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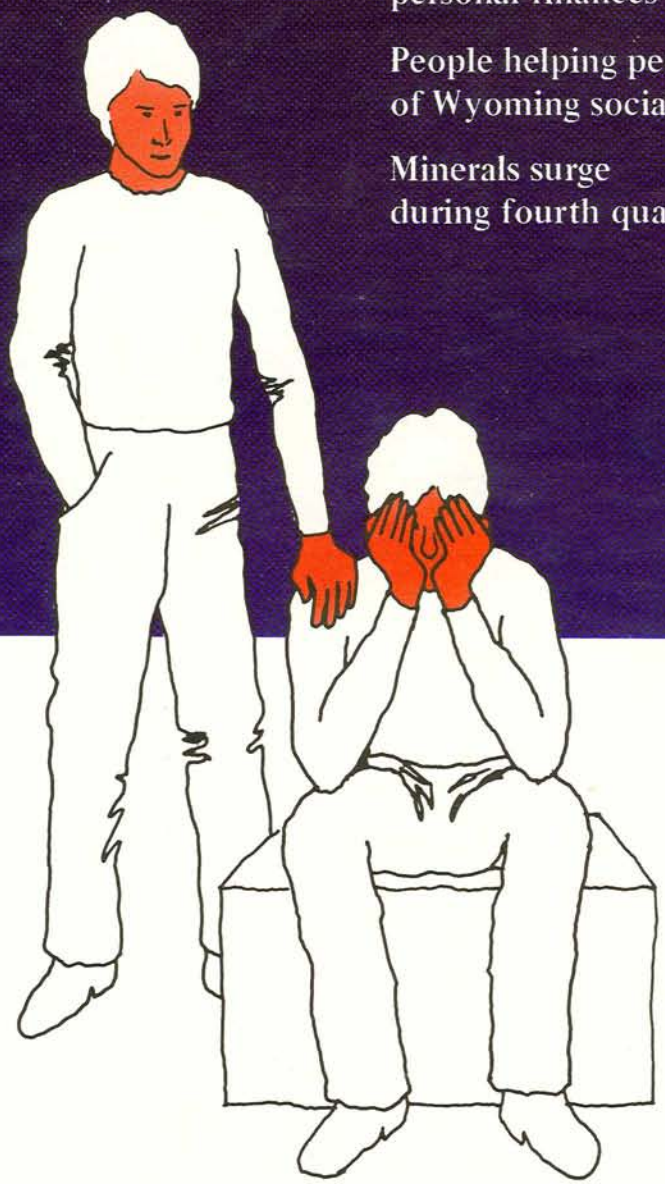

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The Gillette Syndrome
A myth revisited?

by James G. Thompson

The so-called "Gillette Syndrome" has become such a well-known term throughout much of the United States that it is commonly used in the mass media as a synonym for high crime rates and other undesirable social changes which supposedly always occur in conjunction with rapid population growth. The story of how the term Gillette Syndrome became so widely known is unclear. It is clear, however, that to people living in communities experiencing energy development in the West and to people whose work is related to energy development, the term has come to represent an unflattering image of what happens to small towns when a large energy development takes place nearby.

The term appears to have originated with a psychologist who was director of the Northwest Wyoming Mental Health Center in Gillette, Wyoming, in the early 1970's. El Dean Kohrs first coined the phrase in an article entitled, "Social Consequences of Technological Change and Energy Development," published in 1973 in a magazine called *The Wyoming Human Resources Confederation Insight.* It was not until 1974, however, that the phrase and the social problems which it purported to represent gained much public attention. In April 1974, Kohrs delivered a paper to a meeting of the Rocky Mountain Association of the Advancement of Science held in Laramie, Wyoming, entitled, "Social Consequences of Boom Growth in Wyoming." The paper dwelled at length on the social problems of what Kohrs called "boom towns" in Wyoming. Kohrs made assertions about practically every social problem which could occur in a small town experiencing rapid growth. He roughly described problems of divorce, depression, school dropout rates, marital tensions, juvenile delinquency, criminal activity, welfare programs, mental health problems, and other related social problems. Unfortunately, the paper received widespread publicity in the media but apparently was never published in a scientific journal. It is unfortunate because the original presentation was highly speculative, suggesting areas for social science research related to problems occurring in fast-developing small towns. The data on which many of the assertions were based usually were only for one year, were usually for three counties in Wyoming, and generally were not comprehensive. One also can question the quality of the data that supported the assertions. The data appear to be those Kohrs had time to gather to support his ideas of the types of problems he believed were prevalent in fast-growing towns in the region. Even though the data were of questionable scientific validity, the phrase, "the Gillette Syndrome," was catchy and memorable. Thus, the speech and the idea of the Gillette Syndrome were stamped as factual information when in fact it was not.

