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Hitting the Wall: Youth Perspectives on Boredom, Trouble, and Drug Use Dynamics in Rural New Mexico

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Abstract

We examine the experience of boredom and its relationship to troublemaking and drug use among rural youth in southwestern New Mexico. We draw on qualitative research with area youth to describe *what* they think about drug use and *how* they situate it within their social circumstances. We then locate youth drug use within globalized processes affecting this setting, including a local economic environment with limited educational and employment opportunities for youth. Drug use emerges as a common social practice that enables youth to ameliorate boredom, yet only some youth become known as troublemakers. Study findings offer insight into how dominant social institutions—schools and juvenile justice authorities—shape the construction of trouble from the perspectives of youth. We contend that boredom and troublemaking among rural youth are not simply age-appropriate forms of self-expression but instead represent manifestations of social position, political economic realities, and assessments of possible futures.

Keywords

adolescence; economics; substance use

Boredom, Trouble, and Youth Drug Use in Global Perspective

This article examines the experience of boredom and its relationship to sensation seeking, troublemaking, and drug use among youth in southwestern New Mexico, a largely rural and frontier setting in the United States. In recent decades, the decline of historically important industries, such as mining, has blighted this predominantly impoverished region. The changed economic environment creates limited educational and employment opportunities for young people, among whom unstructured time and declarations of boredom abound. In this sociocultural context widely characterized by having “nothing to do,” expressions of boredom provide insight into the lived experience of economic and social marginalization more commonly associated with developing nations. Within this setting, youth portray “partying” with drugs as a common practice to ameliorate boredom. However, though some youth become identified as troublemakers because of their drug use, others are thought to

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suffer fewer social sanctions. Building on contemporary contributions to the study of boredom, we examine how powerful social structures and institutions, including schools and juvenile justice authorities, shape the construction and experience of trouble from the vantage point of rural youth. For these young people—the preponderance of whom perceive their life chances as constrained by economic circumstance—boredom and troublemaking are not simply age-appropriate forms of self-expression but manifestations of social position, political economic realities, and assessments of possible futures.

We wish to situate young people's perceptions and experiences of boredom, trouble, and drug use in rural New Mexico within a broader body of scholarship that critically employs the category of "youth" as a unit of analysis in a way that not only underscores young people's social locations vis-à-vis globalization processes but also explicitly recognizes them as consumers, purveyors, and creators of new experiences, ideas, and cultural forms and acknowledges their role as harbingers of change within the communities they represent.

Comaroff and Comaroff, for instance, argue that youth comprise an ideal population to study in order to gain insights into boredom and how this state relates to global economic transformations. Young people provide an avenue to examine the development of a millennial, global capitalism, as they exhibit distinguishing characteristics of this particular historical moment. Youth are generally excluded from meaningful opportunities for social advancement in local economies undergoing transformation; young men are especially subject to strained social roles that manifest in problem behaviors, glossed under the concept of a "crisis of masculinity;" and young people are the locus of an "assertive, global youth culture of desire, self-expression and representation" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000) that creates unrealistic expectations. This "internationally marketable culture," manifest in distinctive dialects, fashion, music, and other media, has the effect of giving "voice to imaginative worlds very different from those of the parental generation" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000).

A number of recent analyses situate boredom within local sociocultural settings undergoing transformations instigated by global, neoliberal, and postcolonial economic processes. These studies move well beyond previous considerations regarding the origins of boredom and its definitional attributes (Brissett & Snow, 1993; Conrad, 1997). As a result, boredom is now seen as more than an outgrowth of the availability of leisure in modern times or as a state of under-stimulation. Instead, contemporary investigations advance our understanding of boredom by emphasizing the links between it and broader economic transformations.

Several themes characterize this emerging literature and are relevant to the present analysis. Recent work on the impact of African economic policies, for instance, highlights how structural adjustments create significant discrepancies between the aspirations of urban Ethiopian youth regarding their future and the dreary economic realities they face. In particular, Mains (2007) shows how the shortage of local employment opportunities, a consequence of these modifications, creates a plentitude of unstructured time for youth. Unable to find meaningful work routines to realize their ambitions, young people experience boredom and frame their lives in terms of what they lack—entertainment, health, and the consumer trappings of modernity. Limited options stymie their attempts to successfully transition into adulthood—a state of social autonomy expressed in terms of economic independence and consumer power. Migration to South Africa, Europe, and the United States is subsequently construed as an alternative means to attain this independence.

While boredom is typically seen as an unavoidable and unitary outgrowth of the homogenization of non-Western peoples, it is important to examine this affective state in specific sociocultural and historical contexts to more accurately determine what is common

across settings and what represents more unique local variations. Musharbash's study of rural Australian aborigines underscores the importance of local expressions of boredom and how global economic processes contribute to variations. Within aboriginal communities, boredom signifies curtailed desire for social and emotional engagement resulting from absence of meaning or lack of fit between "the old ways" and contemporary settlement realities (Musharbash, 2007).

Relatively few studies explicitly acknowledge that these globalization processes are not confined to the developing world but also operate in rural settings in the United States, which also experience the impact of economic transformations, albeit in slightly different ways. Perhaps most germane to our purpose, Jervis, Spicer, and Manson offer an examination of the relationship between boredom, troublemaking, and life in a Northern Plains reservation. This study parallels other analyses with its focus on boredom as a discrepancy between aspirations and desires, and real-world possibilities. In this context, boredom is equated with having too much unstructured free time (i.e., "nothing to do") and associated with scarce employment and recreation as well as logistical difficulties prohibiting travel to the outside world (Jervis et al., 2003). In this setting, some youth attempt to mitigate boredom through risk-taking activities (Barbalet, 1999).

