

BUSINESS

2,000 Years of Partying: The Brief History and Economics of Spring Break

The long shadow of March mayhem, from ancient Greek festivals to white Florida beaches -- and into the tax coffers of Bay County

By Derek Thompson

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Reuters

Like Western democracy, Socratic philosophy, written histories, epic poetry, and every other foundational pillar of high culture, spring break began in ancient Greece.

Called "Anthestreria" by the local teens, and their parents, it was a festival dedicated to Dionysus, the god of wine and whoopee and just about every excuse to party. For three days, people would dance, singers would perform, women would deck themselves with flowers, and Greek men would compete to see who could be the fastest to drain a cup of red wine.

Two thousand years later, practically nothing has changed except our taste in chugging alcohol. While Anthestreria is immortalized in terracotta wine vessels in world-class museums (below), you might think today's spring break rituals are as easily forgotten by history as they are by memory-blighted college students. But for the American cities that host students, the impact is not so brief, as John Laurie explained in his fascinating economic study [Spring Break: The Economic, Socio-](#)

Cultural and Public Governance Impacts of College Students on Spring Break Host Locations.



The paper begins, as spring break did, in Greece, before the rise of Christianity put an end to kylix head-stands and other childish things for two thousand years. It wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that modern spring break emerged. In 1934, Sam Ingram, a Colgate College swim coach, was looking for a warm place to keep his swimmers in shape. He chose the small, quiet town of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. More swimming instructors followed. During World War II, rich Ivy League students, who occasionally visited Bermuda during their spring breaks, were suddenly spooked by rumors of German U-Boats roaming the Caribbean. The best intracontinental alternative was to meet up with the swimmer co-eds in Florida. And so, Ft. Lauderdale became the first official home of the American Anthestreria tradition.

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The Spring Break Effect

Fast-forward six decades and, by the early 2000s, nearly 40 percent of college students travel en masse for spring break, spending "nearly \$1 billion" in Florida and Texas alone, according to Laurie. In addition to the peculiar joy of reading a paper with these sort of topic sentences -- "Spring Break has a temporal as well as descriptive definition" -- it makes a substantive point about the economic benefits of spring break to the cities receiving hoards of boozing college students.

The spring break effect is, in a word, *meb*.

But how exactly do you measure "the spring break effect"? Laurie graphs sales taxes and hotel development taxes for various undergrad hotspots in Florida, Texas, and Arizona. His overall conclusions are:

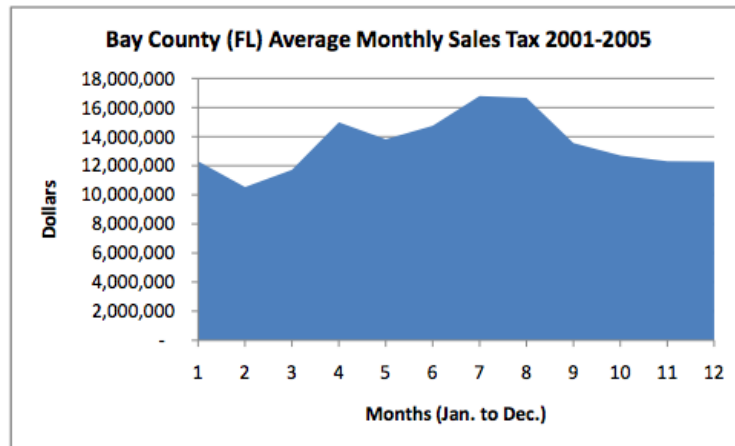
- (1) Spring break can be great for some small businesses and bars that make their money selling cheap rooms and liquor on volume; BUT ...
- (2) It's not a dependable revenue generator for the counties at large, which suggests the economic benefits of the event are overrated, even for the most popular destinations; AND ...
- (3) The only local industry that is clearly and consistently stimulated by spring break is law enforcement.

What Hath Spring Break Wrought? The Panama City Story

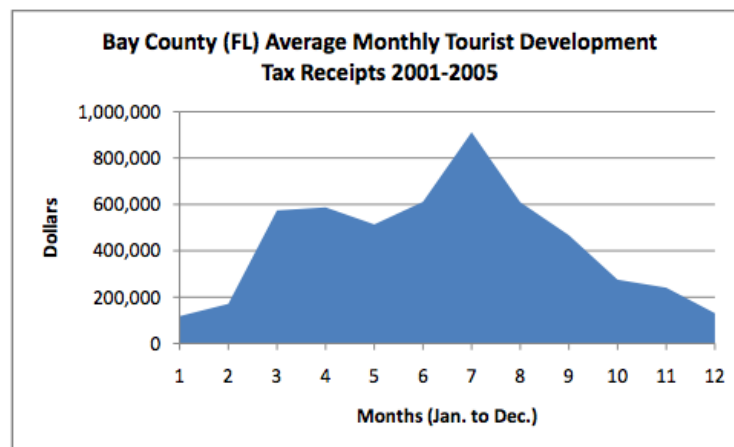
Just inside the armpit of Florida's panhandle, looking into the Gulf of Mexico, sits Panama City Beach, the "spring break capital of the world." Every year, the area draws up to 500,000 college students -- that's 42 co-eds for every city resident counted in the 2010 Census. For many years, Panama City has been MTV's home base for

spring break coverage, and partiers spend \$170 million during six-week period, according to a 2004 study.