Now several years later so many articles have been written using the phrases "boom town" and "Gillette Syndrome" that a mystique has grown up which is difficult to refute. The mystique basically is that the social problems referred to in Kohrs' paper occur whenever rapid development is experienced. In fact, this is far from the truth. The social changes which accompany rapid population growth, particularly of the type related to energy development, often are much different than referred to by Kohrs. Most importantly, there are many positive social changes which occur in conjunction with growth, even rapid growth accompanying energy development. The Kohrs article did not acknowledge such positive social changes in any way. Beyond that problem, however, the image of the Gillette Syndrome possibly conveys an unnecessarily negative image of social changes occurring in rapid growth situations. Anyone who has had close contact with the towns in Wyoming experiencing rapid growth might suspect that Kohrs was mistaken in many of his assertions and overstated the degree to which other changes were occurring. The purpose of this article is to review three of the major assertions made by Kohrs in his original paper and then to review these assertions in the light of more complete data.

As indicated, Kohrs discussed many social problems in his paper. Information can be obtained to examine some of these assertions; unfortunately, for other assertions it is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain the needed information without spending large amounts of time and resources. The three assertions selected for examination in this article are that the divorce rate is high in rapidly gowing communities, that full employment does not result in reduction in public welfare needs, and that rapid growth results in greatly accelerated rates of almost every kind of crime.

To examine the first of the assertions–that rapid growth results in a high rate of divorce–data were obtained for five counties in the state of Wyoming for the years 1970 to 1977. The data were obtained from the Wyoming Department of Vital Statistics, made possible by a recently established computerized record keeping system and subsequent reports. Five counties were selected for comparative purposes. Campbell County, of which Gillette is the county seat, was one. The other four counties were selected because they were closest in size and population to Campbell County and because two of them–Carbon and Sheridan–were counties also experiencing growth from energy development. The other two counties–Goshen and Park–were selected because they experienced little growth, particularly growth related to energy development during the time period examined. Divorce data (table 1) in Wyoming are recorded by county of residence. Therefore, although it can be argued that numerous couples in Campbell County could have gone outside the county for a divorce, it is unlikely that a high percentage also would have gone out of the state. More likely, people seeking a divorce without wishing to file for divorce in their county of residence would go to nearby population centers.

Divorce rates based on table 1 data were constructed by dividing total number of divorces per year by each 1,000 people in each county. The average per capita divorce rate for Campbell County between the years 1970 and 1977 was higher than the average rate for two counties–Park and Goshen– but it was lower than the divorce rate for the other two counties–Sheridan and Carbon. Further, the average divorce rate for the state of Wyoming during this time period was higher than the average rate for Campbell County.

Clearly, the divorce rate for the period

Table 1. Comparison of divorces per thousand people for five counties and the state of Wyoming.

County	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	Average no. of divorces per 1,000 population 1971 to 1977	Percentage change in population 1971 to 1977
Goshen County									
Population	11,100	11,100	11,300	11,400	11,800	12,400	12,400		+ 12%
No. of Divorces	40	54	63	68	65	52	53		
Divorces/thousand people	3.6	4.9	5.6	6.0	5.5	4.2	4.3	4.9	
Park County									
Population	18,000	18,200	18,400	18,300	18,900	19,000	19,000		+ 11%
No. of Divorces	110	108	114	107	87	121	132		
Divorces/thousand people	6.1	5.9	6.2	5.8	4.6	6.36	6.9	6.0	
Campbell County									
Population	13,400	11,700	12,300	12,000	13,100	20,500	25,000		+ 86%
No. of Divorces	73	60	77	65	135	103	154		
Divorces/thousand people	5.4	5.1	6.3	5.4	10.3	5.0	6.1	6.2	
Carbon County									
Population	14,000	14,500	15,500	16,200	16,700	16,600	18,100		+ 29%
No. of Divorces	68	82	96	83	114	117	145		
Divorces/thousand people	4.9	5.7	6.2	5.2	6.8	7.0	8.0	6.3	
Sheridan County									
Population	17,900	18,200	18,900	19,200	19,900	21,300	22,500		+ 26%
No. of Divorces	131	113	154	142	120	148	154		
Divorces/thousand people	7.3	6.2	8.1	7.4	6.0	6.9	6.8	7.0	
State of Wyoming									
Population	340,000	346,000	354,000	362,000	376,000	408,000	424,000		+ 23%
No. of Divorces	1,988	2,210	2,280	2,523	2,835	2,851	3,074		
Divorces/thousand people	5.8	6.4	6.4	7.0	7.5	7.0	7.25	6.76	