Although Mains (2007) and Musharbash (2007) allude to how drug use fits into sociocultural contexts framed by boredom, neither examines this practice as integral to boredom and troublemaking. Jervis et al. stress the value of understanding how "troublemakers" conceptualize drug use and other forms of sensation seeking as antidotes to boredom. In other words, "Because boredom is an uncomfortable state, it may engender attempts to escape it either physically or psychically…." (Jervis et al., 2003). The participants in that study, predominantly Native American youth from a reservation, recognized connections between under-stimulation, inadequate opportunities, and various forms of trouble, including violence and drug use.

Some youth activities skirt social sanctions for a time but may eventually lead to difficulties. One such practice consists of "partying"—social interactions with peers involving the consumption of drugs, including alcohol. Partying is an important activity to analyze when examining boredom among young people in rural settings because it provides structure and meaning to otherwise unstructured, boring, leisure time. In southwestern New Mexico, for example, partying is a commonplace social practice that may or may not be labeled as *troublesome*. Drug use settings shift from party settings to more problematic contexts when institutional structures, including schools and juvenile justice authorities, designate drug use behaviors as troublesome and, therefore, in need of remediation. In this way, trouble is an endpoint when someone, usually in a position of social authority, determines that a particular behavior is unacceptable.

In a related way, other analysts emphasize the relationship between the expression of troublesome behaviors and the socialization of young people into particular socioeconomic class positions. The classic account offered by Willis (1977), for instance, describes the social world of working-class "lads" where excitement (enacted through substance use and law-breaking activities) was seen not only as an effective strategy to engage boredom but also a tactic to articulate class-based values. Rule breaking is an important means for lads to differentiate themselves from the "ear'oles" and "do-gooders" who generally conform to more conventional forms of expression and morality. This account goes far in describing how specific counterweights to boredom (drinking, aggressive behavior, and illegal practices such as stealing and physical violence) are expressions of class position (working class) and gender status (male). However, the account adds little to our understandings of how boredom and troublemaking fit into labeling processes and economic positions in a

multiethnic, rural setting. Willis, for example, underscores the importance of commercial leisure activities and venues (dances, pubs, and clubs) and the consumption of popular culture (tobacco, music, and certain clothing) in providing opportunities for lads to perform their working class counterculture. What of rural settings, such as those in the American Southwest, where these commercial products and venues are perceived to be limited but where access to certain forms of consumption, because of the border drug trade between the United States and Mexico, are ample?

We present the perspectives of drug-using youth living in southwestern New Mexico to consider how behaviors intended to alleviate boredom are labeled as *trouble* and how individuals and social groups come to be recognized as troublemakers (Emerson & Messinger, 1977). We examine the phenomenon of labeling—how we impose boundaries and define categories of people in the course of constructing our social worlds (Wood, 2007). Several questions frame our analysis of youth perspectives: How do youth in rural New Mexico talk about and understand their experiences of boredom? How do they relate boredom to drug use? Who gets into trouble for drug use and who does not? Most important, how do youth represent and implicate individuals affiliated with powerful social institutions in this interpretation process? How do they recount how the “good kids” are differentiated from the “bad kids” and how particular youth come to be defined as troublemakers? What consequences do so-called troublemaking youth recognize as a result of these community labeling processes? Finally, how do drug use, intervention by key social institutions, and being young and bored fit into the socioeconomic reality of having too much time and not enough stimulation (Jervis et al., 2003)?

We will approach these questions first, by providing a description of the economic setting of the study that underscores the social and demographic features framing youth drug use, boredom, and trouble in rural New Mexico. Second, we offer an overview of the qualitative research design utilized in this study, along with an explanation of sampling strategies, as well as data collection and analysis procedures. Interviews and observations document the manner in which youth understood and spoke about drug use, boredom, and trouble in this setting. This includes young people’s perceptions regarding differential social labeling processes related to drug use as well as evaluations regarding their future social and economic advancement in the context of limited opportunity.

The Research Context: New Mexico Rural Economies in Decline

New Mexico possesses several social and demographic characteristics that distinguish it from other areas of the United States. It recently ranked 47th among all states in personal income per capita, third in persons below the poverty level, and second in lack of health insurance (Willging, Waitzkin, & Nicdao, 2008). Alcohol- and drug-induced death rates per capita rank as the top two in the nation, respectively; the suicide death rate ranks fourth, and homicide ranks eighth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).

The data presented here are from a largely qualitative study of drug use and help-seeking strategies among Latino and White (non-Latino or “Anglo”) adolescents living in four adjacent counties in southwestern New Mexico, two of which border Mexico. Their combined land area totals more than 17,000 square miles. These counties include the most rural regions of the state, with the average number of persons per square mile of land area ranging from 0.5 to 8.4 (Table 1), in contrast to 15 for New Mexico and 79.5 for the United States.

These counties are also marked by high percentages of persons living in poverty (Table 1). Long subject to boom and bust extractive economies found within the American Southwest,

this region is dependent on a steeply declining mining industry that, while physically located in two study counties, draws its workforce from all four. Since 1826, the ownership and management of local mines has rested with Anglos (Hugiennie, 1994). Latinos have occupied subordinate (largely manual labor) positions within the industry (Berrera, 1979). The 1954 blacklisted film, "Salt of the Earth," relates the events concerning 1951 striking of local mining operations initiated by Latino employees, who successfully managed to achieve essential worker's rights and living conditions for those residing near the mines.

As is the case with New Mexico as a whole, the southwestern region of the state has not benefited from a particularly thriving financial situation. However, the situation has taken a turn for the worst in the recent past. In a 12-year period, the minerals production value within New Mexico had fluctuated from US$1,122,303,000 in 1989 to a high of US $1,130,000,000 in 1997 to a low of US$651,710,757 in 2001 (New Mexico Bureau of Geology and Mineral Resources, 2010). Home to the largest mining operations within the state, the counties in our study were hit especially hard by this decline. For example, the closure of a multimillion dollar copper smelter in 1999 and ensuing job terminations eroded the tax base of one county by 65%. The closure also rendered a once growing town where operations had been based a virtual ghost town. The town was eventually purchased by the federal government to conduct military training exercises.