Sounds like quite the stimulus. But Laurie's research in Bay County (home to Panama City) found that "the sales tax collected in Bay County during the month of March is actually the lowest of any month" before ticking up in April. Here's the chart:



What about hotel taxes (i.e.: tourist development receipts)? It's a similar story. July is the year's clear winner. March and April, while a huge improvement over February, are hardly better than May or September.

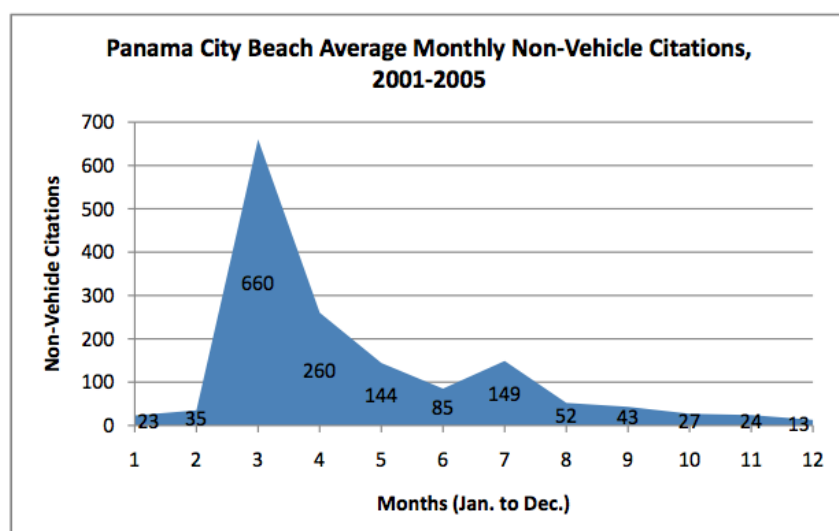
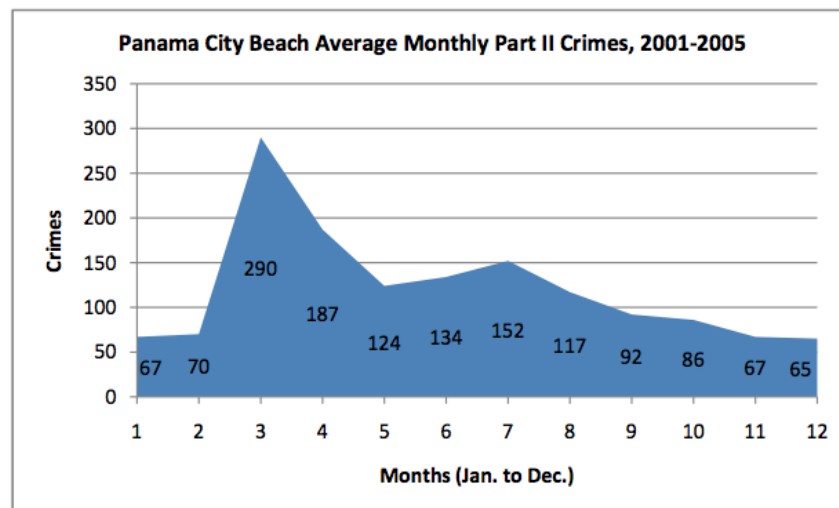


How is spring break so economically tame? Here are two conclusions, besides the possibility that Laurie's data simply does not properly reflect the benefits of spring break. First, college students are cheap and poor. They buy bad booze in bulk, they sleep five to a room, they lie out under the sun with nothing but alcohol and tanning

lotion, and they hunt around for the best deals for dinner and accommodation, even if it means staying in a different city and driving to the beach every morning.

Second, although the spring break effect is weak, it's still *there*. March and April are considerably more lucrative for Bay County than January and February. In defense of college students, maybe they don't spend as much money as the four-person families who fill out Florida over summer vacation, but they might pull forward the spring vacation season by a few weeks.

If you're wondering how half a million people leave so little a mark, however, the proper response is that they do leave an unmistakable mark on local crime and non-criminal citations. March is *by far* the year's worst month for public safety in Panama City Beach.



The Spring Break Legacy

"More crime than tax receipts" would be the five-word summary of the Panama City experience, as painted by Laurie's research. America's most famous spring break city is hardly an outlier. "The overall trend between cities regarding both average business sales tax and average hotel tax is that during Spring Break, [Florida, Arizona, and Texas] counties show low levels of sales tax collected," Laurie concluded. "In fact, the month of March is very poor for all three counties."

It is notable that almost all of the cities in the paper saw extraordinary business and income growth in the mid-2000s. But since these years coincided with the heyday of the housing boom rolling through the sunbelt, it's reasonable to suggest that spring breakers might not have been the first (or 100th) most important factor in Florida's economic development.

Perhaps the only conclusion to draw from the paper is one you could have guessed even if you knew nothing about Anthestreria, Bay County, or MTV. Spring break might be a boon to certain hotels and bars looking for late-winter pick-up. But it's hardly a metropolitan stimulus. It's hot, cheap, mid-semester jaunt for poor indebted college students living off bad beer, cheap grain alcohol, and hormones. These things are timeless. But upon them, great cities are not built.

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