1970 to 1977 for people living in Campbell County was not significantly different from other counties in the state. In fact, it was lower than the state average. As with any data set, arguments can be made that data used are either incomplete or incorrectly reflects a social reality. One argument in this case could be that spouses today simply leave one another without bothering to get a formal divorce. A second argument could be that many of the people who came to Campbell County seeking employment encountered difficulty which led either to separation or divorce, but that the people left both the county and the state before getting a divorce (if in fact they got a divorce), thereby causing the officially recorded divorce rate for Campbell County to be artificially low. But there are counterarguments in this particular case. In the first place, there may be a growing number of people in society who do not bother to get a formal divorce. But this phenomenon should be true for the state of Wyoming as a whole and for the other four counties used in table 1 for comparative purposes. In the second case, there may be a certain percentage of couples who leave the state before getting a formal divorce. But this phenomenon also would apply to the two counties experiencing considerable growth used in our example here--Carbon and Sheridan counties. Both counties, however, have a larger divorce rate than Campbell County.

In all five counties examined and for the state of Wyoming, the divorce rate is higher than the average divorce rate during this time period for the United States as a whole. Reasons for this difference are many and complicated. Numerous social science studies have been conducted to ascertain the reasons for different divorce rates and other social behavior between different regions in the U.S. and between the U.S. and other countries. Such explanations are beyond the scope of this article. But the data and the analysis provided here demonstrate that the divorce rate for Campbell County was not significantly higher than the divorce rate in other comparable counties in the state and is not significantly different from the divorce rate for the state. Therefore, Kohrs' basic assertion that the divorce rate in Campbell County was high should be questioned. Further, the assertion that the divorce rate was a result of rapid population growth caused by energy development is even more suspect. Thus, it remains unresolved whether the divorce rate in a rapidly growing community is in fact any higher than the divorce rate in slow

Table 2. Welfare cases in five counties in Wyoming for four welfare programs 1973-77.

Program		FY-73 Total Cases	Cases per 1,000 pop.	FY-74 Total Cases	Cases per 1,000 pop.	FY-75 Total Cases	Cases per 1,000 pop.	FY-76 Total Cases	Cases per 1,000 pop.	FY-77 Total Cases	Cases per 1,000 pop.	Avg. no. of cases per 1,000 pop., 1973 to 1977	Percentage population change, 1973 to 1977
AFDC	Crook	131	28.5	161	35.0	159	32.4	176	35.2	187	36.6	33.5	+ 11%
	Weston	285	45.9	342	56.0	332	53.5	317	48.0	297	43.0	49.3	+ 11%
	Campbell	353	28.6	245	20.4	196	15.0	200	9.8	269	10.8	16.9	+103%
	Johnson	208	37.8	247	45.7	184	32.2	175	25.7	191	28.1	33.9	+ 24%
	Platte	377	55.4	378	54.0	369	50.5	406	49.5	471	55.4	53.0	+ 25%
Emergency Assistance	Crook	1	0.2	NA	NA	3	0.6	4	0.8	2	0.4	0.5	+ 11%
	Weston	22	3.5	13	2.1	20	3.2	23	3.5	20	2.9	3.0	+ 11%
	Campbell	40	3.3	28	2.3	34	2.6	41	2.0	53	2.1	2.5	+103%
	Johnson	6	1.1	9	1.7	11	1.9	10	1.5	8	1.2	1.5	+ 24%
	Platte	16	2.4	16	2.3	21	2.9	21	2.6	34	4.0	2.0	+ 25%
Total General Relief	Crook	2	0.4	4	0.9	1	0.2	8	1.6	11	2.2	1.1	+ 11%
	Weston	113	18.2	30	4.9	44	7.1	55	8.3	38	5.5	8.8	+ 11%
	Campbell	173	14.3	31	2.6	64	4.9	52	2.5	123	4.9	5.8	+103%
	Johnson	50	9.1	50	9.3	52	9.1	47	6.9	39	5.7	8.0	+ 24%
	Platte	54	7.9	2	0.3	22	3.0	21	2.6	33	3.9	3.4	+ 25%
Individual General Relief	Crook	2	0.4	4	0.9	1	0.2	4	0.8	NA	NA	0.6	+ 11%
	Weston	35	5.6	30	4.9	44	7.1	55	11.0	NA	NA	7.2	+ 11%
	Campbell	41	3.4	27	2.3	59	4.5	48	2.3	NA	NA	3.1	+103%
	Johnson	15	2.7	14	2.6	31	5.4	22	3.2	NA	NA	3.5	+ 24%
	Platte	NA	NA	2	0.3	22	3.1	21	2.9	NA	NA	2.1	+ 25%

