



Beyond the “Roughneck” Stereotype: Revealing the Actual Face of Mobile Workers in the Alberta Oil Sands and North Dakota’s Bakken Oil Region and Why It Matters to Health

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This white paper challenges the stereotypical image of mobile workers as “roughnecks” and reveals, via recent data, the actual demographic profile of the mobile workforce populations in both the Alberta Oil Sands and North Dakota’s Bakken Oil Region in the United States. When you mention a boomtown, a lot of people think of young single men with little education, massive pickup trucks and fistfuls of cash. However, recent research reveals that the majority of mobile workers across North America are *family-oriented, hardworking individuals who travel significant distances and spend a great deal of time away from home to make a better life for themselves and their families*. This paper also discusses why the perceived and actual identities of workers matter to health, and, importantly, why this matters to industry and the greater community.

INTRODUCTION

“One frequent assumption about construction workers (and other “temporary newcomers”) is that they are single-handedly responsible for the broad range of problems often encountered in boomtowns. The assumption may be consistent with a number of stereotypes, but it does not appear to be supported by anything more than circumstantial evidence.” – American Sociologist William Freudenburg

Mobile workers – also known as the “shadow population” or Fly-In Fly-Out (FIFO) workers – are those individuals who commute to and from resource development projects and who live temporarily in work camps, lodges or other short-term accommodations. This mobile and largely male workforce has been a quintessential part of resource development throughout the history of Canada and the United States. The Alberta Oil Sands in Canada and North Dakota’s Bakken Oil Region in the United States recently have seen massive growth in their mobile workforces. In the Alberta Oil Sands, the mobile workforce population increased from 6,000 workers in 2000 to over 39,000 in 2012.¹ In the Bakken Oil Region near Williston, North Dakota, it has gone from nearly zero in 2010 to an estimated 15,000 to 17,000 temporary mobile workers in 2012.² Despite these increasing trends, mobile workers remain over-stereotyped and under-researched.

MOBILE WORKERS ARE DEVIANT, MOBILE WORKERS ARE VULNERABLE

Boisterous crowds of young, single men with little education, massive pickup trucks “jacked up to the moon” – and fistfuls of cash – is what a lot of people think of when it comes to the face of oil booms. It is generally believed that when these “work-hard, play-hard” guys finish their shifts, they take to binge drinking, drugging and reckless driving – triggering spikes in drug dealers, prostitutes, bar brawls, sexual assaults and car wrecks. While a large influx of people into a booming locale does place a certain degree of stress on local communities³, these “boomtown ills” are often exaggerated and blamed exclusively on the “roughneck.” In reality, this “roughneck” stereotype is *mostly* rooted in the myths of the “Wild West” and is only *partially* linked to the deviant behaviors of a small percentage of the incoming population during the early part of an oil boom. In fact, recent research in the U.S. oilfield has found that the “roughneck” stereotype, and its masculine work culture, has shifted over the past couple of decades from one that valorizes risk-taking behaviors to one that prioritizes personal safety.⁴

¹ “Municipal Census 2012. Section Five: Project Accommodations Population Count.” Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. December 2012.

² Hodur, N. and Bangsund, D. “Population Estimates for the City of Williston,” Agribusiness and Applied Economics Report No. 707-S, January 2013.

³ Orenstein, M., Angel, A.C., and Lee, M. “Determinants of Health and Industrial Development in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo.” Cumulative Environmental Management Association (CEMA), Fort McMurray, Alberta. April 2013.

⁴ Filteau, M., 2012. “Who Are Those Guys? Undoing the Oilfield’s Roughneck Masculinity.” PhD Dissertation, Rural Sociology. The Pennsylvania State University, College of Agricultural Sciences. University Park, PA.

“I found it easier to almost adapt to – to almost be a different person when I am at work than to be the real me. So that is one thing that kind of bothers me – that I have to put on a mask to fit in. I have to be a little tougher and rougher.” –
Mobile worker from Edmonton, Alberta, working in the Alberta Oil Sands, near Fort McMurray, AB

Still, media headlines related to North America’s boomtowns such as “Fracking Gave Me Gonorrhea,” “Cocaine Easier to Buy Than Pizza,” and “Jail Cells Full to Overflowing in Bakken Oil Country” continue to sensationalize boomtown conditions and reinforce these stereotypes. What is less recognized is the danger of these stereotypes. Behind the headlines, labels, and highly masculine exteriors of these “gruff and tough” oilfield workers, there are clear signs of vulnerability.