Ranching and agriculture have also played a historical role in the local economy. As with mining, these industries are shaped by broader marketplace demands that lead to fluctuating livestock and crop prices, in addition to natural forces, such as drought and other climatic conditions (Holechek, 1996). Similar to mining, Anglos have dominated this industry since the 19th century, with local Latinos comprising the mainstay of the lower-wage labor force. More recently, ranchers and farmers have also depended heavily on the availability of itinerant, relatively inexpensive migrant day laborers from Mexico, to fulfill seasonal workforce needs.

Research Overview

It was against this economic backdrop that this study began at the request of local stakeholders interested in understanding youth substance abuse in the area. Around that time, the Youth Risk and Resiliency Survey (YRRS) documented the pervasiveness of drug use among 770 area youth in Grades 9 to 12. An estimated 50% of those surveyed used alcohol in the past 30 days, 18% used marijuana, 8% used cocaine, and 6% used methamphetamine. The available surveillance estimates suggested that drug use represented a common social practice among youth, and local stakeholders expressed concern about this issue and initiated efforts to address it.

One result of these efforts was our study of youth drug use and help-seeking strategies. We interviewed 55 adolescent residents of the four-county region between November 2005 and June 2006. A minimum of 13 participants were recruited from each county. Of this total, 16 youth (4 per county) participated in a follow-up interview to assess changes in drug use behavior. After both sets of interviews, we conducted focus groups with drug-using youth (one per county). Each group consisted of 5 to 8 participants. Table 2 provides an overview of participant demographic characteristics. Finally, we conducted participant observation in a variety of community settings to assess contextual factors within the surrounding sociocultural environment. Although not an intended topic for study, the relationship between boredom and trouble emerged as a central issue in this investigation.

We developed a purposive sample of youth participants, in the age group of 13 to 21 years. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) the youth had experienced problems from present drug use or in the preceding year; and, (b) the youth had sought help—formal treatment or

informal support from family and friends—to decrease or stop their drug use. We used multiple sampling methods, including *snowball* (members of the population of interest link researchers with possible candidates), *outcropping* (researchers solicit candidates at places they are known to frequent, that is, school assemblies, teen courts, group therapy sessions), and *advertising* (researchers publicize in newspapers and locations patronized by candidates; Dean et al., 2000). These methods and inclusion criteria may have led to a high proportion of youth reporting drug-related difficulties at school and with the law. As with any purposive sample, these participants may not reflect the views and experiences of all drug-using youth in the study region.

Our initial semi-structured interview protocol consisted of 36 stem questions and several probes. The protocol covered multiple domains, including the sociocultural context of youth drug use, drug-using history and experiences, help-seeking activities, treatment, and protective factors. Structured demographic questions included attention to participant gender, ethnicity, and years of residence within the region.

The semi-structured follow-up interview protocol consisted of 18 stem questions that covered the same domains as in the first interview. This interview, conducted approximately 1 year after initial data collection, assessed changes in life circumstances and drug use behavior and included a PhotoVoice activity. PhotoVoice is a method whereby individuals typically identified as the research subjects become researchers. In our study, the youth photographed images they associated with their experiences of drug use and then explained the significance of selected images (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

Each interview took approximately 90 minutes to complete. All interviews were conducted in English, though participants had the option to complete them in Spanish. Finally, each participant signed a written informed consent approved by the Southwest Institutional Review Board. This document explained the parameters of participation, assurances of anonymity, and compensation of US$40 per interview.

We also conducted a focus group with young people in each county to cross-check findings from both rounds of semi-structured interviews. The focus group protocol consisted of eight stem questions and elicited further information on the participants' explanations for why some youth rather than others found themselves grappling with drug use problems, consequences of having the "bad" label applied to youth, and how racism and discrimination affect individuals with drug use problems. Approximately 60% of the original youth participants took part in the groups; we recruited the remaining 40% through the procedures described above. The focus groups typically took 90 to 120 minutes to complete, and participants were compensated with US$50.

Throughout the study period, we conducted participant observation in a variety of community venues, including public forums on youth drug use, school assemblies, and local parks and coffee shops in which youth would gather (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). We took part in coalitions of concerned citizens founded specifically to address substance use problems within the four-county region. We also had opportunity to observe teen court operations in one county on a regular basis. The resulting data consisted of descriptive and inferential information, as we recorded our overall perception and interpretation of the people and events observed. This component augmented the interview material, enhancing our insight into the community context.

Observation notes were handwritten and transcribed into an electronic database. Each interview and focus group was recorded on audiotape and transcribed. All documents were

then coded using NVivo qualitative data analysis software (Qualitative Solutions in Research [QSR], 2002).

Data analysis proceeded according to a plan that differed somewhat for semi-structured interviews and focus groups versus observations. We first developed a descriptive coding scheme on the basis of specific questions and broader domains comprising the interview and focus group protocols. Analysis then proceeded to the development of pattern codes, allowing indexing of data that illustrated emergent themes. We analyzed data from observations first by using *open coding* to locate themes. We then used *focused coding* to determine which themes emerged frequently and which represented unusual or particular concerns (Emerson et al., 1995). Through this process, we located examples relevant to themes repeatedly surfacing in transcripts: youth drug use in relation to boredom and trouble. Coding proceeded iteratively, with each author coding sets of transcripts and then passing their work to the others for review. Discrepancies in coding and analysis were identified during this process and resolved at regular team meetings.

Youth Understandings of Boredom and Drug Use in Sociocultural Context

Boredom emerged as the most salient characteristic in youths' depictions of their communities and surrounding sociocultural context. Youth portrayed their own drug use as a means to resolve boredom, to grapple with economic deprivation within both families and the larger community, and to address the anomie accompanying the lack of recreational opportunities. Here, we describe how three specific drugs (alcohol, marijuana, and methamphetamine) structured the day, shaped interactions, or otherwise affected these young people.

