

# MYTHS AND REALITIES: A COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION OF THE IMPACT OF "BOOM" AND "BUST" CONDITIONS ON THE QUALITY OF COMMUNITY LIFE

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## ABSTRACT

Popular perceptions of "boom" and "bust" communities, supported by some of the earlier literature and anecdotal descriptions of life in such circumstances, have suggested that the quality of life in these conditions is seriously jeopardized. On the basis of an examination of one "boom" and two "bust" communities in Northern Ontario along with several comparison communities, and an examination of the available literature, some of the earlier claims of large scale social casualty rates are questioned. Both "boom" and "bust" communities appear to experience predictable phases of development. It is suggested that the principal human service needs vary from stage to stage in both. A number of implications for program planners are identified. It is suggested that future research would most profitably be devoted to longitudinal studies of communities entering either a "boom" or "bust" phase.

## INTRODUCTION

The quality of life in "boom" and "bust" communities, whether for single adults, families or children has been a topic of discussion in bar-rooms, homes and the media for many years; however, little

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documentation is available on the precise social impact of such developments. As part of an internal planning exercise, the Northern Regional Office of Ontario's Ministry of Community and Social Services initiated an exploratory study to examine current knowledge on "boom" and "bust" phenomena, the impact of these phenomena on children and families, and the related implications for human services. The study considered the hypothesis that large-scale community changes result in community and in-

dividual dysfunction. The study was undertaken within the general context of stress theory, and used the following data sources:

- a review of available literature;
- site visits in early 1982 to four Northern Ontario communities typical of either a "boom" or "bust";
- site visits to two comparison communities with a stable economic base;
- provincial social indicators considered to be predictive of a population at risk (Linton, 1979) for both the boom/bust and the comparison communities; and
- interviews with key informants from other jurisdictions.

Early in the study we learned that myths existed which we would need to examine; hence, the title of this presentation. Specifically, we found that one community identified by northerners as an example of long-term "bust" conditions had, in reality, become a relatively stable service centre.

### IMPACT OF "BOOM" CONDITIONS

"Boom" conditions have captured people's imagination as few other conditions have done. Lay perceptions are frequently cited in media reports as:

- everyone has ample money except perhaps the lazy;
- drunkenness abounds;
- sex starved males make life hazardous for females;
- crime rates are high;
- many of the resident population exhibit mental or social problems;
- rates of marital breakdown are high;
- community organization generally, and community services specifically, border on anarchy, there being too little, too late.

In support of these views, a few widely quoted studies have shown dramatic increases in incidence (ranging from 200% to 900%) in social problems such as child neglect/abuse, family disturbance calls to police, crimes against property and against

persons, substance abuse and psychiatric disorder (cf. Weisz, 1979; Lantz, Sackett and Halpern, 1980). Other researchers in other communities have not found results nearly as dramatic, hence the findings may have been unique to the communities examined. No studies were found which documented positive and energizing dimensions of "boom" conditions.

While data on the extent of social problems introduced by boom conditions are inconsistent in the literature there nevertheless are a number of other dimensions which appear relatively consistent across studies (Cortese and Jones, 1979; Davenport and Davenport, 1979, 1980; Energy, Mines and Resources, 1976; Glick and Glick, 1981; Hobart, Walsh and Assoc., 1979; Lantz, Sackett and Halpern, 1980; Saskatchewan Department of Mineral Resources, 1978).

1. *Demographics.* Community age distribution becomes skewed as an unusually high number of young men under age 45 move in with families.

2. *Services.* Scarcity of housing increases housing costs. Municipal, social and educational services fail to keep abreast of the increasing demands, particularly with respect to services to the young, such as schools and playgrounds. Changes occur in the types of problem for which assistance is sought through social and health services.

3. *Economic Situation.* The cost of living increases with the result that people on fixed incomes experience a decrease in the quality of their lifestyle. Small businesses often fail to adjust to the competition of new entrepreneurs. Local government is overextended by efforts to provide increased services before an increased tax base is realised.