“Masculinity” can be defined as a set of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours that signify what it is to be a “man” and is often defined *against* positive health beliefs and behaviours.⁵ “Frontier masculinity” is a specific type of masculinity frequently associated with resource extraction contexts and is characterized by physical and mental toughness, rugged individualism, competition, emotional self-reliance, and unsafe work practices that save time and maximize profit.^{6 7 8}

Very few people recognize the negative impacts that masculine beliefs, attitudes and behaviors have on men’s health.⁹ Research on mobile workers in the Alberta Oil Sands revealed that, due to masculine work cultures and what it means to be a “man” in these spaces, a large majority of men do not talk about their feelings or seek help. Instead, these men tend to internalize feelings of exhaustion, loneliness, stress and anxiety or put their physical and mental health “on hold” – until, eventually, they reach their breaking point.¹⁰

⁵ Courtenay, W.H. 2000. “Constructions of Masculinity and their Influence on Men’s Wellbeing: A Theory of Gender and Health.” *Social Science & Medicine* 50:1385-1401.

⁶ Miller, G.E. 2004. “Frontier Masculinity in the Oil Industry: The Experience of Women Engineers.” *Gender, Work and Organization* 11(1):47-72.

⁷ Prasad, P. 1997. “The Protestant Ethic and the Myths of the Frontier: Cultural Imprints, Organizational Structuring, and Workplace Diversity.” Pp. 285-311 in *Managing the Organizational Melting Pot: Dilemmas of Workplace Diversity*, edited by P. Prasad, A.J. Mills, M. Elmes, and A. Prasad. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

⁸ Quam-Wickham, N. 1999. “Rereading Man’s Conquest of Nature: Skill, Myths and the Historical Construction of Masculinity in Western Extractive Industries.” *Men and Masculinities* 2(2):135-151.

⁹ Courtenay, W.H., 2006. “Rural Men’s Health: Situating Risk in the Negotiation of Masculinity.” *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*, edited by H. Campbell, M. Mayerfeld Bell, and M. Finney, pp. 139–158. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University.

¹⁰ Angel, A.C., 2014. “Voices from the Shadows: Investigating the Identity and Wellbeing of Male Mobile Workers in the Contemporary ‘Boom-sphere’ Context of the Alberta Oil Sands.” MSc Thesis, Resource Sociology. University of Alberta, Department of Resource Economics and Environmental Sociology. Edmonton, Alberta.

A men’s mental health counselor in Fort McMurray, Alberta, uses the metaphor of shaking a pop bottle to describe this phenomenon:

“Yeah, people in this world live by stereotypes. So they are going to live by the stereotype that I am just another oilfield worker – scumbag trash – but they don’t know that maybe I could be somebody that is over here to help my family make a better life for themselves.” – Mobile worker from Seattle, Washington, working in the Bakken near Williston, ND

And we say it’s like a pop bottle, you put your finger over [the] top and you shake it and shake it and shake it until you can’t do it any longer. And you lift your lid and it’s going to spew all over the place and everything’s going to be affected around you.

Furthermore, new research on mobile worker wellbeing in Australia found that the mobile work lifestyle was linked to a number of negative health issues, including substance abuse, poor diet and physical inactivity, mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety) and fatigue-related injury.¹¹

THE PROBLEM: THE MYTH/STEREOTYPE OF MOBILE WORKERS

Stereotyping oilfield workers can have harmful consequences. The “roughneck” stereotype does not account for the vast and varied lived experiences, positive values, family-based motivations and productive goals of the large majority of mobile workers. Nor does it account for the challenges these workers face in living and working away from home. This dismissive stereotype also does not recognize the critical role these workers play in the energy extraction and processing activities for North America – energy that is used to power the societies we live in. In fact, perpetuating this stereotype can harm worker and community wellbeing in two key ways:

1. Over generalizing and stereotyping a social group (mobile workers) means that the deeper roots of potential issues, such as substance abuse and violence, are not explored and opportunities for effecting positive change are not identified. If these issues worsen over time, negative impacts could further spillover into work sites, and into family and community life.

¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia, 2013. “Cancer of the Bush or Salvation for Our Cities? Fly-In, Fly-Out and Drive-In, Drive-Out Workforce Practices in Regional Australia.” Canberra.

