

Quicknote #2: Boom times in Hinton, Alberta: The benefits and challenges of a changing economy

Beyond Boredom: Contributing Factors To Substance Abuse in Hinton, Alberta

March 2007

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Introduction

In a recent Foothills Model Forest report called *Beyond Boredom: Contributing Factors to Substance Abuse in Hinton, Alberta*, researchers explored social and economic factors that contribute to alcohol and drug abuse. Researchers also documented the changing face of Hinton in the context of a rapidly expanding oil and gas sector. This Quicknote highlights the benefits and challenges of the boom and calls for a broader dialogue on issues of community sustainability.

Oil and gas comes to Hinton

Hinton and many other resource-based communities across Alberta, such as Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Edson, and Grande Cache, are booming. Hinton's boom is a result of oil and gas exploration in the Foothills area, spurred on by advances in technology and high commodity prices. Oil and gas representatives predict that the boom in the Hinton area could last anywhere from 5 to 15 years.



The boom has brought an influx of oil and gas workers from across Canada, with a majority of them living temporarily in hotels, motels or work camps. This so-called 'shadow population' is estimated to be anywhere from 5,000 to 9,000 people – a near doubling of the Hinton population.

Boomtown blues

The most significant challenge of the rapidly expanding oil and gas sector, reported by residents, is the housing and accommodation issue: near-zero vacancy, escalating rents and lack of affordable housing. Hinton's housing and accommodation issue has created additional problems such as overcrowding, "children going to school from tent trailers", and the cancellation of sporting events. In addition, the rising cost of living is further widening the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. One resident describes the differential impact of the boom with a simple quote: "In Hinton the idea of spreading the wealth means someone's getting a Cadillac while someone else gets an eviction notice."

Other negative impacts of the boom include: an influx of strangers and the diminishing close-knit character of Hinton; increased traffic, noise, and dirt on the streets; a higher incidence of bar fights and domestic violence (in hotels and homes); longer line-ups at restaurants, grocery stores and car washes and overall, poorer service due to staff shortages. Female residents, specifically, said that with the influx of oil and gas workers into the community, they were more cautious on the streets and increasingly hesitant about going out in the evenings.

Boom brings opportunity, scarcity

Despite the social disruption associated with the boom, some Hinton residents are now enjoying abundant job and business opportunities. Young people, for example, are able to find employment without having to leave Hinton and marginally-employable people are successfully securing jobs.



Other Hintonites are capitalizing on the boom through starting new businesses, such as hotshot services and emergency medical services. Profits for many restaurant, store, and property owners have also increased. Closely following the record number of job postings in Hinton, however, is a scarcity of employees. The increased oil and gas activity in the Hinton, as well as other areas of the province (most notably Fort McMurray) has led to a major worker shortage in Hinton and across the province. Residents reported that many long time workers at the mill, mine, and even those in the service sector, have left their jobs for work in the highly lucrative oil and gas sector. As a result, employers are scrambling for workers. One research participant says that the new attitude among employers is: “As long as they have two feet and a heartbeat, I’ll take them.”

The boom – exacerbating substance abuse

Issues arising from the economic boom in Hinton are consistent with those documented by researchers who studied the ‘boomtown effect’ in US communities during the 1970’s oil boom. After observing boomtown effects in Gillette, Wyoming, researchers coined the term ‘Gillette Syndrome’ to describe the suite of social problems that results from boomtowns: crime, family violence, divorce, depression and suicide. Escalating rates of alcohol and drug abuse in communities experiencing a boom is also well documented – and Hinton is no exception.

Although alcohol and drug abuse has persisted in the community since the early Coal Branch days, the recent economic boom in Hinton has exacerbated substance abuse by importing new community risk factors. The surge of money into the community has heightened alcohol consumption and drug use. Also, since many of the oil and gas workers are away from their families, and spend a vast amount of time in the field, they may become socially isolated and physically exhausted, making them more vulnerable to use/abuse substances as they seek a way to entertain themselves and cope with loneliness or stress. The demanding work schedule of the oil and gas sector also places strain on the family structure. Furthermore, research participants described the oil and gas sector as a “quick fix”, “Big Boys Don’t Cry” kind of culture where it is easier for an individual to alter their mood with a substance than to address an underlying issue.

Conclusion

As a modern day boomtown, Hinton’s economy is thriving. Yet, not all of Hinton residents are benefiting from the boom. A lack of affordable housing, the increasing cost of living, and social disruption are just a few of the factors placing stress on people in Hinton. The apparent increase in alcohol and drug abuse signals the need for targeted programming for some residents and transient workers, to help them meet their basic needs, better cope with stress, as well as to help them address substance use and addiction issues. Substance abuse in Hinton, however, predates the boom and is deeply rooted in family, work, and community life. As the root causes of substance abuse are multi-faceted, addressing the issue requires a broader dialogue and the development of holistic, well-integrated solutions, now and into the future. If left unchecked, substance abuse will continue to place downward pressure on community sustainability, decreasing human capacities, limiting healthy social connections, and affecting future generations.

For the full project report, *Beyond Boredom: Contributing factors to substance abuse in Hinton, Alberta*, see: <http://www.fmf.ca/publications.html#SocialScience>.

This Quicknote is one in a series of three.

For a summary of the contributing factors to substance abuse, Quicknote 1: *Five community risk factors for substance abuse in Hinton, Alberta*, see: <http://www.fmf.ca/publications.html#SocialScience>.

A summary of the solutions which emerged from this report, Quicknote 3: *Breaking unhealthy traditions: Community solutions to substance abuse in Hinton, Alberta*, will be available in May 2007.