
Rural North Dakota's Oil Boom and Its Impact on Social Services

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Over the last five years, North Dakota has experienced an oil boom based on high oil prices and hydraulic fracturing technologies. This has brought economic expansion and population growth to rural communities that had previously experienced decades of depopulation and economic struggle. Although the state has enjoyed many benefits—especially in juxtaposition to a sluggish national economy—the boom has also meant the arrival of economic refugees and dramatic impacts on largely rural social service systems. In the midst of a rapidly changing situation, available information tends to swing between euphoria over economic success and hysteria about rising crime and shifting cultures. In response, the authors used a primary focus group with county social service directors from across the state and a follow-up focus group with social workers operating on the edge of oil activity. Grounded in resilience theory, qualitative analysis of the primary focus group, and triangulation of data from other sources, this study provides a more objective report of the housing and social challenges, the benefits of the boom, and the challenges to solutions.

KEY WORDS: *boom economies; community resilience; “fracking”; hydraulic fracturing; social disruption hypothesis*

On the northern edge of the Great Plains, North Dakota's population of less than 700,000 is scattered across a wide-open, windswept landscape. Owing to improved agricultural technologies, the state had lost population over much of the last century. According to estimates from the 2010 census, more than two thirds of its counties are presently classified as “frontier,” with 37 of 53 having seven or fewer people per square mile. Yet, since 2007, North Dakota has become the fastest growing state in the nation (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a; USA.com, 2013). The current oil boom has attracted people and filled the state's coffers with over a billion-dollar surplus (Associated Press, 2012c). It now has the country's lowest statewide unemployment rate of 3 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), and industry estimates indicate that approximately 65,000 new jobs have been created (North Dakota Petroleum Council, 2012). Because of high oil prices and improved technologies (especially hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking”), industry experts have projected that the state's current oil boom could last 30 years or longer (North Dakota Petroleum Council, 2012). Amid the riches, there are critical housing shortages and intense pressures on social service systems. Yet many hold tight to memories of hardships that followed the oil

industry's boom–bust cycles of the 1950s and 1980s and are reluctant to invest in permanent infrastructure.

Extractive industries have long been connected to periods of rapid expansion and decline, including rapid population growth, unprecedented job opportunities, and heavy demands on community services and facilities (for example, Brown, Geertsen, & Krannich, 1989; Camasso & Wilkinson, 1990). Of particular concern in relation to the boom–bust cycles associated with extractive industries is the vulnerability of communities—frequently rural communities—to long-term decline in relation to economic and other indicators. Such long-term challenges associated with the busts are documented in relation to numerous extractive industries in North America, including mineral mining in Canada (for example, Cretney, Vadgama, & Doukas, 2008) and the western United States (for example, Smith, Krannich, & Hunter, 2001) and coal mining in West Virginia (for example, O'Leary & Boettner, 2011). O'Leary and Boettner (2011) found that people living in the highest coal-producing counties of West Virginia had higher poverty rates, lower median incomes, and poorer health outcomes than their counterparts in other counties in the state and warned that similar effects may result from the predicted boom in natural gas

extraction expected in the state's Marcellus Shale Deposit in the near future. Another recent study in Appalachia found that the type of mining (surface or underground extraction) mattered little in relation to the phenomenon of long-term community decline and that the presence of the extractive industry itself was the most important variable (Perdue & Pavela, 2012). Their recommendation was that the best decision for the state's people and its economy would be to leave the state's remaining coal resources undisturbed (Perdue & Pavela, 2012).

Kohrs's (1974) comparison of boom and non-boom counties in Wyoming provides one of the earliest examinations of oil-industry-specific boom and bust effects, with counties enduring higher rates of divorce, alcoholism, depression, attempted suicide, school delinquency and truancy, criminal behavior, and emergency room visits. Little (1977) found similar results of social trauma in Montana, North Dakota, Colorado, and Arizona. Given the likelihood of increased economic and political pressures to rapidly expand oil production through fracking in numerous states with large oil shale deposits, this topic has significant national relevance. Although the majority of states contain shale oil deposits (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2011), it is rural communities, with their small political constituencies and underdeveloped infrastructures, that will likely continue to bear the brunt of this rapid development.

