

“Studying the Shifting Ecology of Consumption:
A Study of Youth Services in Phoenix-Mesa”
by Joseph Galaskiewicz, Olga Mayorova, and Beth Duckles
Department of Sociology
University of Arizona

Introduction

The paper addresses a question that has long been of interest to political scientists and economists: what are the proper roles of for-profit, government, and nonprofit providers? For the most part, the focus has been on the product characteristics, e.g., public vs. private goods, and information asymmetries.

We broaden the debate by asking which sector should be responsible for redistribution. We acknowledge that this is not an issue for the for-profit sector and that governments are able to address this issue if there is the political will. The situation of nonprofits is less clear. On the one hand, there is no legal requirement that there be redistribution to qualify for tax-exempt status or even for public charity status, however, there is a long tradition of nonprofits helping the needy, the disadvantaged, and the poor. In other words, there is nothing to prevent nonprofits from being charitable and there are no legal stipulations that compel nonprofits to be charitable.

This research takes the issue of redistribution as problematic. We examine the provision of services to households with children between 5 and 12 years of age in the Phoenix-Mesa metro area. We ask: Do for-profits, nonprofits, and government agencies provide different goods and services to this market segment? Do the different sectors serve different kinds of families, e.g., rich/middle income/poor, Hispanic/non-Hispanic, newcomers/long term residents, etc.

Methodology

In partnership with Arizona State University’s Survey Research Center (now called the Institute for Social Science Research) we surveyed 1,036 households in the Phoenix-Mesa metro area from November, 2003 to February, 2004. We screened for households that had children between the ages of 5 to 12 years of age. Our response rate was 55% of eligible households.

We asked for the adult who knew most about the children’s activities on the previous Saturday. If there were more than one child, we selected a child at random. We asked about the child’s activities from midnight the previous Friday to midnight that evening. We asked what the child did, where s/he did it, who s/he did it with, where s/he did it, and who was the provider.

Of the 1,036 households, 196 said that there were no activities outside the home while 840 said that there were activities. Of the 840 who said that there were activities, 182 said that none of the activities benefited the child. The 658 households, which said there

were activities that benefited the child, mentioned 1236 activities. These activities included commercial activities (shopping, eating, personal services), sports (organized and unorganized), developmental activities (tutoring, arts, religious services, scouting), socializing, entertainment, (non sport) play, and miscellaneous activities.

Results

We found that commercial activities were overwhelmingly provided by business providers and that socializing took place primarily in other households or in the neighborhood. Churches provided primarily developmental activities, but nonprofits and other providers provided these services as well. Sports, entertainment, and play were provided by a variety of providers. Future research will examine the relationship between household income, length of residence, ethnicity, and a host of other factors on the choice of different services and different types of providers. We will also examine the distribution of providers across the metropolitan area using the addresses of the providers and GIS technology.

Conclusion

We suspect that household characteristics will have an effect on the types of services used and types of providers used. However, we need to do more extensive analyses before we can draw any firm conclusions. Most importantly, we need to obtain data on the organizational providers themselves. We also need to analyze both organized and unorganized activities, the cost of services, and other control variables.