growing communities in the same region of the country. And no causal relationship has been demonstrated between energy development and divorce rates.

To examine the assertion that full employment caused by mineral development projects does not result in a reduction in welfare needs but in fact results in increased welfare needs, our attention turns to the data in table 2. Welfare data are available on a county-by-county basis; however, it is complex and difficult to summarize. The workload for welfare personnel is basically separated into the administration of welfare payments under specific federal and state welfare programs which provide for specific payments to qualifying individuals, and into welfare caseload activity, which does not involve making payments under specific welfare programs. Because the latter welfare activity is so difficult to measure, only caseload payments for four particular welfare programs have been summarized in table 2. The four programs selected for analysis are aid for dependent children (AFDC), emergency assistance, total general relief, and individual general relief. These were selected because they include a high percentage of cases which qualify for payments and because these four categories are categories appearing in "boom town" literature as being areas of great welfare need in times of rapid growth. Again, average number of cases for the time period–in this case, 1973 to 1977–were computed on a per-thousand-people basis for each of five counties. The counties used in this instance are different from those previously examined because of peculiarities in social structure in two of the counties. Sheridan County and Goshen County both have welfare institutions within the county and therefore had unusually high welfare caseloads in relation to the population of the county. They therefore were dropped from the analysis and counties which more closely resemble Campbell County were substituted.

Table 2 reveals that the average number of cases of aid for dependent children in Campbell County was significantly lower than for the other counties presented. In terms of emergency assistance, only one county–Weston County–had a higher average number of cases per thousand population than Campbell County. However, the average number of cases for all the five counties was small.

In terms of total general relief, the average number of cases per thousand population in Campbell County was in the middle of the sample. Two counties–Weston and Johnson counties–had significantly higher average numbers of cases than Campbell County. In individual general relief, Campbell County again was in the middle. Weston and Johnson counties once more had a higher average number of cases per thousand population than Campbell County. The other two counties, Crook and Platte, had significantly lower average numbers of individual general relief cases.

Thus, of the four welfare programs examined, Campbell County had a significantly lower number of average caseloads per thousand population for AFDC than the other counties. It had the second highest average number of total general relief and individual general relief cases: this despite the fact that the percentage population change in Campbell County between 1973 and 1977 was 103 percent. This was more than four times the amount of population change recorded for the next highest county (25 percent for Platte County). Examination of cases for four major welfare programs administered by county welfare offices, therefore, indicates that welfare payments did not increase on a per capita basis as population grew. On the contrary, there is some evidence (AFDC data) that some welfare costs may actually decrease as growth occurs.

An argument can be made, however, that welfare needs and activities performed by welfare agency people in fast-growing communities are not reflected in payment caseloads for specific state and federal welfare programs. Welfare personnel could be overwhelmed by requests for service activity, such as counseling for development-related problems. However, interviews with welfare directors in several fast-growing communities in the Northern Great Plains region indicate this is probably not the case. A study being conducted at the University of Wyoming Institute for Policy Research entitled, "A Socioeconomic Longitudinal Monitoring Study," has examined welfare activities in two counties experiencing rapid growth from the construction of electrical-generating power plants. The two counties examined in this study are McLean County, North Dakota, and Platte County, Wyoming. In both counties, a few years after construction of the power plants had begun, the caseloads of county welfare had not significantly increased. Personal interviews with county welfare directors indicated the caseloads were a reasonable indicator of public welfare activity in the counties. The directors stated that they had not experienced increases in requests for welfare assistance which were even in near proportion to the size of the population growth that had occurred. It did appear from the interviews that the directors and at least some of the staff were working longer hours than they had prior to the rapid growth. But much of this activity was in areas which might be labeled "community prevention" or "welfare planning" activity–activities designed to address possible problems that might result from rapid growth.