“The people that come out here are the type of people that want to work. They are proud. And there are no jobs at home where they live, so they will pack up and go where the money is so they can support their family, and not go on welfare...and be proud. And that is the type of people we work with everyday and we stay with here at this camp.” – Mobile worker from Salt Lake City, Utah, working in the Bakken near Williston, North Dakota

2. How we “see” or perceive people matters. Sociology’s “labeling theory” says that if a population (the mobile workforce) is perceived in a certain way (deviant), they may tend to act according to this identity. Therefore, our perception of mobile workers has real and interactional effects. Similarly, how we “see” people can have real effects on how *we personally* feel and behave. For example, a study conducted in the boomtown of Delta, Utah, found that local residents’ negative perception of incoming workers led to “anticipatory shifts” in residents’ attitudes and behaviors (e.g., increased fear, decreased trust) even before the workers actually arrived in the community.¹² This finding indicates that it is not necessarily the real physical presence of workers that creates stress, but the negative thoughts and feelings toward this incoming population. In this way, changing our perception of mobile workers can go a long way in improving the way we perceive and interact with mobile workers in the host communities, like Fort McMurray and Williston, and vice versa.

THE FINDINGS: “THE ACTUAL FACE” OF MOBILE WORKERS

Deviant, young single men with little education, and “money to burn” is how we often perceive mobile workers in the oilfield. *But who are they really?* While high incomes in the Alberta Oil Sands are no exaggeration, the mobile worker population is actually older, more attached, more educated and “less male” than we think.¹³ For example, more than half of the mobile workforce is actually over 35 years old; 51.2% are married or in common-law relationships; and 61.1% either are apprentices or hold trades certificates or post-secondary degrees (only 7.4% of workers have less than a high school diploma). Finally, the mobile workforce is becoming increasingly female. The census reveals that while 82.9% of mobile workers in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo are male, 17.1% are female.¹⁴

¹² Brown, R.B., Dorius, S.F., and R.S. Krannich. 2005. “The Boom-Bust-Recovery Cycle: Dynamics of Change in Community Satisfaction and Social Integration in Delta, Utah.” *Rural Sociology* 70(1):28-49.

¹³ “Municipal Census 2012. Section Five: Project Accommodations Population Count.” Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo. December 2012.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

“I’ve tripled my income being up here, but I miss my two girls a lot. And it’s hard. It’s a tradeoff. On one hand, my family is able to experience so much and participate in so much that they wouldn’t be able to do if I was still back home earning what I used to – but then I miss it!” – Mobile worker from northern Minnesota, working in the Bakken near Williston, North Dakota

Comparable statistics for the mobile or temporary workforce in North Dakota’s Bakken Oil Region are presently being collected, but not yet available.¹⁵ However, interviews I conducted with mobile workers in various Target Hospitality lodges in and around Williston in April 2014 revealed that the worker population was almost entirely made up of men, and that most of them are married, with a spouse and children back home. These men stated that their fellow workers were of all ages (from 18 to 65 years old), with the average age of men falling somewhere in the mid-30s. Similar to workers in the Alberta Oil Sands, mobile workers in the Bakken reported that they have doubled to tripled their incomes since coming up to work in the oilfield. In fact, money was the main factor in drawing workers up to Williston, with one worker summing up the story of countless others: “I came out here because the economy tipped upside down.”

The mobile work lifestyle in North America can be a huge challenge for worker wellbeing due to the extended period of time away from families and social networks. Research in both the Alberta Oil Sands and in North Dakota’s Bakken Oil Region found that being away from family was cited as the biggest downside to being a mobile worker. One worker in the Bakken stated, “I guarantee you, there would not be a single person here if they could make this much money back home.”

SOLUTIONS

Solutions to mobile worker wellbeing issues keep workers and communities healthy, and industries competitive and profitable. New research on worker wellbeing, which mainly comes out of Australia, found that wellbeing (and retention) could be improved via camp designs that:

- maximize peace and privacy for workers
- provide access to the Internet in workers’ private rooms
- provide easy access to information about mental health issues (e.g., stress, anxiety)
- provide access to online counseling services¹⁶

Similarly, earlier research in Canada found that the following factors could minimize community impacts and enhance worker productivity and wellbeing:

- good quality accommodations with privacy and low noise levels
- good food in quality and quantity

¹⁵ Dean Bangsund, research scientist, North Dakota State University. Personal communication (phone call). Monday, April 21, 2014.