Participants most often invoked the term "boredom" in relation to the perceived lack of local activities. When asked what youth here do for fun, one answered, "Nothing. It's just really boring." Another explained, "There's no bowling alley. There's no arcade. There's no gymnasium. There's nothing…. All you can do is ride your bike around town. Once you're past the age of 13 you get tired of that." This youth spent his time at home playing video games and smoking marijuana. Some youth mentioned activities associated with the natural environment that draws tourists to the region. Hiking, swimming, and hunting were occasionally identified as "fun things to do." However, most youth engaged in "cruising" around town in motor vehicles rather than in outdoor activities.

Youth explained that in the rural communities in which they lived—spaces that they largely constructed and experienced as devoid of "fun"—adolescents were particularly likely to experiment with drugs to appease their boredom. One individual explained, "Kids resort to drinking or doing drugs because we have nothing to do. We can't even go to a mall and hang out…. There's just nothing to do here, and the kids got to do something, so they turn to drugs."

Some young people explicitly connected adolescent drug use within the study region to mental health issues and economic deprivation. One observed, "Around here you'll find that most kids are suffering from basically the same thing—depression—because there's nothing to do around here but party and do drugs. This youth added, "It's hard for teens to watch their parents struggle, to watch your parents struggle to pay the bills, to put food on the table, to put clothes on their backs, and to put a roof over their heads. Watching them struggle is hard for kids because it makes them feel bad."

Most youth characterized drug use as an everyday social activity and a panacea for boredom. Alcohol was the most popular drug and beverages of choice included beer and hard liquor, particularly whisky and rum. These drinks were typically consumed within the relaxed

atmosphere of spontaneous, informally organized parties. Drinking and other types of drug use offered "a good way to make friends," as several youth mentioned. The youth also noted that drinking had its downsides such as fighting and incidents of "trouble," namely, sexual abuse and rape as well as impaired driving that led to motor vehicle crashes.

Marijuana, the second most popular drug, was characterized as a relatively harmless substance presenting few risks to the user, with the exception of "getting caught" by either school or legal authorities. This drug was typically consumed while alone, with a close friend or relative, or in small group settings. According to youth, marijuana use made "having nothing to do" and otherwise mundane tasks "fun" and getting "blazed" or stoned was as a routine, recreational aspect of social life. Walking our researcher through his "typical day," one youth recounted a list of daily activities that resonated with those provided by other participants; the litany of repetition itself suggests boredom even with drug use:

> I wake up, get high, take a shower, and get high…. Then go to a friend's house and get high. Then go outside for a while, talk, and get high. Then go to school just getting high, and going back home and getting high before I go to sleep. Chill for a while watching TV and then go to sleep. Wake up the next day and do it all over again.

Methamphetamine was the third most popular drug. Highlighting the perceived pervasiveness of methamphetamine use among adolescents and adults in his community, one youth observed, "This is meth town in New Mexico, if not the rest of the United States." Youth explained that methamphetamine helped alleviate the boredom in their everyday lives, as it enabled them to engage in activities, such as working on automobiles, drawing, cleaning, and even homework, with intense vigor and focus. The few employed youth also referred to methamphetamine as the "working man's drug"—a substance that allowed users to stay alert or just make things more interesting while performing low-wage service sector jobs.

Young people often downplayed the problematic dimensions of their drug use, clarifying that such behavior simply reflected the reality of adolescence and an abundance of unstructured time. In two counties, youth mentioned that the school week consisted of 4 rather than 5 days due to inadequate funding. While often dedicated to organized sports, this day-off (Friday) increased the free time available to youth, particularly "troublemakers." When youth were asked about social activities of area adolescents in light of the free time, many offered a quick response: "partying," "getting high," and "drinking." Drug use also motivated involvement in other "fun" activities. One youth readily recalled how he and his friends would "sniff a line" of methamphetamine and then lift weights or hike and explore old mining caves in the nearby mountains.

When contemplating specific issues that contributed to the development of drug problems, the same refrain was heard once again, "There's nothing else to do here." One youth responded to this query in a typical way: "Drugs. Get in trouble…. If you don't want to be in trouble, you've got to leave because there's nothing to do here." Some predicted that their drug use would decrease as they grew older and took on additional responsibilities. However, they like others around them wanted something to do. One youth, echoing others' depiction of the community proclaimed, "…everybody's doing drugs now. That's like the new thing to do, especially meth." Indeed, a second youth disclosed that she did not care much for methamphetamine when she first tried it. Despite not liking how the drug affected her appetite and weight, she continued to use the substance "because it was something to do." When the excitement associated with drug use diminished, some curtailed their use or quit using altogether. For example, one young man "cut down" because he was simply "tired

of getting high." Yet most youth reported that drug use enabled them to initiate or reaffirm social ties, experience new mental and bodily sensations, and help pass the time.

Looking Beyond Boredom: Who Gets Into Trouble and Who Doesn't

Although boredom and drug use were characterized as ubiquitous features of the community milieu, youth consistently noted that the outcomes related to these phenomena varied according to the social position of the individuals involved. There were three dominant social categories of adolescents within the region. As summed up by one youth, "[There are] people who play sports, people who [get] good grades, and people that get in trouble a lot. The "troublemaker" label encompassed the "bad kids," "druggies," "pot heads," and "meth heads." Although youth mentioned that adolescents in the area commonly partied, participants reported that drug-associated monikers were only applied to "troublemakers." In this section, we illustrate how youth constructed the significance of such labels and understood how these terms were associated with the differential treatment of youth within varying community contexts, including situations involving sports, schools, and law enforcement intervention, as well as the longer-term implications of these labeling practices.