Native American reservations may be especially vulnerable. Cross (2011) outlined three challenges facing the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arika Nation (also known as the Three Affiliated Tribes), located in the heart of the oil-producing Bakken shale oil formation, underlying parts of North Dakota and Montana and the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba. These challenges are characterized as legal, strategic, and intergovernmental, and Cross's (2011) work provides guidance to tribal governments attempting to exert an increased level of authority over their own natural resources to better mitigate some of the boom's negative effects, including the inability to hire and house staff providing critical human services. Throughout the reservation and the surrounding rural communities, human service worker pay competes poorly with oil industry pay, and the rising costs of living (particularly housing) discussed in this study disproportionately affect both vulnerable populations

and the modestly paid individuals who provide services to them. Increased average earnings and employment mask the disproportionate negative impacts on the most vulnerable and poorest residents in these counties, particularly reservation residents and rural residents on fixed incomes. At the time of this writing, tribal human services remain critically understaffed, from loss of social workers supporting kidney dialysis units (K. Fox, MSW, Kidney Dialysis Unit, Mandan, Hidatsa, & Arika Nation, February 1, 2012) to workers in group homes for people with developmental disabilities (S. Marshall, chief executive officer, Development Homes, Inc., Grand Forks, ND, March 29, 2013).

The ethical principal of challenging social injustice mandates that social workers have a professional responsibility to "pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people" (NASW, 2008). In a visit to North Dakota in the fall of 2012, Elizabeth Clark, past executive director of NASW, clearly framed the disproportionate negative effects of the boom on the state's vulnerable populations as a social justice issue and urged a group of social workers in North Dakota to "help social workers in other states know what you know" about rural social work (she referred to this as "a deficit in the profession") and the realities around the state's economic boom (Clark, 2012). This article is one response to that call.

On January 10, 2012, we facilitated a focus group with the state's county social service directors to discuss the impact of the boom on human service systems across the state. The emergent themes from that conversation were then weighed against available reports and empirical data. Whether from the epicenter of the oil patch, the periphery, or in counties far removed from the oil activity, the directors all had stories of boom-related impacts. (Although technological improvements continue to increase the geographic area of oil extraction activities, at the time of this study, there were 19 counties in the western half of the state generally referred to as the "oil patch." There is a particular concentration of activity in five counties in the far northwest corner, including Divide; Williams, home to Williston; Mountrail; McKenzie; and Dunn. These constitute the epicenter of the patch, whereas the other 14 can be considered peripheral.) Housing and related issues dominated the conversation, but participants also

spoke of other social impacts, the benefits of the boom, and the challenge of finding solutions to current boom-related problems.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE CURRENT BOOM

The social disruption hypothesis suggests that rapid growth leads to crisis, loss of community norms, and less effective community services. [Camasso and Wilkinson \(1990\)](#) indicate that children are particularly vulnerable due to residential transiency and low-density support networks. In contrast, [Smith et al. \(2001\)](#) found a sharp economic rebound followed boom-bust periods, with no evidence of lasting disruption. Furthermore, although the social disruption hypothesis provides a context for examining the negative impacts of booms, it fails to promote interventions to mitigate negative effects or to prevent harm in the first place.

In contrast, recent developments in community resilience theory may yield more practical tools for social workers across system levels. Indeed, the alignment of resilience theory with foundational social work knowledge and values has sparked efforts to call for its adoption as an integral framework for practice (for example, [Fraser, Richman, & Galinsky, 1999](#); [Greene, 2002](#)). Recent developments offer promising avenues for simultaneously testing theory and providing conceptually useful tools for boom-affected communities. The definition of community resilience used by the interdisciplinary Community and Regional Resilience Institute assumes that all systems inherently contain some degree of resilience that can be strengthened and improved through planned change processes and an intersection between systems theory and the strengths perspective ([Plodinec, 2009](#)). However, this more recent body of community resilience literature is largely disaster informed (for example, [Cutter et al., 2012](#)) and thus may have some limitations in terms of its transferability to the boom context. In addition, social work values of self-determination and empowerment (particularly in relation to vulnerable populations) appear only sporadically in this body of work, which is largely concerned with the recovery of economic capacity following a natural disaster (for example, [Community and Regional Resilience Institute, n.d.](#); [NASW, 2008](#)).

