



# Index: Local families struggling

## our community

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

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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 third of four, examines the economic state of the ordinary San Angelo household as measured by the social health index.

The worst global financial crisis in almost a century has stretched some San Angelo households and created worries for next year and beyond. However, the truth is that economic pressures on households have been building for years in our community.

Angelo State University's Community Development Initiatives (CDI) uses its San Angelo Social Health Index to track basic household economic and social conditions. The index highlights some of the key pressure points affecting local conditions.

The CDI Index uses 18 indicators to score our community's quality of life on a 100-point system with higher scores reflecting better conditions.

This article focuses on six more of the 18 social health factors that focus on quality of life conditions in local households. CDI uses the six indicators to create and track the San Angelo Households Index during the 2000-07 period.

The decade began positively with a trend toward improved social conditions. The results show that local households scored a 52 on the 100-point index in 2000, a score of 71 in 2001, and a score of 64 in 2002. After 2002, however, local household conditions deteriorated, falling to a score of 34 by 2005. Despite rebounding to a score of 49 in 2007, local households have been struggling more and more over the years to the point that they are stretched to make ends meet.

One of the CDI index pressures deals with the challenge households face to put food on the table. In July 2000, 8.4 percent of Tom Green County residents were using food stamps. Four years later, usage

climbed to 13.2 percent, yielding a 57 percent increase between 2000 and 2004. The rate of food stamp use declined to 10.6 percent of county residents by 2007. Even with this improvement, however, food stamp usage exceeded the low mark of 2000 by 25 percent. Current conditions surely strain some local household food budgets, but this condition has been building throughout the decade.

Housing and higher education costs are other areas where pressure points have intensified for San Angelo households. Analysts believe that whenever housing costs reach 30 percent or more of a household's income, troubles start for the family. Compared to the state as a whole, the number of San Angelo households reaching this danger zone is low. Nevertheless, this pressure has escalated over the years. CDI analysis shows that in 2000, almost 24 percent of local households had housing costs exceeding 30 percent or more of their income. By 2006, 31 percent of the households reached this danger zone, and 29 percent fell into the zone in 2007.

Angelo State University has a history of keeping tuition charges below the average for state schools. The trouble for local households is that local wages are further below the state average and have not kept pace with increases in the university's tuition. In 2000, expenses for one semester at ASU consumed almost 5 percent of the local average wage per job. By 2007 that figure had risen to a little over 8 percent. Despite laudable financial aid programs, the underlying dynamic is that year after year ordinary households experience college costs that cut deeper and further stretch their budgets.

Pressures building over the years on local households are not only financial in nature. There are troubling social trends, too. Despite the good news that there has been a decline in the Tom Green County divorce rate since 2000, the fact remains that local divorces consistently run at least 25 percent higher than the statewide level. This trend reveals a disquieting instability. Likewise, the spectacular increase in local arrests for drug violations, a rate that more than doubled between 2003 and 2005, suggests that local household troubles are reaching horrific proportions.

Stretched! The word not only describes the threat of current conditions on households, it also describes the established trend of multiple pressures affecting the quality of life for local households. San Angelo needs to reverse this trend if it is to develop socially and economically.

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The Community Development series

n Monday, Jan. 12: Social Health

n Monday, Jan. 19: A reputation on the line.

n Today: Stretched - households and economic pressures.

n Monday, Feb. 2 - Hopeful signs for our quality of life.



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