Most youth in our study, particularly young men, had been arrested for drug possession, fighting when impaired, or driving while intoxicated, and a few had been taken into custody for dealing drugs. The majority self-identified as troublemakers to varying degrees. Stretches in detention centers, daily surveillance by probation officers, and mandatory "boot camp" were common experiences. Several youth had been "caught" using drugs on school premises.

The youth suggested that the difference between those labeled as troublemakers and those who were not related to community social distinctions. Social institutions—specifically schools and law enforcement—along with "small town gossip" contributed to labeling by designating as *troublesome* the drug use practices and subsequent behavior of some youth. The youth generally perceived adults within these institutions and the wider community as responsible for tagging some with the *troublemaker* label; in contrast, they believed that adults viewed those youth with athletic prowess (including those who used drugs) favorably and directed fewer sanctions toward them.

High school athletics, particularly those dominated by boys, were central to community social life. In our study, the youth involved in sports did not generally view themselves as troublemakers; they suggested that their participation in athletics conferred social recognition and status and provided an impetus to abstain from drugs. They appreciated one coach in particular, characterizing him as a trustworthy person with whom they could discuss personal problems. Yet those youth who did not take part in sports complained that this same coach cold-shouldered troublemakers.

According to the self-identified troublemakers in our study, jocks were considered to be the "good kids" and to benefit from far greater emotional and social support from adults, even though they did not universally avoid alcohol and drugs either during or after the athletic season. Within communities where school athletics were highly competitive, alcohol consumption by "star" players was reportedly pardoned with a slap on the wrist. One youth observed how the police had pulled him in for drinking, while allowing his friend—a prized quarterback—to walk home.

The youth explained that community sentiment tended to favor less severe penalties for jocks, in contrast to troublemakers who had been excluded from sports due to drug use. In one telling example shared by several youth, coaches at a small town high school concluded the football season prematurely, after police arrested several players for underage drinking at

a party. The youth made it clear that this action did little to increase the popularity of either the police or the coaches within the broader community, given the otherwise typical response to overlook drug use among socially prominent youth under the logic, “Boys will be boys.”

Neither athletes nor “preps,” who also participated in partying, were apparently subjected to the same intense surveillance and social consequences, in contrast to individuals negatively labeled within the educational system or the broader community. As a result of labeling, troublemaking, or academic problems, these youth believed they had been purposefully relegated to special educational settings. They also expressed little confidence in continuing high school studies or pursuing higher education. When asked how they imagined their lives within 5 years, none of them had set their sights on college or university.

Some youth attended an alternative school, referred to as the “secure school.” The young people in this facility reported an abbreviated school day that began at 10:40 a.m. and ended at 12:40 p.m. Youth nearing graduation typically spent the 2 hours studying for their general equivalency diplomas. One young man suggested that the alternative school represented his only option for education, and he was more than delighted to pursue it. He explained, “I’m a troublemaker. They send me to school for less time. They’re like, ‘You’re in trouble so you can’t go to [the regular] school no more.’”

Youth described schools as a locus for labeling processes, where troublemakers argued that teachers, coaches, and administrators had unfairly singled them out for either harassment or disciplinary action. For example, one individual reported that his teacher challenged him to a fight after school. Although the fight did not happen, the youth explained that the teacher liked to taunt him because his older brothers were known gang members within the community.

Several youth suggested that the troublemaker reputation could be “inherited” from family members. One explained, “I had some classes with my brother. [The teachers are] like, ‘Oh, well you’re his sister, right?’ I’m like, ‘Yeah’. They’re like, ‘Well, you a troublemaker like him?’ I’m like, ‘No, just ‘cause he’s my brother doesn’t mean I’m like him.’ They’re just like, ‘Oh well, she probably is.’” In two small communities, participants talked of “good families” and “bad families,” and participants clearly described how youth from the latter social units were prejudged from the beginning by school staff. Such demoralizing experiences led youth to avoid school. A few youth even discontinued their education due to “unfair treatment” by teachers and other school officials. “That’s the one reason I dropped out of school. Those teachers don’t give everybody [the same] chances,” commented one youth. Some young people reported that getting “kicked out” of school reinforced their feelings of social exclusion. Others stated that such consequences intensified their drug use. Reflecting on his expulsion, one youth disclosed, “I had all the time in the world to get high.”

The young people who discussed negative interactions with teachers and school officials also described similar interactions with law enforcement. Although the youth complained that there was “nothing to do in this town,” they argued that they had gotten into trouble for “doing nothing.” They also suggested that local police relied heavily on community labeling to focus their efforts and generally agreed that officers harassed known troublemakers. A youth explained,

> There was one time…. I happened to be with and he was on probation. We were walking home late. The cop stopped us and he’s like, “You don’t mind if we search you?” and I was like, “No, you can’t search me.” And he’s like, “Man, don’t give me no shit. I’m not in the mood tonight.”

This youth added, “If you’re a nobody or in the system, they target you [and] take you in more.”

Latino young people reported greater harassment than Whites. One Mexican American participant stated, “Cops judge a lot and pull you over for nothing.” Such youth remarked that they were more likely than Whites to be singled out by the authorities. When discussing the absence of gang activity in his community, a second Mexican American participant observed that local law enforcement still treated Latinos as if they were gangsters. He continued, “…especially with the cops, they stereotype us. Just the way I dress, like this shirt that I’m wearing that says ‘Corona’ is an alcohol shirt. They just think I’m in a gang or something. Or ‘cause I’m bald and I’m Latino.” First generation Mexican American youth residing close to the border also reported that law enforcement had targeted them as potential drug traffickers and illegal immigrants.

Individuals reported differential treatment within the juvenile justice system as well. In one example—derived from multiple observations of teen court proceedings—the presiding judge spoke amicably with a White youth, whose case was under consideration, about their neighborhood. The judge teased the boy about staying out of trouble and then sentenced him lightly for his alcohol-related offense. The other young people who witnessed the interaction were all Latino; when their cases were heard, the judge regarded them with the sternness for which he was well known.

