

Drilling boom brings surge in crime to small towns

Associated Press State Wire: Pennsylvania (PA) - Wednesday, October 26, 2011

Author: MARC LEVY - Associated Press

In a modern-day echo of the raucous Old West, small towns enjoying a boom in oil and gas drilling are seeing a sharp increase in drunken driving, bar fights and other hell-raising, blamed largely on an influx of young men who find themselves with lots of money in their pockets and nothing to do after they get off work.

Authorities in Pennsylvania and other states are quick to point out that the vast majority of workers streaming in are law-abiding. But they also say the drilling industry has brought with it a hard-working, hard-drinking, rough-and-tumble element that, in some places, threatens to overwhelm law enforcement.

Some police departments are trying to hire more officers but are hard-pressed to compete with the industry for applicants.

"On one hand, we need to count our blessings," said Sheriff Scott Busching of Williams County, N.D. "On the other hand, we need to see if we can control this so it isn't chickens one day and feathers the next. ... We have come to the point here where we're almost overwhelmed. It's very close."

In Bradford County, Pennsylvania's most heavily drilled county in the 3-year-old rush to tap the Marcellus Shale, the nation's largest-known natural gas reservoir, the stream of men from Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana and elsewhere has been accompanied by increases in arrests, traffic violations, protection-from-abuse orders and warrants issued for people who don't show up in court, law enforcement officials said.

In the heart of western North Dakota's oil patch, driving under the influence and assaults have spiked after thousands of workers descended on the area and settled in apartments and trailer villages known as "man camps." Southwestern Wyoming's booming gas fields also have seen a rise in rowdy behavior.

"We definitely do drink a lot. I ain't going to lie," said Jordon Bourque, a 23-year-old pipe inspector from Lafayette, La., who was drinking beer at a bar in the Williamsport, Pa., area one recent night.

But he said that many in the industry obey the law and that authorities in Pennsylvania have less tolerance for troublemakers than police in small-town Texas, where rig workers are used to raising hell and getting a pass from law enforcement.

"You can do that (stuff) and get away with it," Bourque said. In Pennsylvania, "they look at it totally different."

Leaving a diner in Towanda in northern Pennsylvania, Jason Phillips, a 30-year-old drilling-equipment supervisor from Coldspring, Texas, said the problem is not really the drilling industry "it's young people making a lot of money." As for himself, he said, "I'm not too much of wild person."

The boom in drilling has been made possible by horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, a technique that cracks open rock layers to free natural gas. Large numbers of workers are needed to operate drilling equipment, drive trucks, handle chemicals, lay pipeline and perform other tasks.

The hours are long. Some employees put in two weeks on, two weeks off. But entry-level laborers or truck drivers can make \$40,000 or more, while workers on the drilling rigs can easily pull down twice that. Their employers often pick up the tab for hotels, meals and practically everything else.

In Sweetwater County, Wyo., where natural gas exploration boomed about a decade ago, the population increased from 37,600 in 2000 to 43,800 in 2010, and arrests for drunkenness, drugs and DUI more than doubled from 603 in 2000 to a peak of 1,535 in 2008, according to state figures.

Since then, the numbers have eased to 1,128 in 2010, a decline that sheriff's spokesman Detective Dick Blust Jr. credited to the sluggish national economy.

In Pennsylvania's Bradford County, DUI arrests by state troopers are on track to rise 40 percent this year after climbing 60 percent last year, District Attorney Dan Barrett said. The number of sentences handed out for criminal offenses was up 35 percent in 2010, he said.

Sheriff Clinton Walters said his officers are handling about a 25 percent increase from last year in everything from warrants for people who fail to appear in court to protection-from-abuse orders. The flood of arrests is such that his office's van is no longer big enough to transport all the inmates at once from jail to court, Walters said.

Stories abound about friction between locals and out-of-towners, whether road rage incidents or fights over women.

Renee Daly, 27, of Montrose, Pa., said she knows of at least three marriages that ended when local women abandoned their husbands for gas-field workers.

It's "because of these Southern gentlemen, with their Southern accents, and the girls move in with these guys to take care of them," she said. "You get to spend their money, and they're gone two weeks at a time."

Wearing a T-shirt emblazoned "My Indian name is crawling drunk," Jeanette Pratt, a title searcher from Monroe, La., who travels the country for the gas industry and was on assignment recently in Montrose, said the difference is that the out-of-town rig workers "have a lot more money to party with" than the locals.

In the North Dakota boomtown of Williston, some bars have become rough, and the number of domestic-disturbance calls and arrests for such crimes as DUI, assault and theft in just the first half of 2011 was twice the total for all of 2010, said Busching, the sheriff.

Busching and Williston police are scrambling to hire but say they can't pay enough for their new officers to afford the high rents, and many would-be local applicants have opted for a higher paycheck in the drilling industry.

"I have increased staff, and I'm going to increase again, but I can't until I find a place for them to live," Busching said. Williston Police Capt. Tom Ladwig said he has been hiring from police academies in Minnesota and has officers staying on couches in colleagues' apartments until they can find their own places.

Doctors are treating more patients for chlamydia, a sexually transmitted disease, in some of the biggest oil-producing counties in western North Dakota 237 cases in 2010 compared with 145 in 2008 although the state's disease-control chief, Kirby Kruger, said that it is difficult to call three years of data a real trend.

There are also rumors of prostitution.

In rural southern Texas, where exploration for oil and gas in the Eagle Ford Shale is just getting under way, Robert Garza, police chief in the town of Dilley, said he has heard talk about plans to build a club "down in the boonies" that would supply prostitutes to drilling industry workers.

Police departments in the area have reported unusual activity in recent months: early morning traffic stops with "very young, attractive girls in BMWs" from the Houston area, at least a five-hour drive from Dilley, Garza said.

Back in Pennsylvania, a Bradford County commissioner, Doug McLinko, said the crime spike doesn't change his mind about the importance of the drilling boom to the local economy. Other states, he said, would "cut an arm off" to have such a surge.

"I'm always a little apprehensive about painting this as a big problem around the county, because it just isn't," McLinko said. "A lot of these people are really well-behaved. ... To a large degree, is it out control or a major issue? Absolutely not."

Associated Press writers Michael Rubinkam in Montrose, Pa., James MacPherson in Bismarck, N.D., and Ramit Plushnick-Masti in Houston contributed to this report.