¹⁶ Barclay, M.A., Harris, J., Everingham, J., Kirsch, P., Arend, S., Shi, S., and Kim, J. 2013. *Factors Linked to the Wellbeing of Fly-In Fly-Out (FIFO) Workers*. Research Report, Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining (CSR) and Minerals Industry Safety and Health Centre (MISHC). Sustainable Minerals Institute, University of Queensland. Brisbane, Australia.

“It’s a big burden to put on your family, being out here – because your spouse is both the mom and the dad, and the cook and the cleaner. I am very grateful for my wife. If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t be out here, working to pay for my daughter’s education and working towards our retirement.” – Mobile worker from Carmenville, Newfoundland, working in the Alberta Oil Sands near Fort McMurray, AB

- work rotation schedules that were not too long or short
- a shift schedule that did not give workers too much time in camp
- varied and well-organized recreational and leisure programs¹⁷

To the extent possible, Target Hospitality addresses the wellbeing of its clients through providing “a home away from home” via its Economics of Comfort® platform. The company strives to create a cultural mindset of positivity, comfort and relaxation – leading ultimately to healthy social environments, which result in high-performance workers. This is achieved through the strategic design of Target Hospitality’ lodges and the offering of key amenities, such as:

- professional security with zero tolerance for public intoxication and alcohol
- high-quality food, providing good nutrition and 4,000 calories per day, available 24-7
- comfortable private rooms with individual temperature controls
- flat-screen TV/DVD players
- pillow-top mattresses
- state-of-the-art recreation and fitness centers with saunas
- convenience stores with free DVD rentals

Target Hospitality’ instrumental role in the wellbeing – and overall performance – of workers can be effectively illustrated via the “Human Performance Model.” This model is often used in training elite athletes in highly competitive arenas, and consists of two components: “getting the player ready” (e.g., ensuring optimal sleep, nutrition, conditioning, hydration, mental focus); and “game time” (e.g., equipment, strategy, rules).¹⁸ While industry largely excels at providing workers with the equipment, tools and rules they need to successfully perform during “game time” or work time, Target Hospitality excels at the “behind-the-scenes” preparation: getting the player or worker ready.

LONG-TERM FOCUS

From the boomtowns of the 1970s to the present day, oil booms and population surges have been known to cause social disruption and infrastructure strains.

¹⁷ Storey, K. and Shrimpton, M. 1987. *Planning for Large-Scale Construction Projects: A Socio-Economic Guide for Communities, Industry and Government*. Environmental Studies Research Funds, Report No. 087. St. John’s, Newfoundland.

¹⁸ Patrick Bryne, founder of fatigue science and internationally recognized expert on the science of sleep fatigue. Personal communication. ENFORM Petroleum Safety Conference. Session: “Mitigate Risk Associated with Fatigue.” Wednesday, May 7, 2013. Banff, Alberta.

A study conducted by the Edith Cowan University in Australia found that while there was a large focus on physical safety in the mining sector, a focus on the emotional and mental health of workers was absent. This emphasis on physical safety versus mental wellbeing was also reported in the Alberta Oil Sands and North Dakota's Bakken Oil Region.

One of the most pressing of these strains is the shortage of housing and accommodations. Today, with the increasing number of mobile workers, the need for housing has become even more acute and the mobile work arrangement is increasingly becoming the labour model of choice for the natural resource sector. For a worker, trying to find high-quality accommodations in a boomtown can be risky or next to impossible, and can cause significant stress and anxiety. By providing a long-term supply of high-quality accommodations, Target Hospitality is essentially bringing order to people's lives. The workforce housing provider is also lifting the strain of housing shortages and social problems related to these shortages – such as overcrowding, mental health issues and violence. At the end of the day, Target Hospitality is raising the bar for mobile worker wellbeing in North America – and, with this “race to the top,” is boosting worker morale, reducing turnover, improving productivity and safety and increasing bottom lines.