According to the youth, problems with law enforcement and the juvenile justice system fueled community gossip. One young person explained, “This town’s too small. Everybody knows everybody and the cops are like, ‘Stay away from this kid.’ [They’re] telling their family and their friends. Pretty soon you’re a bad kid.” Similar accusations were lodged against probation officers, who were privy to otherwise confidential information concerning the familial, educational, legal, and behavioral health histories of the youth.

Trapped Troublemakers: The Consequences of Community Labeling Processes

One result of these labeling processes and associated social stigma is that those designated as troublemakers may experience psychosocial difficulties, including pessimism and defeat. One particularly poignant expression of such difficulties was offered by a young man who took a photo of a cinderblock wall for the PhotoVoice exercise and who lived near the border shared with Mexico (Figure 1). It was against this wall that he would typically pass the day by drinking or getting stoned. He explained, “The more that you let alcohol get to you or whatever the drug, the [more that] wall just builds up…. Any chances of succeeding just drop like bricks.” The wall was not only meaningful to this youth but was of greater metaphorical consequence. He and others often spoke of feeling “trapped” or “up against a wall.” As we describe in this section, the wall not only reflected how young people thought about their own drug use behavior but, more fundamentally, it symbolized how youth perceived the rural communities in which they lived as well as their own social standing and life chances within them.

In some respects, recent economic decline combined with the globalization of youth consumer cultures provided new sources of meaning from which the predominantly lower-class youth in this rural area interpreted their social realities and expressions of boredom, troublemaking, and future prospects. Engagement through the Internet, television, video games, music, radio, and other media created opportunities for youth to participate in these cultures and increased their awareness of the severe limitations of their own circumstances.

Youth longed to escape the boring confines of their communities and often accessed this range of media while using drugs. Conversely, some adolescents participated in youth consumer cultures as a means to avert troublemaking or as "something to do besides drugs."

One youth described break dancing and improvising song lyrics with his friends—drug-free activities that fostered creativity, kept them out of trouble, and alleviated boredom. He claimed that his efforts to practice and perform in a local park were inhibited by local police responding to complaints from nearby residents that the music was too loud and could not be broadcast without proper permission. Although several young people described their passion for popular music and mixing their own music as a means to resolve boredom, they were of the opinion that others in the community had associated their public displays of this passion with troublemaking.

Many youth framed the relationship between boredom and trouble through a sense of disgust with the area. One young person struggling with methamphetamine addiction commented:

> It's hard growing up here. It's nothing but drugs here…. This town's just nasty…. It's just a drug town. It's hard growing up here 'cause the drugs and the people…. You're going to become somebody? You're gonna become nothing in this little town…. The drugs get anybody quick. And there's always alcohol, there's always kids trying to party.

Most young people reported that their communities were too small, risky, and boredom inducing. As this participant posited, the community assured the propagation of drug problems. The idea that community was the central etiological agent of such problems was also reflected in suggestions that leaving town was the best option to avoid drug use problems and to stay out of trouble. Even when asked to reflect on community strengths, the response was often disheartening. Youth described local communities as places devoid of adolescent-focused recreational opportunities, with the exception of drug use, largely characterized as a viable solution to boredom. In so doing, youth normalized drug use as part of the overall adolescent experience.

Nevertheless, the act of resolving boredom through drug use could result in trouble or perceived trouble by adults in the community. Through gossip, adults also contributed to the public branding of troublemakers. Most youth suggested that they were categorized as troublemakers within the broader community; some used this term to self-identify. The *troublemaker* label made them feel unwelcome at school and transformed them into the targets of police harassment. Young people were pessimistic about their future prospects, not clear about whether they could continue their education or whether local employers would hire them. Youth discussed the consequences of labeling in very stark terms. One individual, who had experienced his first period of probation in his early teens, described his personal struggle:

> It didn't bother me so much until I started getting older…. I started noticing that older people were thinking of me as a troublemaker and not knowing who I was and them thinking that made their children [troublemakers]…. It started getting around that I wasn't no good…. I'm like, "You know they don't really know me, so why judge me?"

He continued:

> Right now I'm basically by myself. I don't hang around too many people because if I'm in trouble then everyone else is in trouble…. I try to stay away from trouble so I just walk around school alone, but I'm already labeled as one of the troublemakers and the pot head and all this other stuff.

Isolation was a common practice among youth who perceived themselves as having been labeled as *troublemakers*. This strategy served two principal functions: (1) removing oneself from social situations where the threat of trouble (or being blamed for trouble) was present; and, (2) protecting oneself and even younger family members from further social rejection. Feeling ostracized and lacking support, some young people simply intensified their drug use, reasoning that people would treat them as users regardless.

Youth were extremely cynical regarding the possibilities of shedding the *troublemaker* label once it had been assigned. During a focus group exchange one youth explained, “We’re always gonna be marked. We got to leave and show them and come back, you know, nice ride and a suit and stuff all clean and then they’ll be like, ‘Oh, maybe he changed.’ They’ll never let us do anything, they’ll never change.” A second youth challenged the view that one’s image could be effectively rehabilitated, “All that they’d [community members] just be like is, ‘Oh, he’s a drug dealer.’” A third youth said more definitively, “If someone wants to get a bad label off them I think they should just leave town.” A fourth youth added, “Even if you do something good [the people in the community are] still gonna focus on the bad thing you did.” Within the context of both one-on-one interviews and focus groups, young people consistently suggested that prospects for acknowledgment and encouragement by others in the community were nil; this situation could only be remedied by leaving the region for good.

Troublemakers in Times of Economic Transformation

Transnational, globalizing influences and economic transformations within southwestern New Mexico have created an environment of limited opportunity for youth that contributes to the desire to leave town. Although we have illustrated how local context shapes the meanings, experiences, and causes of youth boredom, the impacts of global processes are hardly homogenous (Ong, 2006). The highly rural nature of the study setting might imply the isolation of youth experience, but transnational processes strongly influence this area. As we discuss below, dependency of the local economy on global capital, labor opportunities in multinational corporations and the armed forces, and the current “border crisis” are also implicated.