4. *Quality of Life.* Tensions arise between newcomers and long-time residents who become progressively alienated from the developing community. Increasingly formal inter-personal relations undermine the traditional neighbourhood support systems.

*Case Examination.* One "boom" community examined directly was Elliot Lake, a uranium mining centre which has had three distinct booms, including the most recent one starting in 1976. Each had been characterized by an influx of newcomers, few of whom have family ties in the area; by housing shortages; by increased cost of living; by complaints of disrespectful inter-personal behaviour by newcomers; and by a lag in service development.

Interviews with personnel of newly established service agencies provided anecdotal examples of excessive behaviour consistent with the stereotypic perceptions. In contrast, human service leaders who had been resident in Elliot Lake for most of its history were primarily concerned that expansions in hospitals, police force, etc. were not keeping up with the population growth. These latter views were most consistent with the social indicator data which did not reflect high rates of family disputes, alcohol consumption, mental illness or crime. A number of factors may contribute to the consistency between the social indicators and the accounts of long-time leaders: personnel may acclimatize over time and become immune to difficult circumstances; conditions in this third boom may be proportionately less of a problem than in earlier booms; the presence of a service infrastructure and having experienced boom conditions before may cushion the impact of rapid development.

It is worth noting that major differences were evident in the ability of newer agencies to find and retain good volunteer leaders, compared to older institutions such as the hospital and the churches. The early identification of sound, stable and continuous leadership for new agencies is a factor planners in "boom" situations need to keep in mind.

### IMPACT OF "BUST" CONDITIONS

Typical lay perceptions by outsiders of communities experiencing a "bust" are very similar to those attributed to boom com-

munities—perceptions of increased drunkenness, higher crime rates and high rates of mental breakdown. The major exception is that—in contrast with boom communities—people in bust communities are believed to have no money (except for a few hard-hearted elite).

Again, some widely cited studies reinforced these perceptions and cited social problems such as more mental health problems, alcohol abuse and drunkenness (Barling and Handal, 1980; Dooley and Jackson, 1981; Energy, Mines and Resources, 1976; Marshal and Funch, 1979; and Siemens, 1976). However, conflicting evidence is presented by other sources. McKenzie, Check, Hiebert and Penning (1978) studied the effect of cutbacks in Thompson, Manitoba and concluded that there was little evidence of increased rates of alcoholism or of increased demands for counselling, although there was some evidence of an increased demand for crisis-intervention services related to depression, mental breakdown and child care. After studying the impact of the Inco Strike in Sudbury, Radecke (1981) concluded that about 10% of the striking husbands increased their alcohol consumption, but a much larger proportion drank less.

Some of the more consistent findings in the literature on bust communities follow.

1. *Demographics.* Community age distribution becomes skewed, with the elderly over-represented because individuals with portable skills leave.

2. *Service Provision.* Some services are reduced or withdrawn because of the reduced local tax base.

3. *Economic Situation.* The increased unemployment results in unoccupied buildings, unused public utilities and developed but deserted properties (Department of Regional Economic Expansion, 1979).

*Case Studies.* For our site visits three single-industry communities in Northern On-

tario were selected as sample bust situations: Hearst, Longlac, and Geraldton.

At Geraldton, the gold mine had closed a decade ago. Since then the community had become the subregional office for various kinds of government services with the secondary school, the hospital and the site of an airport for the surrounding area. The community's economic base was diversified and stable so that Geraldton could no longer be considered a "bust" community.

Longlac, with a population of 2,407 in 1981, is near Geraldton and was also affected by the gold mine closure. Longlac, too, had developed an alternate resource base in the intervening years with the establishment of two major forest products industries. In 1981, the town entered what was anticipated as a short-term bust. Virtually all workers from these two employers had experienced intermittent employment since the Fall of 1981. At the time of the study in March-April, 1982, employer spokesmen could not estimate when the mills would be in full operation again.