County and state welfare offices appear to be quite busy assisting individuals and community groups cope with change. But there appears to be little evidence that demand for welfare payments under existing programs increases as development occurs. The data (table 2) suggest that full employment may, on the contrary, lead to a *decrease* of some types of welfare needs, while having little effect on others.

To test Kohrs' assertion that rapid growth leads to general increases in crime,

two sets of data were assembled and are presented in tables 3 and 4. For a variety of reasons, however, it is difficult to compile accurate and reliable crime data for the state of Wyoming. Estimating the amount and the extent of criminal activity in any area is difficult. Many crimes are not detected, while other crimes are never reported. However, the FBI's "Uniform Crime Reporting System" has resulted in the collection of comparable data for a clearly defined number of serious crimes.

Table 3. Comparison of F.B.I. uniform crime index for five cities in Wyoming, five cities in the Northern Great Plains, and five cities on the West Coast.

City	Population* 1970-77	Percentage Change 1970-77	F.B.I. Crime Index, 1977	Crime Index Per 1,000 Population
Wyoming Cities				
Casper	39,361 - 43,100	+ 10%	2,668	62
Cheyenne	41,254 - 49,100	+ 20%	3,173	65
Gillette	7,200 - 11,200	+ 57%	673	60
Laramie	23,100 - 25,000	+ 8%	856	34
Sheridan	10,900 - 13,500	+ 24%	515	38
Northern Great Plains Cities				
Brookings, S.D.	13,700 - 14,000	+ 2%	504	36
Mitchell, S.D.	13,400 - 13,900	+ 4%	572	41
Dickinson, N.D.	12,400 - 12,700	+ 2%	525	41
Mandan, N.D.	11,100 - 12,700	+ 14%	554	44
Havre, Mt.	10,600 - 10,300	– 3%	682	66
Cities on the West Coast				
Albany, Ca.	15,600 - 14,000	– 10%	742	53
Artesia, Ca.	14,800 - 14,400	– 3%	810	56
Clovis, Ca.	13,900 - 27,800	+100%	832	30
Pullman, Wa.	23,200 - 23,500	+ 1%	1,163	49
Aberdeen, Wa.	18,700 - 17,700	– 5%	1,298	73

*Population figures for 1970 from *U.S. Census of the Population, 1970;* U.S. Department of Commerce. Estimates for 1977 from Population Estimates, Series – P25, U.S. Department of Commerce.

The data used in tables 3 and 4 are defined in the FBI's Uniform Crime Report as Part 1 offenses. These offenses include murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny and theft, and motor vehicle theft. Because an extensive effort is made to collect reports of known offenses in these categories for all counties and all states in the U.S., Part 1 offenses provide a reasonable basis for comparing levels and types of criminal activity. To make the Part 1 offenses comparable, the FBI's Crime Reporting System includes computation of a "crime index." The crime index is the summation of all crimes in the seven categories listed under Part 1 offenses. By summing the total number of offenses on a county-by-county and state-by-state basis, a rough barometer is provided for comparative purposes.

The FBI crime index for 1977 is reported in table 3 for the five Wyoming cities, five Northern Great Plains communities, and five cities on the West Coast, all comparable in population size to Gillette (except Casper and Cheyenne, Wyoming). The crime index is reported only for 1977 because that was the first year in which Gillette was included in the FBI Uniform Crime Report. The crime index is calculated on a per-thousand-population basis to make it more meaningful for analysis. Examining the figures,

Table 4. Comparison of the average crime index for five counties in Wyoming for the years 1973-77.

	Population 1973-76	Percentage in Population 1973-76	Total Crime Index 1973	1974	1975	1976	Average Crime Index 1973-76	Average Crime Index Per 1,000 Population*
Sheridan	18,900 – 21,300	+ 13%	540	1,311	822	631	826	42
Carbon	15,500 – 16,600	+ 7%	382	277	588	873	530	33
Campbell	12,300 – 20,500	+ 67%	400	496	615	763**	570	39
Park	18,400 – 20,000	+ 9%	302	547	615	278	435	30
Goshen	11,300 – 12,400	+ 10%	152	93	223	223	173	15

*Population used was average population for each county for the four years, 1973 to 1976, which were, respectively: 19,800; 16,300; 14,500; 18,900; and 11,700.

