

Is Las Vegas a “Real City”?

David R. Dickens

At the recent Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association, held in Las Vegas, Professor Sharon Zukin, a recipient of the ASA's Robert and Helen Lynd Lifetime Achievement Award in community and urban sociology, was featured in a two-minute video produced by the prestigious Norton Publishing company. The first words out of her mouth were “I hate Las Vegas.” She then proceeded to launch into an extended diatribe aimed at tourists on the Strip, whom, she claimed, “might think that they are having fun, but they are not,” and went on to add that “Las Vegas is not a real city.”¹

While the stupefying combination of arrogance and ignorance contained in Professor Zukin's “commentary” is deeply disturbing, it is hardly new. There is a long, dishonorable tradition of “drive-by journalism” (and what I would call “drive-by scholarship”) where writers spend a few days in Las Vegas (or in the case of academics, send a squad of their graduate students), usually staying in a hotel on the Strip, and then return to their hometowns to write an article or book condemning an entire metropolitan area of two million people as wicked hedonists, degenerate gamblers, prostitutes, and so on.

It is crucial to note, however, that there exists an equally large literature on Las Vegas based upon systematic, in-depth empirical analysis. This growing body of work covers a broad range of topics, much of it conducted by researchers at the local colleges and university, including outstanding studies of Las Vegas history by Professor Michael Green of the College of Southern Nevada (CSN) and Eugene Moehring of the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) and dozens of articles, books, and research reports on various aspects of the region such as gambling, health care, immigration, population, sense of community, and the sex industry.²

Though less prominent in the public eye, this scholarly literature collectively paints a far more complex portrait of “Sin City.” For more than two decades the Las Vegas metropolitan area experienced an unprecedented period of growth and prosperity. Lavish new casino resorts, plentiful job opportunities (especially for those with little formal education), low or nonexistent personal and corporate taxes, and relatively inexpensive housing (particularly in comparison with nearby Los Angeles) combined to create an almost euphoric belief among many local residents that the good times would go on forever.

The sense of invincibility quickly dissipated, however, with the onset of the current recession. While most Americans across the country are feeling the effects of this recent downturn, the citizens of Las Vegas have been especially hard hit. With the highest national rates in unemployment and home foreclosures, Las Vegas seems to have gone from boom to bust in record time. Many aspects of the town's current troubles, of course, are largely a product of the earlier period of explosive growth itself, which placed enormous stresses on local social and physical infrastructures (such as schools, health services, roads, etc.). Yet it should also be noted that education and health care were woefully underfunded even during the economic good times, as Las Vegas and the state of Nevada have ranked at or near of the bottom nationally in these areas for more than thirty years.³

If at some point you find yourself in Las Vegas and are willing to venture away from the glitzy confines of the Strip, I recommend the following itinerary: take a cab downtown to the location of University Medical Center. Proceed north on Shadow Lane, then turn right onto Pinto Lane. From there turn into the third driveway. There

David R. Dickens
Department of Sociology
University of Nevada,
Las Vegas
e-mail: david.dickens@
unlv.edu

you will see a crowd of men and women standing in a long line that snakes around the building before you, just like on the Strip. But they will not be laughing boisterously, wearing silly party hats or holding giant-sized plastic glasses filled with oversweetened alcoholic beverages. Rather, they are waiting, mostly in silence, out in the open (where temperatures range from 110 to 30 degrees depending on the time of the year) to gain entry into the Clark County Social Services Building in order to apply for financial assistance. Once inside (which can take two to three hours), they receive a ticket allowing them to come back several days later and again wait for hours (though inside this time) in order to meet with a case worker. After a brief interview, the case worker may approve or deny their request for benefits or, just as often, send them away to retrieve more information. In the latter case, after returning with additional documentation, individuals once again must wait to meet with a case worker, though usually not the person with whom they spoke the first time. Once again applicants may be told that they need further documentation, even though they were told by the first case worker with whom they met that bringing the additional information would be sufficient to qualify them for assistance.

If observing this sad, often desperate, bureaucratically degrading process, which currently shows no signs of abating, doesn't convince you that Las Vegas is a "real city," then I don't know what would.

- 1 Ironically, Professor Zukin was the featured speaker at an Urban History Association Conference hosted recently by the UNLV History Department.
- 2 For a listing of many of these studies, see the UNLV Sociology Department website.
- 3 Unfortunately for the local citizenry, many of whom are really suffering, their plight is exacerbated by a political culture in Carson City (the state capital) that promotes policies based more on extremist ideology than sound empirical research, making prospects for a quick recovery all the more daunting.