In spite of the employment difficulties, very few people had left Longlac. Most laid-off workers were eligible for unemployment insurance. One firm had continued its employee benefits and had subsidized mortgages or halved rents. Alcohol consumption was reported to be up somewhat, though this was not corroborated by annual social indicator data. Activity Programs had been organized by the firm and the municipal recreation department to occupy the men during the day.

A variety of social indicators were studied, namely: police charges under the Criminal Code of Canada, the Narcotics Control Act, the Food and Drug Act, the Liquor Licence Act, and the Highway Traffic Act; number of persons sentenced to prison; number of children placed on probation; juveniles committed to training school wardships; children admitted to residential care; psychiatric admissions; and the live births to teenage

mothers. None of these social indicators reflected any consistent or significant change over time except as might be expected from a significant change in administrative policy.

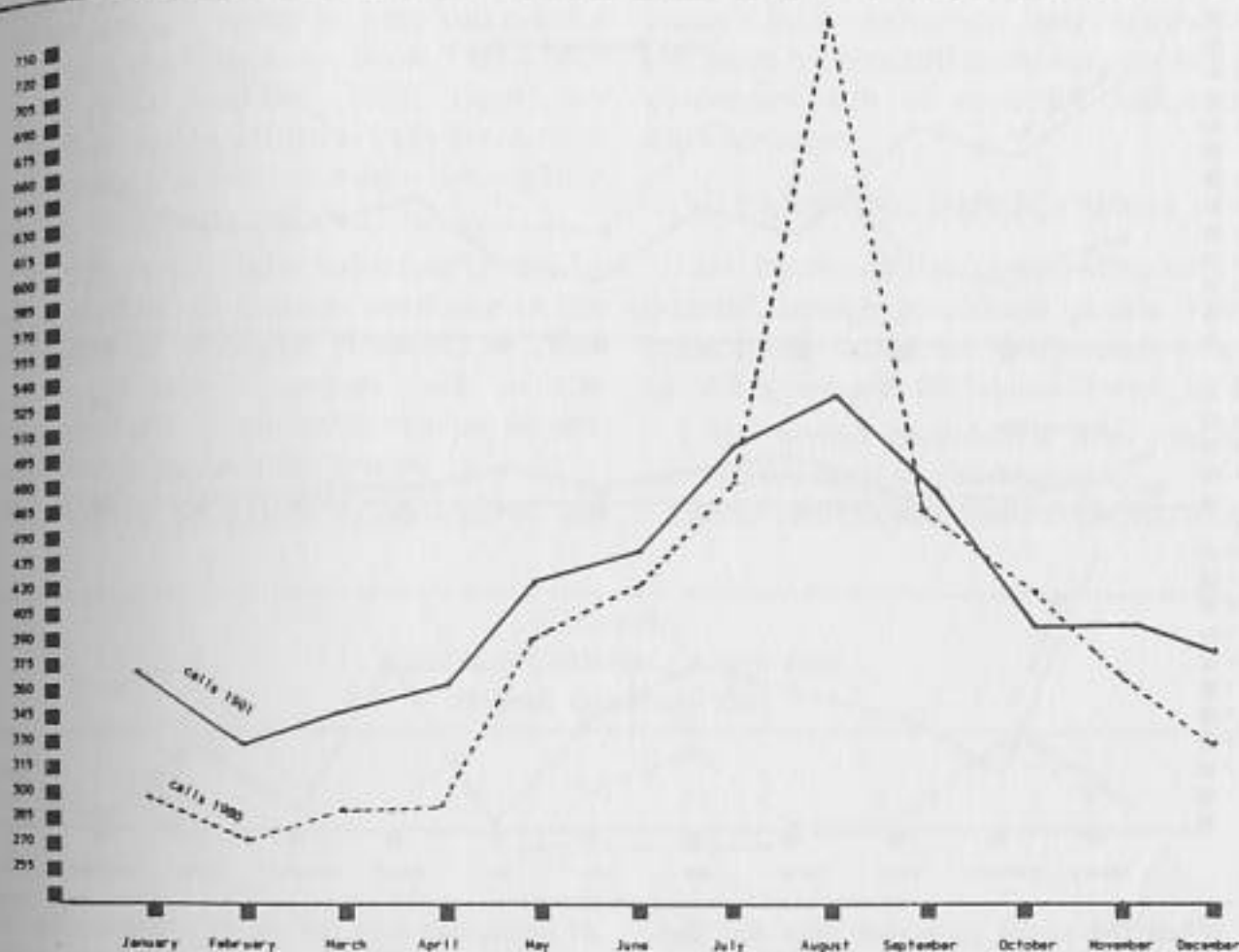
The study of Geraldton and Longlac demonstrated that the available social indicators were not sufficiently sensitive to pick up a significant stressor such as a "bust." Annual data does not reflect occurrences of a shorter time-span. Further, many catchment areas for data are much larger than the community of interest, and the catchment areas do not coincide. Finally, local interpretations of the legislation requiring the filing of data varied considerably.