The mining industry of southwestern New Mexico has relied heavily on global demands for minerals and metals, whose price fluctuations result in local increases in either employment or layoffs. From the time of the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, the extraction of copper has dominated the mining industry within the region. Until recently, young men could expect that their futures would lie in mining. Much like their adult relatives, many of our participants, specifically young men, imagined they would work in the mines, earn decent incomes, start families, and in so doing possibly end their careers as troublemakers. However, downturns in the mining industry created economic hardship for adults and youth in the past decade. Since late 2008, some 1,000 mine workers have been laid off due to an international decrease in the demand for copper. Contemporary globalization has also brought about a shift in centuries-old copper-mining practices to illegal foraging. Local media report that copper wiring “has been ripped from machinery to operate wells, torn from homes under construction and stolen from storage yards of companies” and then sold by residents to fences outside the United States (Buey, 2008).

Some youth worked in a multinational call-in-center, an employment option also subject to the vicissitudes of the marketplace. One young man, whose girlfriend had recently given birth to his child, had stopped using marijuana in order to pass a drug test to gain employment in the mines. After the massive layoffs had occurred, he then landed a job at the call-in-center. Having to respond to the angry customers of a cellular service company led

him to return to heavy marijuana use. He reasoned that the mellowing effects of marijuana helped him cope with the pressures of work.

Other young people attempting to support themselves or their families sought employment at fast food restaurants or Wal-Mart. Securing these jobs meant that they needed to "break through" the label of troublemaker. For some, even limited success presented challenges; if employment was obtained, boredom with the tasks at hand and the long hours that prohibited them from pursuing education to advance to better employment options would set in. One young woman, who associated work in the fast food industry with living "like a junkie," lamented the dearth of meaningful, high-status jobs within her community.

Another labor alternative, the military, was characterized as the most viable option for men. This career path was particularly attractive not only because it provided employment but also educational opportunities and a real chance to leave the area. One youth stated, "I want to go to college… . I don't have the money to go to college so I want to join the Marines, especially if I can travel the world and be something." Even when queried about this option, given the high likelihood of being sent to a war zone, the young people in our study could see little risk in comparison to their current state of extreme boredom and lack of alternatives.

Finally, the proximity of the region to the U.S. border with Mexico influenced employment options as well as family relationships and troublemaking activities. A national "border crisis" coinciding with our period of fieldwork led to increased surveillance and decreased border-crossing opportunities for area residents. The limitations placed on border crossing profoundly affected the local agricultural industry. Area farmers shifted to crops that could be mechanically harvested because they feared the repercussions if human labor from Mexico became unavailable during key harvest times. This shift also resulted in a reduction in the demand for manual labor, which affected local youth and their families.

Ironically, though border surveillance inhibited much human passage, it did not appear to stem the flow of drugs, one of the dominant rationales for the increased control. At the same time, in the minds of many youth, the "border" signified opportunities for troublemaking in terms of trafficking and drug use. The youth were well aware that methamphetamine production recently had switched from relatively small local facilities to mass production operations in Mexico, citing statistics in informational materials produced by the Drug Enforcement Administration. They observed that methamphetamine was increasingly transported from mega-labs in Mexico through massive shipments over the Interstate, or on the bodies of Mexicans or Americans crossing the border.

One youth situated the linkages between access to drugs, criminal activity, and local economics within the border. He said,

> This town is right near the border. A lot of kids take part in bringing [drugs and migrants] here and everything else…. It's a way to get paid like say as if you're working a regular minimum wage job and you're working your butt off and you go and just bring some people across, some drugs across and you get paid for like two weeks that you would have been working hard.

A few youth reported a willingness to risk trafficking in drugs or humans. However, as surveillance increased, young people—Latinos in particular— avoided such activities, reasoning that legal authorities would likely profile them as *traffickers*. One Latino youth who regularly crossed the border to visit family prior to the crackdown and now felt unfairly targeted by the authorities disclosed that she had been asked to carry drugs on several

occasions and had even been solicited to put “crystal in my keester.” She added, “I am not gonna do that.”

Discussion

An analytical focus on youths’ experience of and response to boredom is crucial to understanding drug use and social labeling processes in rural southwestern New Mexico. As suggested by Jervis et al. (2003), boredom is a manifestation of social position, political economic realities, and assessments of possible futures and, as illustrated here, it is often a gloss youth utilize to summarize their specific sociocultural circumstances. One point worth emphasizing is that this particular understanding of boredom is not limited to youth living in areas in the developing world but is also an expression of ethnic, geographic, and economic position within the United States as well. Although our study focused on rural and frontier communities, similar findings may apply to urban areas undergoing economic transformation, where unstructured time is plentiful and globalized youth cultures likewise shape the imaginations of youth and community-based resources geared toward adolescents are in short supply (see Bourgois, 2003; MacLeod, 2008). Between 1977 and 2005, Zick (2009) reports that youth across the nation have experienced a marked surge in nonproductive leisure time, which may contribute to complaints of boredom more broadly, with two thirds of this time devoted to “passive activities” rather than “pursuits that have a high probability of promoting personal growth.”

The rural youth in our study use drugs within a sociocultural context widely characterized by having “nothing to do.” These young people suggest that behavior considered problematic by some is viewed as a normal part of growing up by others. What makes the difference appears to be a reflection of the social status of the individuals engaging in specific activities and the individuals observing them. Thus, actors in social systems may express a wide range of evaluations of certain troublemaking activities such as youth partying and drug use. Although young people regard such activities as effective antidotes for unrelenting boredom, they also observe that these same practices can be interpreted quite differently by others in the community, especially when they are associated with members of specific sociocultural groups. These alternative interpretations give way to labels, such as *troublemaker*, which affect how youth think about themselves and how others respond to them (see Eyben, 2007).

