young persons did not have 50 years' worth of momentum to keep themselves on course.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Large-scale energy developments in relatively isolated communities of the western U.S. provide an important opportunity to study human responses to rapid social change. Of particular interest are the implications of rapid growth for the quality of life of local residents. The present study finds no evidence that rapid economic development would be experienced as liberating and beneficial by the persons who experience it. The study provides partial support for the Durkheimian expectation that development would change social patterns and be disruptive to local residents, but the disruption is concentrated in a group where it was not previously expected—the young persons of the community. On the basis of extensive ethnographic fieldwork, it appears that the reasons have more to do with the social worlds and the stages of personal development of the boomtown adolescents than they do with the kinds of facilities, services, and other logistical considerations that have been the primary focus of much past work in this area.

While this study's findings have sociologically interesting implications for other situations of rapid community growth, it would be premature to accept them as definitive and final. It is also too early to tell whether the negative pattern of experiences among the boomtown's youths will be transitory or long lasting. This study's hypotheses, and others, need to be tested further. It is to be hoped, in

short, that this study will be part of a trend toward more detailed empirical analysis and greatly increased specificity in hypotheses about which groups benefit or suffer from development, and why, in future work.

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² This comment was made during an informal classroom discussion, and one of the newcomers in the room provided an explanation: "Yeah, I've moved a lot, and I've had kids come up to me and say 'hi' when I get to a new school. But I always figure they're saying it because they think they have to. So I just turn away, and the next time they see me, they don't have to say 'hi' again."

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