To compensate for these factors, a different data collection strategy was adopted for Hearst when it entered a bust cycle and was added to our study. Hearst, a community of 5,372, is heavily dependant on the forest industry and also ran into difficulty in 1981. According to the Canada Employment Manpower Office statistics, the number of men and women looking for work rose from 470 in January 1981 to a record high of 1,032 in December, 1981. To examine the full impact of the "bust," social indicator data were collected on a monthly basis from local services.

Again, there was little evidence that the economic crisis was having a negative social impact on residents. The number of persons receiving welfare increased only slightly; no mortgage foreclosures occurred. A slight increase in the number of calls to the police in 1981 (Graph 1) was counterbalanced by the fact that more situations were resolved on the telephone so that fewer domestic disputes required the intervention of police. The Liquor Store manager stated that there had been a noticeable decrease in the quantity of alcohol sold to individuals and commercial establishments even in the month of December, historically a busy month for liquor sales.

Hospital admissions for depression decreased in Hearst from 1980 to 1981, but drug overdoses increased (Graph 2). These

GRAPH 1  
Calls to OPP Detachment  
Hearst, Ontario—1980 and 1981



changes must be interpreted with caution as the number of patients involved was small.

Graph 3 shows the number of protection and child care cases on the caseload of the Children's Aid Society for 1981. Comparable data for 1980 was not available. The monthly breakdown of data for 1981 shows no increase in child protection cases from January, when lay-offs had just started, to December when unemployment was at a record high.

In 1982, at the time of the study, the residents of Hearst and the local municipal government were collaborating to minimize the impact of the lay-offs. Schools opened their gymnasiums so that the adult population could benefit from free recreation opportunities during the day and at night. Extra