**Total Part 1 crimes for Campbell County were only available for 1973 and part of 1977 and 1978. So the figures for 1974, 1975 and 1976 are interpolations and should be viewed as rough approximations only.

it appears that the crime index per thousand population is higher for the city of Gillette than for Laramie and Sheridan but about the same as Casper and Cheyenne. It also appears that the crime index for Gillette is significantly higher than four of the cities in the Northern Great Plains, but lower than the figure for Havre, Montana. When compared to the five cities of the West Coast, however, it appears that the crime index per thousand population for the city of Gillette is again about midway between the extremes.

To provide a comparison for counties rather than just for cities in the state of Wyoming, Part 1 criminal offenses have been summarized in table 4 for five Wyoming counties. This data had to be assembled from state reports because FBI Uniform Crime Reports do not report data for rural counties of less than 25,000 people on a regular basis. The data in the state report varies significantly in its reliability from year to year and from county to county. Unfortunately, data for Campbell County included in the state reports has been incomplete for a number of years. Part 1 type offenses reported in table 4 for the other four counties, (Sheridan, Carbon, Park, and Goshen) were complete. To provide data on Part 1 offenses for Campbell County, reported offenses for 1978 and for 1973 were used to compute a rough crime index for Campbell County for the period 1973 to 1976. A crime index for the years of 1974, 1975, and 1976 was computed by interpolating the differences between 1978 and 1973 figures. The average crime index per thousand population for Campbell County was higher than all other counties, except Sheridan County. This measure of criminal activity in Campbell County roughly coincides with the crime index for the city of Gillette. Both indexes indicate that criminal activity in Campbell County is in fact higher than criminal activity in other parts of the state of Wyoming.

Because criminal activity is higher in the rapidly growing community of Gillette and Campbell county, however, this does not necessarily mean that Kohrs' assertion that all types of criminal activity increase significantly with population growth is correct. To provide an idea of where the increase in criminal activity has occurred in Campbell County, the Part 1 crime categories for Campbell County are summarized in table 5 for the years 1973 through 1977. The greatest increases by far occurred in crimes against property, such as burglary, larceny, theft, and motor vehicle theft. Cases of crimes against persons, such as robbery, forcible rape, and homicide, did not increase significantly in Campbell County in absolute terms. This is not to say that there have not been serious violent crimes against persons. But the total numbers in these categories have not been large during the reported time period.

The high incidence of criminal activity in the categories of motor vehicle theft, larceny, and burglary is not unique to Campbell County, but it appears to be consistent with patterns found in other communities growing rapidly because of energy development. The U.W. socio-economic monitoring study mentioned earlier confirmed this pattern of crime both in Wyoming and in North Dakota. There does appear to be sufficient evidence to say that criminal activity in particular categories does increase dramatically as rapid population increases occur. It is important, however, to make the distinction that by far the majority of increased criminal activity takes place in property related crimes, as opposed to crimes against persons. It is important that law enforcement planning activities in rapidly growing areas make this distinction. It is probable that the high levels of crime in the property areas are related to changes in social structure, areas which can be at least partially managed by public officials. For example, the proposition has been put forth that one of the reasons for large increases in larceny, theft, and burglary in rapidly growing areas is that many people arrive in rural areas expecting to use some form of financial credit to pay the rent and buy groceries until their first check from a new job arrives. But temporary financial credit often is not available in any form in rural areas for a newcomer to the community. Thus, a father with a family to feed may find himself with few choices except to go outside the law to temporarily provide for his family. If structural problems, such as lack of consumer credit, are causing increases in theft and larceny, then solutions can be found such as changing state laws to encourage better consumer credit financing. But it is important to know what types of crimes are being committed and to seek understanding of why these crimes occur. Only with such knowledge can communities take rational steps to eliminate such problems.

In conclusion, it is the contention of this paper that Kohrs' assertions in two of the three examples selected for more thorough examination were incorrect. Divorce rates do not appear to be higher in rapidly growing communities in Wyoming. Welfare payments do not appear to grow because of population growth related to energy development. Total criminal activity does appear to increase with rapid population growth, but mostly in the categories of property related crimes.

This analysis should make it clear that terms such as "the Gillette Syndrome" and "boom towns" are not factually descriptive terms. Therefore, these terms should not be used at all by supposedly objective social scientists. Such terms are factually inaccurate but crowded with emotional imagery. There are certainly social problems occurring in towns experiencing rapid growth. But these problems should be specifically and objectively studied so social planning can proceed from as accurate an information base as social science makes possible.