North Dakota currently struggles to sort the lessons from past booms with the current challenges and realities. North Dakotans have experienced

three distinct oil boom periods. The first boom (1951–1955) included housing shortages and more expensive public services. In response, during the second boom (the late 1970s through the early 1980s), locals strived to build adequate physical and social infrastructure but were then stuck with the bill for infrastructure made obsolete by the bust. Perceived lessons from those times have become guiding principles that fuel reluctance to build permanent housing or other physical or social infrastructure.

The media—especially newspaper stories, radio, television, and documentaries—offer the most up-to-date information about the current, ongoing oil boom. However, the business of newspapers is to sell stories, and there is a tendency to swing between hysterical reports of crime and euphoric tales of Horatio Alger-style success. Reports generally promote industry-friendly stories of abundant jobs, economic opportunity, and prosperity, though recent documentaries provide notable exceptions. The documentary *Boom Town: Oil Boom or Bust* notes concerns about economic and environmental issues, along with reports of community disruption and inequities in overall benefits ([Left/Right & Libert, 2011](#)). *Crude Independence*, another documentary, considers the impacts of the boom on infrastructure and housing issues and calls for increased law enforcement to address crime rates that have been disproportionate to population increases ([Howard & Hutton, 2009](#)). Newspaper reporters in 2010 produced over 50 articles under the title “Running with Oil,” including reports of insufficient human service funding; a lack of affordable child care; increased crime; housing issues; and increased traffic, which has challenged social service workers’ ability to serve clients living in remote, rural areas ([Forum Communications Company, 2010](#)). Meanwhile, there is a persistent tendency to promote booster-friendly stories of jobs and economic opportunity and any level of financial response from state government and the governor’s office. It is against this backdrop of often-sensationalized media accounts and widespread anecdotal information that we implemented a more empirical approach.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

This study is part of a larger set of investigations that aim to add to the empirical understanding of the effects of the oil boom on social services and

the state's vulnerable populations. The intention is to facilitate development of state and local policies that maximize the benefits of the boom and to inform potential interventions that may ameliorate its negative effects. North Dakota's county social service directors were selected as the focus of this study because they supervise the child welfare workers and others on the front lines of service provision across the state and would thus have first-hand knowledge of the impacts of the oil boom both in the heart of the oil-producing counties and in the counties more peripheral to this activity.

North Dakota's 38 county social service directors oversee child welfare, domestic violence, and substance abuse and mental health treatment services in the state's 53 counties (many directors oversee services in multiple counties). The majority of North Dakota's counties are several hours from metropolitan centers; have been primarily dependent on agriculture; have aging populations; and have, until recently, dealt with the threat of population loss. The state's county social service directors are fairly homogeneous, reflecting the state's dominant European American immigrant groups (for example, Scandinavian or Germans from Russia). Their relative homogeneity and the opportunity provided by their regular monthly meetings in the state's capital of Bismarck made the focus group format attractive as the study's method.

Focus groups allow for a wide spectrum of information to be obtained and promote the "reciprocal shaping of views among participants, as their ideas are shared, adjusted and shaped through group dialogue" (Ferguson & Islam, 2008, p. 220). On the basis of participants' shared history, the focus group method was deemed appropriate to "facilitate the exploration of collective memories and shared stocks of knowledge" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903).

The focus group consisted of 20 self-selected participants who had responded to an e-mail invitation to all 38 directors overseeing social services in North Dakota's 53 counties. The sample was 65 percent female ($n = 13$) and 35 percent male ($n = 7$), reflecting the gender distribution of the state's directors. A semistructured interview guide allowing for prompts of the interview participants focused on social service impacts while also allowing for the exploration of unexpected novel information. The interview guide was developed by the three authors on the basis of our review of the

literature and our knowledge of the scope of the interview participants' professional responsibilities. Key questions were e-mailed to participants in advance of the meeting to help them prepare, and the 90-minute focus group session was both video- and audiotaped.

The discussion was transcribed verbatim, and research team members independently coded the transcript through a process of constant comparison to develop higher-order themes and categories. The team then compared independently derived coding schema, and codes and categories were refined through a consensual process. The team then developed 16 higher-order categories from their initial coding process and grouped these into three major themes: (1) housing and social challenges, (2) benefits, and (3) challenges to solutions.