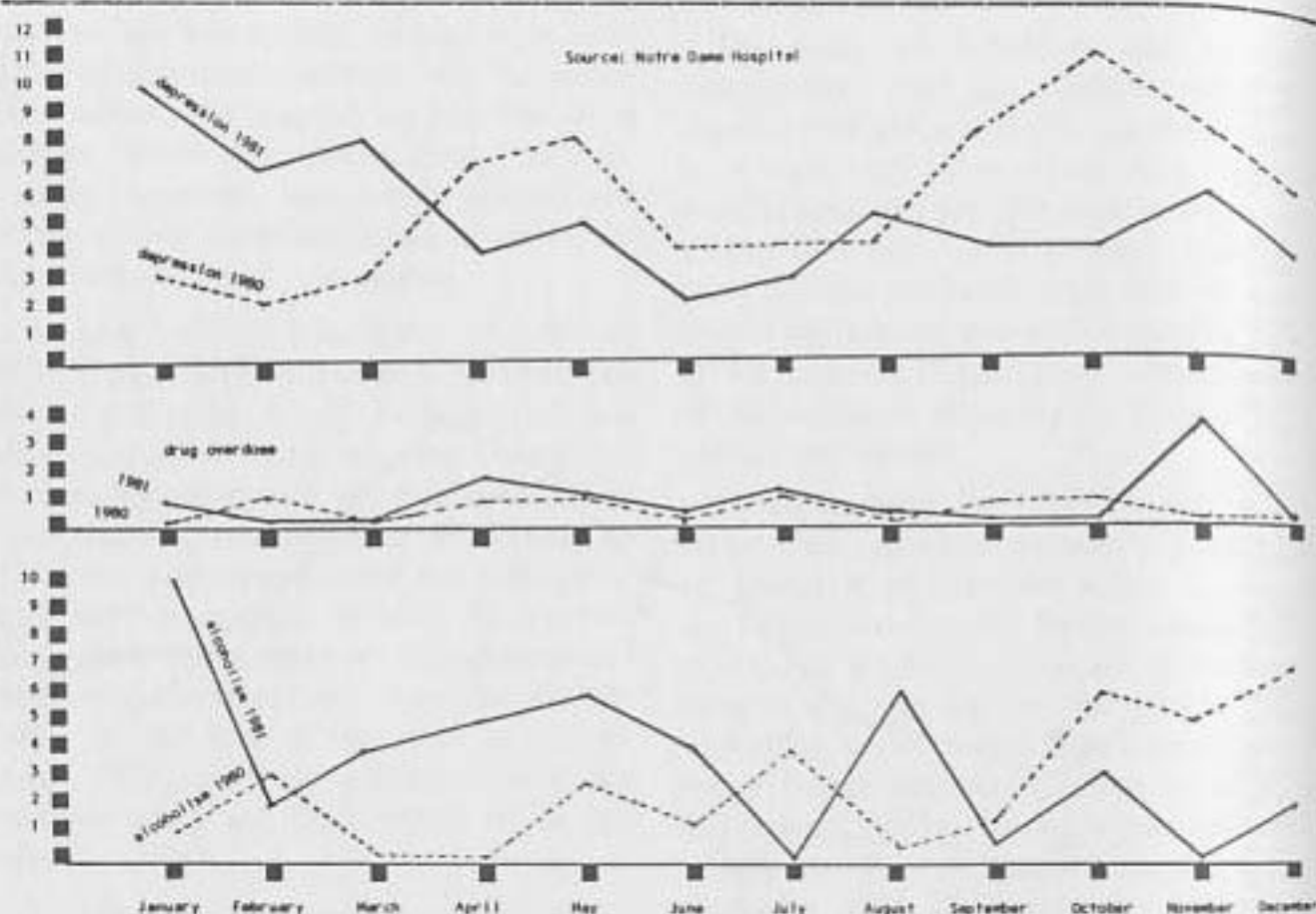
adult education courses had been set up and municipal rinks and the pool had been opened for extended hours. A number of informants also suggested that families and neighbours were spending more time together in mutually helpful activities such as fishing or cutting wood for fuel.

### COMPARISON WITH ECONOMICALLY STABLE COMMUNITIES

Five communities having a stable economic base had been chosen at the beginning of the study for comparison purposes:

| Name         | Population | Economic Base |
|--------------|------------|---------------|
| Espanola     | 5,785      | single-sector |
| Terrance Bay | 2,560      | single-sector |
| Cochrane     | 4,811      | diversified   |
| New Liskeard | 5,507      | diversified   |
| Haileybury   | 4,886      | diversified   |

**GRAPH 2**  
**Hospital Admissions by Selected Diagnosis**  
**Hearst, Ontario—1980 and 1981**



When the social indicator data for these communities were compared with the boom community of Elliot Lake and with the bust communities, the only consistent difference was that the number of live births to mothers age 19 or less was higher in the boom and bust communities than in the stable communities. Again, the actual number per year in each of these communities was very small and, hence, must be interpreted with caution.

## DISCUSSION

There are several possible explanations why data from this study differ from the findings of some previous investigations. It may be that the indices examined were not sufficiently sensitive to changes in the communities. Alternatively, most of the problems may be associated with a highly visible but small proportion of the population. Both factors likely are relevant, but the second is

of particular note for boom communities. In Fairbanks, Alaska, 50% of arrests during the early boom period were of people who had lived in the community for less than a year (Stanley Associates, 1975). Although statistics were not available for Elliot Lake, anecdotal evidence suggested that the largest proportion of problems seen by the social service agencies and police were associated with newcomers.

