

## Data can measure quality of city's life

### Angelo State University researchers study trends

By Jennifer Rios

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — Crime is down in San Angelo, but violence in the home seems to be increasing. More people are seeking material assistance, and the community seems to be meeting the need well.

Costs are increasing faster than people's ability to pay them.

These are some of the indicators uncovered by a system of data measurement devised by a pair of San Angelo researchers.

Data to measure San Angelo's quality of life were compiled, categorized and scrutinized by Angelo State University's Ken Stewart and Laurence "Casey" Jones at the ASU Wellness, Education and Development Center to give leaders and social groups a look at trends in the city.

Stewart and Jones worked through the Community Development Initiatives, a community engagement program that conducts studies to shed light on health and social issues.

"We don't think we have the answer," Stewart said. "We think the community can get there."

Each year's numbers are based on a 100-point scale that compares local results to other years since 2000 and, at the same time, to parallel statewide outcomes.

Higher scores indicate better quality of life for San Angelo, which overall remained steady over the study period.

Some of the trends, however, were unsettling. Even though the crime report index showed it's moving on a positive trend, Stewart said there seemed to be an "undertone of violence" in other areas.

Child abuse, family violence and elder and disabled abuse all scored negatively. They — along with health care cost, which also scored a zero — were the lowest of 18 indicators.

Uniform Crime Reports, federal statistics used in determining a trend for crime, account for murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny and auto theft. The most recent result for 2009 was a score of 100, an improvement over a score of 89 in 2000.

According to the report, which begins in 2000, the city had an increase in crime and then a steady decline beginning in 2003.

The indicator for food stamps, which shows a negative trend because of a growing number of people receiving assistance, could mean San Angelo is in a better place to meet the needs of the community.

"We seem to be providing a better net," Stewart said.

Gloria Hale, manager of the Women, Infants and Children program in San Angelo, said that in the past 10 years the number of people receiving benefits has climbed about 400 or 500 per month.

The office serves seven counties, including Tom Green, which handles about 4,100 cases a month. Services include nutritional education, referrals and a call center that takes questions from expecting or current mothers. It also offers electronic benefits transfer, a system that puts money for certain foods on a card that's then taken to WIC vendors.

"We have increased because of the economy," Hale said. "There's a certain level of young families in the area, and there's more information about WIC out there; people realize it's not just for the very, very poor."

Reduction of the stigma associated with food stamps, and more publicity about what the program offers, has led in part to the increase, Hale said.

Across Texas in 2009, WIC had more than 1 million participants, Hale said, but that number has been decreasing both statewide and locally. At one point in 2010, all seven counties were serving more than 5,000 people, a number Hale said has declined in subsequent months.

With income tax returns coming out, she said, the office is typically slower at this time of year.

"People talk about how we lag behind broader economic trends," Stewart said. "What goes with that is a real sluggishness to the local economy."

Loss of jobs, combined with a difficult time creating jobs, creates a "bigger spread" between the resources people have and what things cost, Stewart said.

College costs have increased across the state since 2000, and Angelo State University has shown an upward trend since 2003.

Academic charges at ASU two years ago were 81 percent higher than 2000, according to the report, but that is lower than the statewide increase over the same time period.

Child abuse, elderly abuse and domestic violence in San Angelo all had a growing trend since 2000 and remained above the state average, according to the report. Each had a score of zero in the study, which received its data from the Texas Department of Public Safety and the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

One area in which the city achieved a perfect score was in the number of suicide; between 2003 and 2007, San Angelo had significantly fewer people taking their own lives.

Precinct 4 Justice of the Peace Eddie Howard, a 16-year veteran judge, said he remembered the year before the county's mental health deputies unit was in place, Tom Green County was worst in the state in suicide per capita.

"It turned around," Howard said. "Instead of being No. 1 in the state, we were down two or three from the bottom."

The radical switch earned the county statewide recognition with a best practices award for the program.

Howard said former state Rep. Rob Junell, in his last year in office, designated money to be used for crisis intervention. At that time Tom Green County expanded mental health resources by hiring additional deputies. Before then, mental health investigations were conducted by Fred Buck and Ed Joiner, then constables for Precincts 3 and 4.

Howard said the program has saved the county from \$1,200 to \$1,800 a person by holding hearings in San Angelo rather than driving people with mental health crises to Big Spring for evaluations. He said deputies detecting mental health problems also has saved the county money by diverting mentally ill people from jail.

"I believe with all of my heart that they have saved this county more money than any program has," Howard said. "It's just been a fantastic program."

Although the number of people booked into the jail makes up only a small percentage of overall suicides in San Angelo, jail officials have seen visual indications that their numbers are growing.

Jail Lt. Beth Mulls said over the past two to three years, the number of people in suicide smocks — a different-colored uniform — has increased. Out of the two dozen cells used to accommodate potential suicide inmates, 15 were filled Friday, each with a trustee watching the room.

At the time mental health deputies were hired, public awareness was also raised through local media, which officials believe reduced stigma and added to the decline.

Lynn Rutland, executive director of MHMR for the Concho Valley, said the number of suicides, and those who attempted suicide, has been increasing lately at "an almost alarming rate."

With state legislators' proposed cuts to community-based care, the center is looking at a \$2.2 million reduction from 2011 to 2012 — from \$8.2 million to \$6 million.