Aware of the problematic nature of journalistic and anecdotal accounts of the boom, the team triangulated focus group information as extensively as possible, using both the archival data, especially minutes and reports from municipal government, school districts, and legislative hearings, and an additional focus group consisting of a slightly different population of human service professionals. This second focus group was held on March 6, 2012, and consisted of 13 social workers serving the area around the state capital of Bismarck, the largest city on the periphery of the oil boom. Data from the additional focus group provided an opportunity for "triangulation of sources" (Patton, 2002, p. 556), allowing the research team to use the same method (focus groups) to analyze consistencies and inconsistencies in the data gathered. Archival data were used similarly in the data analysis as a means of "methods triangulation" to review findings in light of credible sources of data that might confirm or disconfirm focus group results (Patton, 2002, p. 556).

Study findings should be viewed with caution as the study methods have inherent limitations. Given its cross-sectional nature, the findings represent only a snapshot in time. In addition, a fairly small sample of human service professionals was used. To partially offset some of these limitations, we used both source and methods triangulation (Patton, 2002) in the data analysis phase as pragmatic attempts to provide an empirically grounded interpretation and representation of a complex and rapidly changing phenomenon. Although focus group results may lack the depth of individual

interview techniques, they also may allow for a deeper exploration of “collective meaning-making” and of the “nature and effects of ongoing social discourse” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 902) that are particularly well suited to the oil boom’s politicized context. Finally, it should be acknowledged that this study is only one of a series that use multiple and mixed methods to better ascertain the effects of the oil boom on social services and North Dakota’s more vulnerable populations.

DATA ANALYSIS AND STUDY FINDINGS

What follows is a description and analysis of the focus group’s three major themes (housing and social challenges, benefits, and challenges to solutions); the categories grouped under these themes; and analysis of focus group results based on the triangulation of data from multiple sources (for example, Patton, 2002), including journalistic reports, legislative testimony, archival data obtained from state and local agencies, and an additional focus group in March 2012 with social workers employed by the state North Dakota Department of Human Services.

Housing and Social Challenges

With the rush of economic refugees from the rest of the country into counties that have had decades of depopulation, the single most pressing issue of the oil boom in relation to social services is that of housing, which extends to and aggravates many associated social challenges.

Housing. A recurrent theme from the focus group was the issue of housing. The general lack of housing and shortage of affordable housing connect to more specific problems, including price gouging, substandard living conditions, and homelessness; difficulties in hiring because of a lack of available housing; and temporary labor housing known as *man camps*.

The directors repeatedly pointed to the centrality of the housing issue in relation to rising prices, substandard conditions, and increased rates of homelessness. From the epicenter of the patch, one director reported: “rents are jumping \$1,000 to \$1,500 at a crack . . . while renters are typically given only one month notification.” She also described elderly and disabled individuals on fixed incomes who were hit with a threefold rent increase from \$800 to \$2,400 (but did not provide a specific time frame).

In counties across the state, rent increases have forced vulnerable individuals to leave their home communities. Either voluntarily or through eviction, many have moved into substandard arrangements, including overcrowding or other risky living arrangements. Job seekers from areas of the country with high rates of unemployment often arrive to discover a lack of affordable housing. Even counties far from the edge of the oil patch are affected. One director distant from the boom noted that after experiencing depopulation for decades, some counties have families moving into “houses that haven’t been lived in for years.” These include houses with insufficient water and heating systems, in some cases requiring people to heat their homes with cooking ovens or to live with tangled masses of extension cords from the overuse of space heaters. Others are unable to find housing of any sort and are simply left homeless. Directors cited examples of individuals and families sleeping in their vehicles, and one described a “truck stop where there is upwards of 300 people there at night living in the trucks they drive.” Census data indicating the percentage of the population paying more than 30 percent of their income for housing data do not sufficiently reflect the situation as much of the boom activity has occurred since the 2010 census. Conversely, the state has not experienced any sort of a foreclosure crisis as there had not been a housing bubble prior to the boom.