Social indicator data from the two bust communities, Hearst and Longlac, failed to confirm the dramatic social stress responses reported earlier. The social indicator data from bust communities was more consistent with data reported by Radecki (1981) and the report of McKenzie, et al. from Manitoba (1978). The efforts made by local government and schools in Hearst, and by one company in Longlac may have minimized the impact of lay-offs. In Hearst particularly, anecdotal

evidence suggested that families and friends helped each other out more as the bust condition emerged. Therefore, in these two communities, it appears that both formal and informal support networks were successfully mobilized as a response to stress. This is consistent with Michels' (1980) report on Atikokan and its ability to rally forces in a constructive fashion to lessen the negative impact of industry pull-out.

Mobilization of informal networks may be more difficult in a boom town due to the rapid influx of people. However, in Elliot Lake, established agencies such as the hospital and a church reported some success in establishing volunteer groups.

In summary, despite suggestions to the

contrary in the literature, there does not appear to be a simple "cause-effect" relationship between changes associated with boom or bust conditions and stress-related problems. Both individual and community responses to economic stress may depend on a complex web of economic and socio-cultural factors.

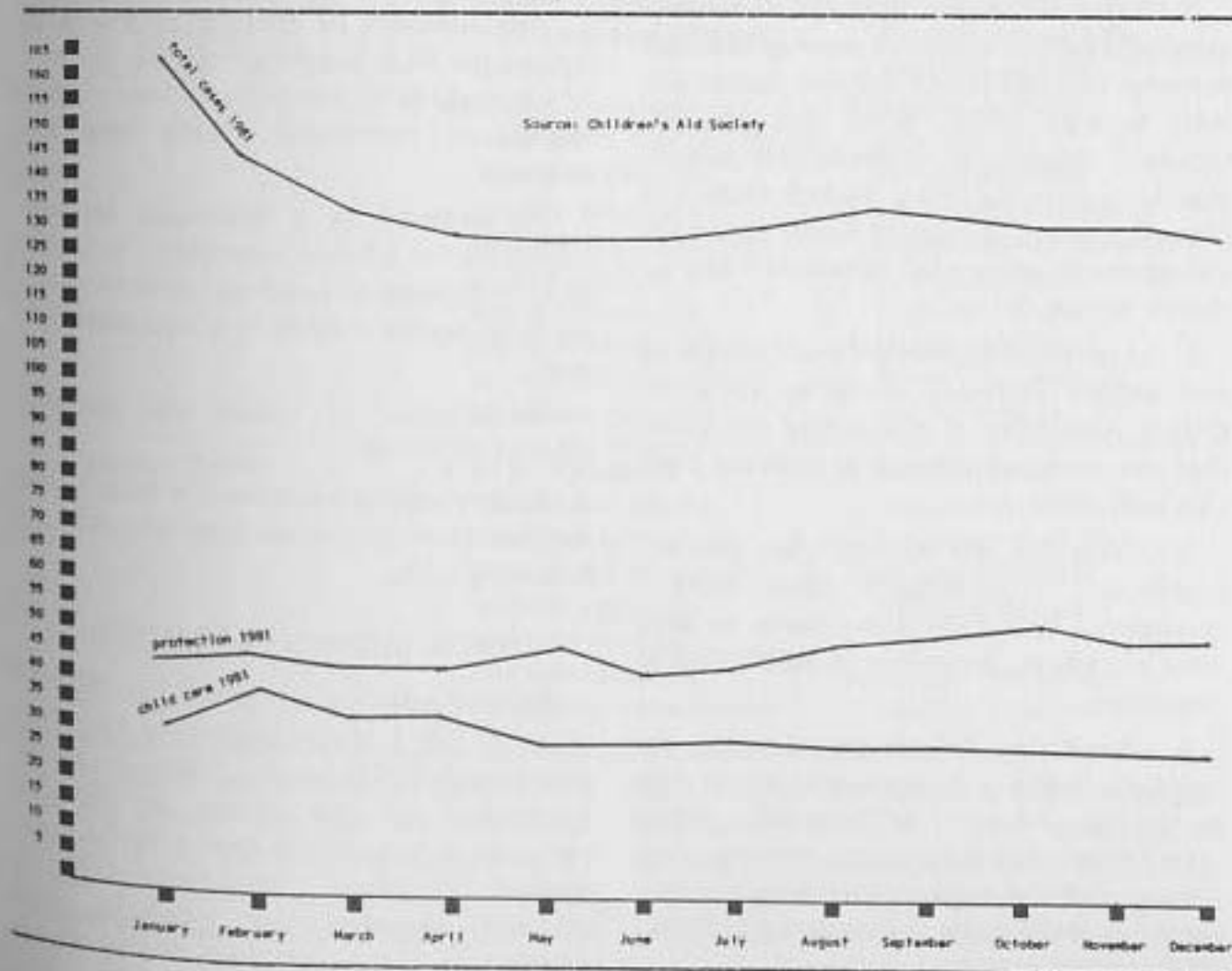
### PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

