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## Study shows spike in Sublette crime

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A report on crime rates in Sublette County shows a rapid increase in arrests since the natural gas boom began, but some say the data provide a simple snapshot and do not take into account other variables.

Prepared by sociologist Jeffrey Jacquet, the report analyzes population trends and crime rates from 1995 to 2004 in Sublette County. Since 1995, population has increased by almost 21 percent. The number of arrests, however, has increased by 270 percent during the same time.

Most arrests fell into the "other" category, and law enforcement officials said that may be attributed to outstanding warrants, according to the report. Other arrest increases were for driving under the influence, simple assault, drunkenness and drug possession.

More serious crimes, such as murder, rape and robbery, have not increased.

Sublette County Commissioner Betty Fear said the report is helpful as the county grapples with growth, but may not adequately reflect the issues in the area.

"Remember, we have a very low population, so if we had one crime yesterday before the gas came in, and one today, that's a 100 percent increase," she said. "When you look at this, I think it's a little bit misleading without understanding the factors that go into it."

Jacquet's report draws parallels between when drill rigs are active and spikes in arrests. But there are also more people in Sublette County during the summer tourist season, which may also lead to an increase.

Fear, who is also on the Pinedale Anticline Working Group, which commissioned the study, said that group would like to present the information to the Bureau of Land Management. The BLM is in charge of permitting gas activity in Sublette County and has wrestled with understanding socioeconomic impacts to the community.

"We want some hard data to present when they're making their decisions," Fear said. "When you have this type of economy, it's good to know so you can plan ahead."

Steven Hall, spokesman for the BLM, said the working group was developed by the BLM to better understand the impacts of increased gas activity, and this report does just that.

"This very study comes out of BLM's commitment to find out what the impacts are," he said, and it will be incorporated into socioeconomic studies.

He also said half the mineral royalties from energy extraction go back to the state specifically to mitigate impacts like this.

"That's why the revenue structure is set up like that," Hall said.

Jacquet, the author of the report, agreed with Fear's statement that small population numbers may make results seem more staggering.

"With such small numbers, the huge percentage increases can be misleading," he said. "But still, if the number of arrests is doubling every four years, you know something is going on."

Sublette County's sheriff, undersheriff and a lieutenant were out of the office late last week and not available for comment.

Still, last year, now-retired Sheriff Hank Ruland said crime was going up, and the office's budget was increasing, too.

In 1995, Ruland's budget was \$1 million. In 2004, it is nearly \$5 million. The county has a new jail, holding 52 people to replace the 21-person old jail. In 1995, there were 15 officers. Now, there are 23, according to Jacquet's report.

But the arrests made per officer have increased, while arrests per officer made in the rest of Wyoming and in Sweetwater County -- also home to a gas boom -- have remained stagnant.

The number of Wyoming officers increased by 8 percent and the number of arrests jumped by 15 percent in the same time period. In Sweetwater County, the number of officers increased by just 4 percent, with arrests increasing by 8 percent, Jacquet reported.

"Increases in crimes, arrests, and services have also grown, although at large rates that vastly outpace the growing population," the report said. "While caution may be exercised when analyzing percentage changes of the small numbers associated with rural areas, the changes still appear to be substantial."

Since 2000, the county population has increased by 12 percent -- 70 percent of that growth in rural Sublette County and 22 percent in Pinedale, according to the report.

Arrests increased by 94 percent since 2000, and by 270 percent since 1995.

In an interview, Jacquet said the spike in arrests may be attributed to "nonresidents" living in Sublette County, in nontraditional housing, who are not counted in a census -- thus underestimating the actual population.

"Those are the people that might be more likely to be affecting disparity between population increase and crime rate increase," Jacquet said.

Many of the new residents are younger people, and "the rate of crime typically tends to be higher among younger populations of people," according to the report.

Still, Fear said there are other socioeconomic issues the county still needs to understand, such as child care needs, impacts to schools and health care. Jacquet said the next task will be to examine health care impacts to the area since the population boom.