Housing experts recommend apartment vacancy rates of 5 percent to 8 percent to maintain a “good market of available units” (North Dakota Coalition for Homeless People [NDCDP] and Rural Community Assistance Corporation [RCAC] preliminary report of point-in-time survey data provided by M. Carbone, personal communication, April 4, 2012). Yet even in Fargo—North Dakota’s largest city, located on the state’s eastern border, far from direct oil activity—the vacancy rate is only 3.8 percent. In the state capital of Bismarck, on the periphery of the patch, rates are 1.0 percent, and in communities around the epicenter of the boom, rates are at 0 percent. Data from the NDCHP and RCAC (M. Carbone, executive director, NDCHP, Bismarck, ND, personal communication, April 4, 2012) indicate that many counties have no rental availability at any cost, with some counties experiencing a 200 percent increase in homelessness from 2010 to 2012, though rates are likely even higher given the “challenges in conducting a homeless count.”

The shortage creates hiring challenges for companies generating the wealth, for construction companies who could help build housing, and for social service agencies. Resident surveys gathered by researchers at Dickinson and Minot State Universities, along with testimony given during legislative hearings, confirmed that more employees are essential to meet the rapidly growing “demand for law enforcement, emergency response, public health, social services, public works, and medical services” (Dickinson State University, Minot State University, & Great Plains Energy Corridor, 2011, p. 4).

Despite the housing crunch, perceived lessons from past booms have resulted in communities being reluctant to invest in the infrastructure necessary to build more adequate housing. One result is a preponderance of temporary labor housing, commonly referred to as *man camps*, that span a continuum from institutional barrack compounds to ad hoc tent communities with no water or sewage. One director noted that camps were originally embraced as a way to prevent “rents from escalating, [but] it’s too late: that’s already happened.” Amid the rapid accumulation of wealth, concerns about social and economic injustice are corroborated by a variety of sources, including legislative testimony (Bekkedahl, 2011; North Dakota Legislative Management [NDLM], 2012), government-sponsored studies, symposia publications at local universities (Dickinson State University et al., 2011), data from the NDCHP and RCAC (personal communication, M. Carbone, April 4, 2012), other human service agency data, human service employees, and media sources (Thompson, 2011).

Social and Environmental Challenges. The directors noted an increase in child protection and foster care cases stemming from environmental issues, including substandard living conditions, a preexisting and increasing day care shortage, and a shrinking supply of foster homes. Families who have come to the oil patch often have few familial or community networks or other local supports—a marked difference for rural social workers used to small communities and readily available family resources. These observations were reinforced by human service center workers and in legislative testimony (second focus group; NDLM, 2012). Human service workers reported increases in child protection and foster care cases involving families “increasingly from out of state” (second focus

group). During legislative testimony, a county commissioner stated, “social services are seeing increased demands in every category, [and] the most critical is our increase in child protection cases” (NDLM, 2012, Appendix P, p. 4).

There was only minimal discussion from the directors about domestic violence issues. However, statistics from western North Dakota sheriff and police departments, themes from outreach meetings and surveys, human service agency data, and fugitive literature all indicate troubling increases in domestic violence issues disproportionate to population increases (Dickinson State University et al., 2011; NDCDP and RCAC preliminary report of point-in-time survey data provided by M. Carbone, personal communication, April 4, 2012; NDLM, 2012; McKenzie County Sheriff’s Department 2010–2011 statistics provided by R. Rankin, Sheriff, McKenzie County Sheriff’s Department, Watford City, North Dakota, personal communication, March 28, 2012; Mountrail County Sheriff’s Department 2009–2011 annual activity report provided by F. Clouse, Clerk, Mountrail County Sheriff’s Department, Stanley, ND, personal communication, March 28, 2012; Williston City Police Department 2011 statistics provided by D. Peterson, Officer, Williston Police Department, Williston, ND, personal communication, March 27, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b). According to U.S. Census Bureau data, the population increase in one oil-producing county was 5 percent from 2010 to 2011 as contrasted with an approximately 40 percent increase in domestic violence calls to law enforcement (Mountrail County Sheriff’s Department 2009–2011 annual activity report provided by F. Clouse, personal communication, March 28, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b). Another county in the oil patch with a 10 percent population increase experienced a 120 percent increase in requests for extra officers to respond to such calls (McKenzie County Sheriff’s Department 2010–2011 statistics provided by R. Rankin, personal communication, March 28, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b). According to the executive director of the North Dakota Council on Abused Women’s Services, the dearth of housing has made response to domestic disputes difficult (J. Moos, executive director, North Dakota Council on Abused Women’s Services and Coalition Against Sexual Assault, Bismarck, ND, personal communication, June 8, 2012). This