Both boom and bust communities seem to proceed through predictable phases. Boom communities experience five distinct phases according to Lucas (1971) and Owens (1974):

1. the period immediately after the announcement of development;
2. the construction period during which

GRAPH 3  
Caseload: Children's Aid Society  
Hearst, Ontario—1981

Source: Children's Aid Society



the highly mobile construction workers arrive to build the new plant, housing, etc.;

3. a period characterized by the arrival of families who will make the community their place of residence;
4. a transitional phase when the new community members become progressively more involved in and responsible for the developing community; and
5. the mature phase when the population has stabilized, and some of the older residents begin to retire in the town.

Most major disruptions seem to occur during the second and third phase of rapid population influx. A community such as Elliot Lake seems to have gone through several epi-cycles of this general pattern.

Communities undergoing an economic bust proceed through four distinct phases according to Robb Ogilvie Associates (1981).

1. During the period after the announcement of lay-off or closure, a sense of disbelief pervades and few people use this time to adjust. Schwass (1982) notes that the anticipated removal of construction activity associated with the Bruce Nuclear Station in Ontario resulted in massive denial and in the circulation of unfounded rumours of new industry moving in.

2. After notice is given the truth hits home and anxiety increases according to Robb Ogilvie Associates. It was during this phase that one community began to mobilize itself (Michels, 1980).

3. During the first 90 days after jobs are terminated, approximately 30% become reemployed and 15% more leave to seek work elsewhere, according to Robb Ogilvie Associates.

4. After 90 days following termination, the numbers reemployed rise more slowly to 50% by the end of 6 months. Those who cannot afford to conduct a job search, women, older people, unskilled workers and immigrants are the groups most likely to experience difficulty finding reemployment.

Knowing something about these phases enables the tailoring of human service responses to the appropriate stage of development. In both boom and bust situations the first two phases are a time of uncertainty in which people require accurate and trustworthy information. By the second phase the reality of the change is clearly evident and people are ready (even if reluctant) to face the fact that life in the community is going to change. It appears appropriate to capitalize on this growing realization, and the anxiety which may accompany it, to mobilize community resources to plan how to cope. While the first thought might be to develop a *service* plan (e.g. how to handle the anticipated increase in service demand), this reaction is too narrow. It fails to take into account the possibility of broad preventive action which might lessen the negative impact of the pending boom or bust. Some examples of broad preventive strategies are:

- establishment of training programs to ensure that local people are eligible for new jobs brought in by new industry and to lessen feelings of resentment among long-term residents.

- development of a residential development plan for a boom community or agreement by industry to assist with or defer mortgages on houses it owns in a bust situation; and

- mobilization of formal and informal support networks.