A CALL TO ACTION

Perpetuating the ‘roughneck’ stereotype can have harmful impacts to mobile worker and community wellbeing. We need to challenge the “roughneck” stereotype and recognize the actual face of mobile workers – their motivations and the challenges they face, as well as the vital role they play in energy extraction and in the fueling of our economies and societies. Understanding who mobile workers are and what they need, and addressing these needs, demands immediate attention – and Target Hospitality is at the forefront of this dialogue and challenge. Target Hospitality knows the actual face of its clients and is focused on continually meeting their needs and contributing to mobile worker wellbeing. The company has a track record of success in mobile worker wellbeing, as evidenced by the way the company has helped improve worker retention and safety at its clients’ work sites. For example, in 2011, Target Hospitality helped a leading oil field service company increase its employee retention by 66% and its safety record by 50%.¹⁹

“The biggest downside is not getting to watch my two-year old son grow up.” – Mobile worker from Houston, Texas, working in the Bakken near Williston, North Dakota

Target Hospitality plays a critical role in worker wellbeing – and ultimately in the human performance – of oilfield workers. The workforce housing provider has explored ways in which mobile worker wellbeing can be enhanced via a number of recent white papers. These white papers include a focus on the importance of “the other 12 hours” – or the time a worker has off before his or her next shift; high-quality accommodations, food and nutrition; optimal sleep environments; diverse recreational opportunities; and solutions to substance abuse.^{20,21,22,23} This white paper adds to this ongoing and forward-thinking dialogue by examining the interconnected social and health dimensions of mobile work.

¹⁹ “The Economics of Comfort™ Case Study by Target Hospitality and Client”: http://www.targetlogistics.net/1_pdfs/Target-Logistics_EOC-case-study_2013.pdf

²⁰ Chandler, G. *Reducing Alcohol and Substance Abuse: A Benefit for Workforce Housing in Oil, Gas, Mining and Construction Industries*. Target Hospitality White Paper, April 2014.

²¹ Chandler, G. *The Other 12 Hours: Workforce Housing as a Recruitment and Retention Tool in the North American Mining and Oil & Gas Industries*. Target Hospitality White Paper, January 2014.

²² Rothstein, N. *Optimizing Sleep for an Optimal Workforce in the Oil, Gas, and Mining Industries*. Target Hospitality White Paper, October 2013.

²³ Wanjek, C. *Workforce Housing and Feeding Solutions for Health, Safety, Productivity and Morale*. Target Hospitality White Paper, March 2013.

More specifically, this white paper reveals the health dangers of perpetuating the “roughneck” stereotype and recognizes the actual face of mobile workers across North America: *a group of family-oriented, hardworking individuals who travel significant distances and spend a great deal of time away from home to make a better life for themselves and their families*. This paper highlights some important wellbeing issues for mobile workers and, importantly, presents solutions to enhancing worker wellbeing – and by extension, worker morale, productivity, retention, safety and industry’s bottom line. Target Hospitality recognizes that focusing on mobile worker wellbeing is a win-win-win approach – with positive benefits for workers, industry and communities – now and into the future.

About the Author

Angela C. Angel is a health impact assessment practitioner and program manager of Mobile Worker Wellness with Habitat. Based in Calgary, Alberta, she provides expertise to industry, government and communities on how to maximize mobile workforce wellness and, in turn, boost worker morale, productivity, retention, safety and overall worker and community wellbeing. For the past decade, Angela has been investigating the links between resource development and the wellbeing of communities, including the contributing factors to substance abuse in resource boomtowns. Angela has worked as a researcher with the Alberta Government, the Government of Canada, and the Department of Resource Economics & Environmental Sociology at the University of Alberta. Angela holds a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Conservation Sciences, with a major in human dimensions of environmental management and a Master of Science in Natural Resource Sociology. Dissatisfied with the singular and all-pervasive “roughneck” stereotype of blue-collar workers in Fort McMurray, Alberta, she focused her master’s research on the identity and wellbeing of male mobile resource workers in the Alberta Oil Sands. Her research stands as an original and innovative contribution to our understanding of modern-day boomtowns. She can be reached at angela@habitatcorp.com.

About Target Hospitality

Target Hospitality, an Algeco Scotsman company, is a global provider of workforce housing and one of the largest operators of turnkey solutions in North America. It operates in some of the world’s most remote environments supporting oil, gas, mining and construction operations, government agencies, disaster relief and large-scale events with temporary workforce lodging, mobile crew camps and extended-stay hotels. Target Hospitality was named by *Inc.* magazine in 2012 and 2013 as one of “America’s Fastest Growing Private Companies.” Visit www.TargetLogistics.net or call (800) 832-4242.