might be clarified by the preliminary data from the NDCHP and RCAC's July 2011 study, which noted that "all homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, and transitional living facilities in the state were full" (M. Carbone, personal communication, April 4, 2012). Nonetheless, this was not an issue emphasized by the directors. Although it would be a mistake to assume cause and effect in relation to the oil boom and these increases in domestic violence, the literature on boom communities suggests that this is not atypical.

Similar to the disconnect with domestic violence concerns, there was little discussion in the focus group about traffic and other environmental concerns, despite many references in outside sources. (Bekkedahl, 2011; Dickinson State University et al., 2011; NDLM, 2012). This is particularly surprising because of the connection between traffic and poor road quality with challenges to delivery of social services (Thompson, 2011). In addition, fatal accidents and reckless or dangerous driver citations had increased by between 72 and 102 percent in recent years (McKenzie County Sheriff's Department 2010–2011 statistics provided by R. Rankin, personal communication, March 28, 2012; Mountrail County Sheriff's Department 2009–2011 annual activity report provided by F. Clouse, personal communication, March 28, 2012; Williston City Police Department 2011 statistics provided by D. Peterson, personal communication, March 27, 2012). And although only 13 percent of resident respondents to surveys identified environmental concerns as among the top five issues facing their community (Dickinson State University et al., 2011), other sources indicate widespread concern related to hydraulic fracturing, oil spills, and leaks (Gunderson, 2012; Left/Right & Libert, 2011; Wetzell, 2012).

In contrast, a significant portion of the focus group discussion was about an initiative to eliminate property taxes in the state. At that time, anti-tax enthusiasts were using North Dakota as a test case and had succeeded in getting an initiative on the ballot—and the oil industry and leaseholders who live outside of the state would have been among the greatest beneficiaries. The directors recognized that this would have taken away local collection and distribution authority. In addition, there was widespread concern about the fact that nearly half of the oil wealth leaves the state, which would have meant that many of those profiting

from the boom would have paid less in maintaining the state's infrastructure and the other related costs (Sulzberger, 2011). The initiative was defeated some six months later in a statewide June 2012 election.

Benefits

Although concerns about housing and social challenges dominated the discussion, there were frequent references to the oil boom's benefits. These included economic development, partnerships with oil companies, decreases in traditional social welfare and cash assistance programs, and the potential for building long-term community capacity. However, these were always considered in the context of mitigating factors and tended to be mixed blessings at best.

From the epicenter, one director stated, "there are jobs and there are good paying jobs," although another cautioned that "about 10 percent of the people are making a profit from the oil wells and 90 percent have to put up with the problems." Although the boom has had benefits, one director noted that this is creating blinders to social issues.

Multiple newspaper articles, legislative testimony, published and unpublished survey results by various other researchers, and comments during outreach meetings with western North Dakota residents (see, for example, Dickinson State University et al., 2011; NDLM, 2012) highlighted the state's copious benefits (especially in contrast to the nation's sluggish economy) and impressive gains in relation to rankings in U.S. domestic oil production (at the time of the focus group, the state ranked fourth, but by May 2012, North Dakota had risen to second place, trailing only Texas, in oil production; Associated Press, 2012b). At the time of the focus group, North Dakota had the lowest unemployment rate in the country according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012). And in a state that has largely experienced population decline for much of the last century, immigration has raised the state's population to its highest level in eight decades, and average annual wages have been rapidly increasing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b). Meanwhile, city commissioners from the oil patch have requested billions to expand and repair infrastructure (NDLM, 2012), and one city commissioner testified: "We are very appreciative of what this industry brings . . . but the majority of our residents have not seen direct benefits [and instead]

have endured significant economic, social, and emotional stress these last three years” (NDLM, 2012, Appendix J, p. 1).