Major planning elements for both boom and bust communities are summarized in the following table.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Without question a "boom" or "bust" situation has a major impact on the community in which it occurs; however, reports suggesting that the quality of life for everyone is jeopardized appear to be exaggerated. In either circumstance there is evidence suggesting that relatively small percentages of the population as a whole ex-

## A Social Planning Strategy for Boom or Bust Communities

| Planning Elements                                                   | Boom                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Bust                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) deal with uncertainty                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● develop credible information sources for long-term residents re nature and size of expansion</li> <li>● develop information for newcomers on schools, housing, etc.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● develop credible information sharing re nature of shutdown, alternative jobs, etc.</li> <li>● initiate planning to broaden the income base of the community</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                            |
| 2) initiate a broad community development/ social planning strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● identify and support community leadership</li> <li>● encourage and enable community leaders to obtain information from other communities having had similar experience</li> <li>● obtain outside planning expertise if necessary</li> </ul>                                                                                     | as for boom community                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| 3) develop practices and resources that benefit all                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● develop industrial zoning and performance standards</li> <li>● develop a residential development plan and mobile home park controls</li> <li>● establish temporary resources for temporary populations, e.g. during construction</li> <li>● establish training programs to ensure local people eligible for new jobs</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● develop special agreements to assist with or defer mortgage payments</li> <li>● develop re-training programs for laid-off workers</li> <li>● encourage local church groups, service clubs, etc. to organize social support networks</li> <li>● provide additional recreation programs for day time use</li> </ul> |
| 4) provide flexible                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● fly in expertise to help conduct regular household surveys during rapid growth to detect emerging problems pending development of the community's own services</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● provide special employment counselling for groups most likely to have difficulty finding a new job</li> <li>● provide "safety-net" financial resources</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                 |

hibit severe stress-induced behavioural changes. Clearly, this does not belittle the severity of the problem for people so affected, or for human service personnel in difficult circumstances. On the other side of the

coin many people thrive on boom conditions, and cope well with "busts," although no literature had documented these dimensions.

From a planning perspective, the predictable successive stages of both "boom" and

"bust" phenomena should make it possible to plan adaptive and appropriate responses to human needs as they present themselves.

Since "boom" community residents seem to favour more formal social service institutions to meet their needs (providing an air of stability), while residents in bust communities focus on informal support systems (clergy, doctors, family, neighbours), then it seems sensible to make relatively flexible resources available to "boom" communities while emphasizing the development of formal support networks.

In the initial stages of a "bust," many residents may benefit from a preventive strategy focused on developing job search and money management skills, preparing to face increased personal and family stress related to unemployment, etc. In later stages of a "bust" when most individuals successfully have adapted, a residue of less func-

tional families with fewer adaptive skills may remain requiring a more intensive case management approach to service planning.

A variety of research issues remain to be resolved. To what extent does prior experience with either a "boom" or "bust" help both individuals and communities cope? How do variables such as community age and size interact with booms or busts? If communities are given time to prepare an adjustment plan between "announcement" and actual occurrence phases, does this help reduce stress? What effect do different roles of employers have on community residents' ability to cope? These and other questions can only be addressed with research strategies which are longitudinal in nature, and use a conceptual model with related community-specific data collection systems. Preferably developments in a number of communities would be examined concurrently.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les mythes populaires qui entouraient les communautés en plein essor et en déclin, renforcés par certains écrits et certaines anecdotes au sujet de la vie dans des circonstances semblables, nous ont porté à croire que la qualité de vie dans ces conditions est sérieusement compromise. L'étude d'une localité en essor et de deux autres en déclin dans le nord de l'Ontario, ainsi que de plusieurs localités témoins, et l'analyse de la littérature existante, incite l'auteur à remettre en question certaines des affirmations antérieures voulant que l'incidence des troubles sociaux soit élevée. Les deux types de communautés semblent passer par des phases prévisibles de développement. Il apparaît que dans les deux cas, les besoins en services à la personne varient d'un stade à l'autre. On détermine un certain nombre de conséquences dont devraient tenir compte les personnes chargées de la planification des programmes. Enfin, on laisse entendre qu'à l'avenir les recherches devraient être axées sur des études longitudinales des communautés qui commencent une phase d'essor ou de déclin.

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