

PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: The well-being of children in Tom Green County: not well enough

Staff Reports

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — The holidays are here! This is the time of year when, more than any other, thoughts and acts of kindness and giving are showered upon family members, especially the children.

Indeed, a particularly wondrous feature of the season is that so many people find a means to care, not only for their own children, but for the children of others too.

Toys for Tots boxes fill up fast, and people rush to hang their ornaments and gifts on angel trees at this time of year. It's astonishing how the community reaches out to vulnerable children and families at Christmastime.

But it's equally astounding to find how the community fails in support for the same vulnerable children and families during the rest of the year.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation collects data each year from across the nation on the well-being of children. The Foundation's Kids Count data covers children's economic security, as well as their education, health and safety.

Using 10 key indicators of child well-being as a basis for comparison, the Casey Foundation releases an annual Kids Count Data Book that profiles and ranks the 50 states. The 2011 Kids Count results rank Texas 35th among the states when it comes to the well-being of children.

ASU's Community Development Initiatives created a similar project to assess the well-being of children in a way that applies more directly to the local community. The Concho Valley Children's Social Health Index is the result.

Like Kids Count, CSHI uses data that is annually reported by a variety of state and federal agencies. The data cover each of the Concho Valley counties and each year over the past decade.

It tracks 21 key indicators on four aspects of child well-being throughout the region: education (five indicators), economic well-being (six indicators), health (five indicators) and safety (five indicators).

To enable comparison of the Concho Valley counties with one another and with the state, a 100-point scale is used to score each county and the state as a whole. A score is computed for each of the four aspects of child well-being and a total score reflects a county's (or the state's) outcomes on all 21 CSHI indicators. Higher scores indicate better conditions for the well-being of children.

The chart is a snapshot of scores from the 2011 edition of the CSHI. To the left of the chart, the indicators are listed for each of the four aspects of child well-being covered in the study. The right side compares the scores for Tom Green County, the average of the scores for the 12 other Concho Valley counties and the scores for Texas overall.

The chart does not paint a pretty picture for Tom Green County. On average, the 12 outlying counties of the Concho Valley show better conditions for all aspects of the well-being of children. In addition, the statewide scores are better than Tom Green County in all the areas of child well-being except the economic dimension.

Connecting the dots, the Kids Count data show that Texas falters in comparison with other states. The CSHI shows a local community that fades within a faltering state when it comes to underwriting the well-being of children. Bob Dylan wrote the lyric for this: "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there."

To be sure, Tom Green County has bright spots where significant progress is being made to improve the well-being of children. For example, high school attrition in the county has declined by 79 percent over the past decade. In the same time, births to teen mothers fell by 73 percent, and infant mortality was reduced by 49 percent.

Still, there are many other areas where the local community is stumbling and the vulnerability of children is being multiplied:

While more than 22 percent of Tom Green County's children live in poverty, the county decreased funded Head Start slots by 6 percent over the past decade.

While the percentage of children receiving food stamps increased by 146 percent since the beginning of the decade, enrollment in the Children's Health Insurance Program declined by 17 percent, and the number of students in all grades who receive special education services fell by about 25 percent.

While only 26 of 254 Texas counties have a higher number of child abuse victims than Tom Green County, the number of children in family violence shelters and foster care increases consistently, and the violent death rate for teens in Tom Green County grew by almost 377 percent during the past decade.

These are some of the reasons why the county scores poorly on child well-being.

Of course, there are local organizations that do heroic things throughout the calendar year to help uplift children.

The San Angelo/Tom Green County Hunger Initiative organized volunteers to provide more than 26,000 meals to children and their parents or caregivers this past summer.

The Concho Valley CARES Drug Free Communities Coalition is reaching out to numerous school and faith-based student organizations to enlist their leadership in steering young people across the region away from the destructive consequences of excessive underage drinking and substance abuse.

House of Faith counsels, mentors and tutors thousands of local children and families on a year-round basis, and the Children's Advocacy Center strives to prevent child abuse and is dedicated to assuring that every child has a nurturing home.

These are only some of the many community assets we have to secure the well-being of children. Yet the outcomes keep slipping away.

So, happy holidays San Angelo! This season, help make sure Santa widens the eyes and fills the Christmas stocking of every child. Pray for the well-being of all families and children in our community.

But, on New Year's Day, make a resolution. Let us resolve that at tax time, in the voting booth and with our charitable time and dollars, we will do our part to make sure the schools are up to educating all the children, that health and mental-health care is provided to every child in need of it, that every child has a safe and healthy home, and that every family earns a living wage enough to provide for the children.

Next holiday season, let us celebrate evidence of our progress toward showing that Kids Count in the Concho Valley.

Kenneth L. Stewart and Casey Jones are directors and Makayla Cisneros is a student research assistant at ASU's Community Development Initiatives at the ASU Center for Community Wellness, Engagement and Development. Contact them at kstewart@angelo.edu, casey.jones@angelo.edu or mcisneros1@angelo.edu.



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