The directors glowingly spoke of oil company donations to support local issues. For instance, in relation to road conditions, one director noted, “they are right there realizing they are the ones who are causing it so they are going to help compensate.” In addition, there was talk of donations of Christmas gifts for children and food baskets, and one director credited oil companies for financial relief to flood victims “in the millions [of dollars].” However, sources indicate much smaller payments of only \$25,000 in relation to flood relief, and that included money for road signs (North Dakota Petroleum Council, 2011; Peterson, 2011). Similarly, there was virtually no mention of oil company largesse during a legislative hearing held just two weeks after the focus group was conducted. Instead, thanking the state legislature for previously allocated funding, the city and county leaders detailed the need for more infrastructure funding and environmental costs. Industry-related assistance for road maintenance falls short of the environmental costs and issues related to housing (Kusnetz, 2012).

Another alleged benefit of the boom includes reduced cash assistance needs, with one director explicitly stating, “our economic assistance numbers have been down.” Another added, “our food stamp caseload went down [since the boom].” However, positive reports seem localized, at best, and rapid population growth and difficulties in tracking demographic data make it difficult to confirm or contest such claims. One director who was not present at the focus group observed, “our fuel assistance program has seen a dramatic decrease in numbers compared to five years ago, but more community members are seeking food basket[s] because their entire paycheck went to pay rent” (B. Quigley, director, Mountrail County Social Services, Stanley, ND, personal communication, December 13, 2011). In fact, oil patch counties have the greatest need for food pantries in the state. In one city near the boom’s epicenter, nearly 12 percent of the population regularly seeks food assistance (Finneman, 2011). Two county commissioners from the oil patch testified that economic assistance requests have increased (NDLM, 2012, Appendixes P & Q), and another county had a twofold increase in food

stamps from “pre-oil impact” to the present (NDLM, 2012, Appendix Q).

Challenges to Solutions

Second only to housing challenges, the directors spent the most time struggling to define and track the rapidly changing conditions. After housing, their main concern was that social workers in the oil patch lack the terminology and methodology to quantify boom-related problems and, subsequently, the means to alert policymakers. For instance, homelessness and abuse and neglect issues were foremost, with no consensus about how to define either. One epicenter director stated that “anyone that is living in temporary housing which includes those residing in campers and anyone in a multi-family living situation” should be considered homeless, whereas others argued that those “living in trucks where their job is two to three days per week” should be categorized as transient. In addition, there was disagreement about what constitutes neglect, with some noting that “families living in small campers for extended periods of time” did “not necessarily equate to abuse or neglect.”

Clearly, terminological discrepancies complicate service delivery, including the reality that some individuals and families living in substandard conditions may be exercising their agency by choosing housing that maximizes their earnings in a temporary work situation. In this way, they echo the fears of long-term residents that the boom will be short-lived. Because such individuals may not be seeking social services, current tracking methods, such as “point-in-time” homelessness studies, are insufficient. Although one county director near the epicenter asserted that “the school[s] have] the best gauge of homelessness,” the reality is that school systems are struggling with deciding whether to “report families living in vehicles with kids,” fearing that families might avoid the school system. All of this makes identifying and determining whether “kids are going to school” particularly difficult. As one director noted, “we simply have no way of tracking them,” suggesting the likelihood that homelessness and neglect situations are quite possibly more prevalent than reported.

Only limited, independent sources have considered these issues (Associated Press, 2012b; NDLM, 2012; second focus group; Thompson, 2011). According to an oil patch journalist, one barrier to

accurate measurements is pride, noting that long-time residents who had “become homeless aren’t willing to be identified. They are proud people who have lived in town their whole lives [and] don’t want to be labeled as homeless” (Thompson, 2011). Without accurate population data, it is difficult to ascertain the degree to which issues are proportionate to demographic changes. For example, city leaders dispute 2010 census data, believing that actual populations may be from 20 to 177 percent higher than reported (NDLM, 2012, Appendix H & L). The chair of the North Dakota Census Committee noted that it is “difficult to measure migration in rapidly growing areas,” as the thousands living in crew camps (that is, man camps) are not counted, leading him to declare that “the census estimates for the Oil Patch are too low” (Associated Press, 2012a). Clearly, current methodologies for tracking population are insufficient, and new terminology and processes are needed to mitigate the personal and social costs of the oil boom.