At times, youth perceive themselves to be targets of negative labeling and social stigma based on their specific ethnic and family identities. In our study, rural Latino youth, especially males, felt disempowered as a result of their troublemaking status. Individuals whose siblings had already incurred negative reputations within local educational and juvenile justice systems also expressed concern that they had been unfairly marked as *troublemakers*.

From the perspectives of young people, the consequences of negative labeling are tremendous. As suggested repeatedly in both interviews and focus groups, many feel demoralized and experience social isolation as a result of labeling, regardless of whether they continue to use drugs. The experience of boredom also becomes more pronounced for some. Young people commonly disclosed that institutional and social authorities, such as teachers, coaches, and parents, instruct other adolescents, that is, the “good kids,” to stay away from them. These individuals are not only alienated from these peers but also find that they cannot easily rely on alternative social support networks, particularly when judges, probation officers, or behavioral health providers tell them to stay away from friends with whom they had used drugs.

The transnational forces that shape rural communities in developing nations as well as within the United States may exacerbate this negative labeling. These forces have undermined potential livelihoods within southwestern New Mexico by limiting educational and stable employment opportunities. As noted by several young people in our study, the decline of key industries, especially mining, has affected revenue generation at the local level. In particular, fewer tax dollars have resulted in decreased public spending, as evidenced by the reduction of the traditional school week from 5 to 4 days. Such cost-cutting measures have resulted in more unstructured time for youth, particularly those who do not participate in school athletics.

Young people's desires to shed the *troublemaker* label are put into practice in contexts where poverty is an indelible feature of the socioeconomic landscape and unstructured time predominates. In our study setting, those fortunate enough to gain employment typically find themselves working in fast food restaurants, a global retail giant, or a (recently defunct) multinational call-in-center. Many do not consider these jobs rewarding or viable career options, but experience difficulty envisioning other work trajectories, with the exception of the military. These youth also claim to be the targets of international drug traffickers operating on the border. The insights offered by the youth have implications for southwestern New Mexico and other rural spaces experiencing global transformation and economic hardship. Given the small-scale nature of our qualitative study, we must further investigate how schools and law enforcement agencies identify and initiate actions to address the problem of trouble within rural settings. For example, how do school policies that facilitate suspension and expulsion affect drug use among youth? Although young people's perceptions of institutional responses to boredom and drug use may be biased, their observations still indicate that, if nothing else, local institutions could more effectively manage communication with the communities they serve.

Other pragmatic steps can be taken to address the problem of boredom and troublemaking. Efforts may be needed to enhance educational and vocational training opportunities for young people. Service programs that provide income and educational stipends, or low-cost mentorship programs in which youth are paired with local professionals, business owners, and other concerned community members, may represent an important step in this direction. Additional efforts could focus on supporting youth-focused economic development activities as well as the cultivation of drug-free social spaces where youth can mingle, access youth-oriented recreation and entertainment, and engage in healthy patterns for interaction.

Limitations

Although this qualitative research provides insight into *what* rural youth think about drug use, boredom, and labeling processes and *how* they situate these phenomena within social circumstances shaped by globalization and economic transformation, we recognize certain limitations. First, this work does not document the experiences and perceptions of rural youth who did not associate adverse repercussions with their drug use. We interviewed a specific\segment of the drug-using youth population—young people who self-identified as having drug use problems, whose first-hand perspectives on boredom and troublemaking may be easily dismissed by adults in the community. Because most youth had already experienced problems within educational and legal systems, they may have been more inclined than others to also self-identify as troublemakers. Second, our research did not focus explicitly on the viewpoints of either school or law enforcement officials; further qualitative investigation into their perspectives may serve to strengthen our findings. Third, we did not assess the role of parents and other social supports or the relationship between drug use and mental health among these youth. Comparative research is also needed to

further illuminate emergent drug use issues among ethnically diverse youth living in other economically depressed rural areas of the United States.

Finally, the notion must be addressed that boredom is an affective state common among contemporary Americans of recent generations—one that can be easily invoked as justification for drug use behavior that declines as youth mature, find employment, and start families. However, in a state that currently leads the nation in drug-induced death rates (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008), further investigation is needed to determine whether drug use actually declines among those youth transitioning into adulthood. Although relapse was common among the youth who participated in our follow-up interviews, without longitudinal data, we cannot draw conclusions as to whether the youth stopped using after moving out of the area or whether they had matured out of drug use.

Conclusion

Rural communities in the United States, particularly in the American Southwest, may be subject to the same economic transformations as developing nations that create desire for participation in global youth cultures while simultaneously limiting opportunities for social, educational, and economic advancement for young people (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000). Within rural communities, where poverty and ethnic tension are ubiquitous, drug use and troublemaking provide a short-term antidote to boredom for youth who perceive themselves as lacking socially valued activities and roles and who have an abundance of unstructured time. Social institutions intensify experiences of youth marginalization through the deployment of the *troublemaker* label. Within a global economy that has compromised local educational systems and regional industries, troublemaking youth in our study represent a vulnerable population whose “problem behaviors” may require novel interventions at the level of community rather than individual.

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Figure 1.
The Cinderblock Wall

Table 1

Demographic Features of the Communities

County	Population in 2000	Persons per square mile	Latino	White, non-Latino	Persons below poverty
County 1	3,543	0.5	18.9%	77.2%	18.9%
County 2	31,002	7.8	48.7%	49.0%	19.6%
County 3	5,932	1.7	55.9%	43.1%	23.6%
County 4	25,016	8.4	59.6%	38.1%	26.2%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2000).

Table 2

Demographic Features of Youth Participants

Method	Male	Female	Latino	White, non-Latino	Other
Semi-Structured Interview	61%	39%	68%	21%	11%
Follow-up Interview	59%	41%	71%	29%	0%
Focus Group	65%	35%	77%	15%	8%