



# Study reveals hopeful signs

## 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 last of four, offers hopeful signs indicated by the social health index.

Hopeful signs are emerging that suggest general community quality-of-life conditions are strengthening in San Angelo.

That conclusion comes from research by Angelo State University's Community Development Initiatives (CDI) on basic indicators tracking communitywide conditions affecting local residents since the year 2000.

CDI's San Angelo Social Health Index uses 18 indicators to score the local quality of life on a 100-point system, with higher scores reflecting better conditions. Six of the 18 social health indicators center on communitywide economic and social conditions that concern local residents in common. CDI used these to create the San Angelo Community Index for the years 2000-07.

Unlike the previously reported parts of the local social health index that marked deteriorating conditions affecting households, children and the elderly, the results of the Community Index show improvements. After a slowdown in the opening years of this decade between 2000 and 2002, communitywide quality of life conditions improved in recent years from a 2004 score of 43 on CDI's 100-point scale to a 68 score in 2007.

Several indicators in the Community Index point to reasons for improvement in San Angelo's general community conditions. First, despite the problems of substance abuse in the community, the city's crime situation has improved in key aspects. In 2004, for example, the local violent crime rate stood at 471 known incidents per 100,000 people. It fell by 14 percent to 403 violent crimes per 100,000 residents in 2007, a level that was 21 percent lower than the violent crime rate for Texas overall.

San Angelo also posted important gains in the number of jobs between 2004 and 2007, and the unemployment rate fell accordingly. The high water mark for unemployment across Tom Green County hit in 2003 at 5.1 percent. It dropped to 3.7 percent for 2007. And, while jobs increased and unemployment declined, average wage levels among workers in different sectors of the local economy became more equal.

Lower crime, more jobs, declining unemployment and greater equality in wages are all hopeful signs of a developing local community that may in coming years find means to reverse the darker conditions revealed by the San Angelo Social Health Index among children, the elderly and households. For this to happen, however, two other general communitywide conditions - low wages and health care - need reconciliation.

Despite increased wage equity, the average annual wage per job in San Angelo for 2006 was \$30,615. This was 27 percent less than the average Texas wage of \$41,918. Between 2004 and 2006, in fact, the average wage in San Angelo grew by only 4.5 percent while the statewide average wage growth was 10.3 percent. Low wages and stagnant earnings growth are conditions that hinder the community's capacity to address unfortunate trends affecting the quality of life in households and among children and the elderly.

Regarding health care, San Angelo, like the rest of Texas, faces a downward spiral in the realm of fundamental health care economics. Estimates for 2005 show that 22 percent of residents served by San Angelo's health facilities are medically uninsured, and that number will likely grow by another percentage point by 2010.

For sure, the uncompensated charges at local medical facilities are increasing. In 2006, for example, uncompensated charges at San Angelo's acute care hospitals were almost \$47 million. That was the equivalent of \$442 per person in Tom Green County. It was 42 percent over the level of uncompensated charges for 2003 and 62 percent more than in the year 2000. Thus, the cost to the community of uncovered health care is growing.

This brings the Standard-Times series on CDI's San Angelo Social Health Index to a close. Different parts of the index uncover a community struggling with severe trends in households and among children and the elderly. The Community Index, in contrast, shows hopeful developments in communitywide economic and social conditions.

To help turn hope into success at dealing with the grimmest local social conditions, however, community leaders should prioritize their efforts in two areas. San Angelo needs to overcome its legacy of low and stagnant wages and to solve the rising challenge of financing health care.

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Angelo Social Health Index at [www.angelo.edu/dept/cdi](http://www.angelo.edu/dept/cdi). ASU students Amanda Roper and Shawn Shoemaker contributed to this article.



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