One of the greatest challenges about which the directors were absolutely clear was the need for greater state funding for social services to keep pace with emergent needs. Although these concerns are strongly supported by outside data and reporting sources, policymakers tend to focus on roads and physical infrastructure. The directors noted, “it’s an uphill battle for us.”

These concerns are broadly supported by outside sources (Dickinson State University et al., 2011; North Dakota Department of Commerce [NDDOC], 2012; NDLM, 2012). Just two weeks after the focus group, an interim legislative committee hearing focused almost exclusively on repairing and expanding road systems and related infrastructure and addressing housing shortages. Social service needs were mentioned by only a few county commissioners, with little follow-up. Similarly, the governor released a report outlining the primary challenges facing the state, with no explicit mention of social service needs (NDDOC, 2012).

LESSONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

Our reason for organizing the focus group, qualitatively analyzing its emergent themes, and triangulating those data with outside sources was to capture a more objective sense of the impact of North Dakota’s oil boom on the state’s social service systems and those served. Within this rapidly

changing environment, emerging narratives about the crime-ridden “Wild West” compete with wistful memories of pre-boom idyllic bliss. The euphoria about limitless riches, unbounded opportunity, corporate largesse, and the magical wonders of capitalism neglects the problems faced by the majority of long-term residents who have had their lifestyles disrupted, the many who suffer drastic inflation of living costs, and the waves of economic refugees from the rest of the country who have come to the state to find only disappointment and hardship. Conversely, the romanticized version of pre-boom rural life obscures decades of population loss and desperate attempts to develop economic activity beyond building and operating nursing homes for aging populations in remote frontier settings. Between these extremes, there lies a complicated reality that requires unbiased information and clear-headed planning. This is especially necessary for social workers seeking to address the costs of the boom and trying to influence policy decisions.

Although it is possible for communities to rebound after experiencing the impacts of boom times and the consequences of the seemingly inevitable crash, many of the consequences anticipated and described by the social disruption hypothesis are clearly evident throughout North Dakota’s oil patch. Those challenges also reverberate through the periphery and the rest of the state. What is less clear is the extent to which the current boom is unique and to what extent the lessons from past booms apply. Most immediately, policymakers have to make important decisions concerning adequate housing for what seems to be an inevitable, long-term population increase.

Lesson drawing from this study suggests that social workers and human service professionals might leverage their advocacy efforts with local and state officials by developing a laser-like focus on housing as both correlate and cause of many other social issues requiring greater attention and resources. In addition, advocates have the opportunity to help build community resiliency through the process of “naming and framing” housing-related problems in ways that could lead to better solutions for North Dakota’s more vulnerable groups, who have already been or are currently being displaced. For instance, language that evokes North Dakotans’ historical reverence for small-town values of mutual support, neighborliness, and civic duty could be developed and consistently

deployed by the human service community and its allies. Similarly, advocates could create coalitions to launch a coordinated campaign to galvanize citizens to be more than witnesses to the devastating effects of the boom. To counter the rhetoric of “There’s nothing we can do,” advocacy efforts should include practical models and consideration of tools, including tax relief, rent controls, more genuine public–private partnerships, and even the possibility of viewing the state’s energy resources as more than just opportunities for private enrichment. Coalitions, related efforts, and policy reforms could then become established assets that could survive the boom and further strengthen community resiliency. A state legacy fund recognizes that these resources do not just exist for the benefit of the current generation. Additional governmental action could be used to provide a more secure future for the state’s current residents of all ages, as well as for future generations.

North Dakota’s oil boom has clearly been positive in many ways, including far-reaching economic development for both oil patch communities and the rest of the state along with opportunities to build greater physical and social capacity and, of course, the direct enrichment of a limited number of individuals. However, there is a clear need to balance the freedoms of industry and individual property owners with both the immediate and long-term interests and social justice concerns of the rest of the state’s population. This will require the expertise of industry, technical, legal, and political experts. With their unique perspectives and skill sets, it is essential that social workers be involved in that process. They are needed for the work of organizing individual communities and the broader state. Social workers must facilitate and lend an ethical compass to the larger conversations and bring the value of hope to balance wealth accumulation for a few—based on the insistence on grabbing as much wealth as quickly as possible with insufficient regard for the immediate and long-term consequences—with the needs of the broader society and future generations who also have legitimate claim to the state’s energy resources. **SW**

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