



Decline affects elderly, children

Our Community

By KENNETH L. STEWART and CASEY JONES Special to the Standard-Times

Monday, January 19, 2009

The Community Development Initiative at Angelo State University has analyzed a series of measurements comparing the quality of life in San Angelo to the rest of Texas. Today's article, the second of four, examines whether San Angelo's self-image as a good place to retire and to raise children is supported by the social health index.

San Angelo's image as a great place to raise a family and enjoy the golden retirement years is on the line.

That is the story told by Angelo State University's Community Development Initiatives (CDI) research into basic indicators tracing social conditions affecting children and elderly persons since the year 2000. These indicators are among 18 factors used to weigh the local quality of life between 2000 and 2007. The San Angelo Social Health Index scores the community on a 100-point system, with higher scores showing better quality of life conditions.

This article focuses on six of those factors centering on the community's children and elderly. CDI uses the six indicators to create and track the San Angelo Dependent Populations Index.

According to the Dependent Populations Index, elderly persons and children actually entered the 21st century with improving conditions. By 2002, the six measurements yielded a score of 83 on the 100-point scoring method. This reflected the best quality of life conditions seen by San Angelo's children and elders since 2000.

From there, however, things took a serious turn for the worse. The index fell from its 2002 high to a dismal score of 29 by 2006, followed by slight improvement in 2007. It is fair to say that the quality of life for seniors and children slid into a "social depression" during the past three years.

A closer look at the six parts of the Dependent Populations Index reveals certain factors that are dragging down the quality of life for children and elders.

Health conditions, for instance, are playing a role. The Tom Green County infant mortality rate declined by 38 percent between 2000 and 2002, but this improvement turned into a 28 percent increase by 2004. The most recent infant mortality numbers show the county's rate exceeds the 6.3 rate for Texas by 40 percent.

School conditions also affect children. Between 2003 and 2007, a 9 percent increase in the number of economically disadvantaged students in San Angelo public schools outpaced a 7 percent statewide increase. In 2005, the most recent year for which dropout statistics are available, San Angelo's annual dropout rate for public schools was 31 percent higher than for the state overall.

Besides these conditions, stunning increases in child and elder abuse are extremely significant in the recent "social depression" of San Angelo's dependent populations.

In 2004, the child abuse rate in Tom Green County was 6.4 victims per 1,000 children, two points lower than in 2000 and 28 percent lower than the statewide rate. By 2006, however, local child abuse climbed to a peak-level of 16.4 victims per 1,000 children.

Some relief came in 2007 when the child abuse rate fell back to 13.8, but the county level was still 116 percent above its low level of 2004 and 23 percent higher than the rate of child abuse across the state.

The trend in abuse of elderly residents is similar.

The county's 2004 rate of 27.4 victims per 1,000 elder and disabled adults was down 18 percent from 2000. As with children, however, elder abuse climbed after 2004 to a high-water mark of 37.5 per 1,000 in 2006. A slightly improved rate of 34.4 in 2007 still left the county with a level that was 25 percent higher than its own low in 2004 and over three times greater than the statewide rate.

Children and elderly persons make up about 40 percent of our local population. Perhaps San Angelo's reputation as a "family place" and a "retirement place" is the reason this number exceeds the statewide percentage by about two points.

These images satisfy longtime residents, and community leaders tout them to promote economic development. However, eroding quality of life among the community's elders and children tarnish these images, and the social depression will continue until we more effectively address these negative trends as a community.

We are quick to recognize children and elders who are "at risk." But we should all understand that the community is "at risk," too.

Kenneth L. Stewart and Casey Jones are co-directors of ASU's Community Development Initiatives. Contact them at kstewart@angelo.edu or casey.jones@angelo.edu. See detailed results of the San Angelo Social Health Index at www.angelo.edu/dept/cdi. ASU students Amanda Roper and Shawn

Shoemaker contributed to this article.



© San Angelo Standard-Times | gosanangelo.com