

## **PATHWAYS TO PROGRESS: It takes a village to raise kids right**

### **City holds most and least privileged**

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More than a century has passed since Frederick Douglass observed, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." At a momentous time following the Civil War, when America first glimpsed the prospect of moving from slavery's past to freedom's future, Douglass rightly urged investment in children as a sure pathway to the prize.

The prospect and promise of that same pathway for improving communities is a core reason why we developed the Children of San Angelo Social Health Index at ASUs Community Development Initiatives.

Building on the nationally recognized KIDS COUNT project tracking the well-being of children, the CSHI provides timely information focused at the level of San Angelo's local neighborhoods. The purpose is to enrich community discussions of pathways to a better future and to increase the visibility of evidence-based inspection of children's issues.

The index is a detailed and inclusive report card on local children that uses data from the U.S. census, the Texas Education Agency and the San Angelo Police Department. Twenty indicators compare the city's 20 census tract neighborhoods.

In addition to a comprehensive comparison, the report details neighborhood differences on factors describing children's households, income support levels, guardianship arrangements and qualities of the elementary schools serving the neighborhoods.

The project uses a 100-point scale to indicate how a particular neighborhood is doing compared with other neighborhoods throughout the city. Higher ratings indicate that a neighborhood has a better quality of life for children than other parts of the city.

The comprehensive result of the index will not surprise folks who are familiar with the city. It identifies Bentwood–Nasworthy as having the best overall quality of life for children. The Sunset and Bonham neighborhoods followed with scores of 87 and 81 respectively.

Rio Vista and Glenmore are middling neighborhoods, scoring 47 and 45 respectively on the 100-point scale. The Blackshear–Downtown area had the lowest score of zero.

More eye-catching results emerge by delving into details that contrast the situation of children living in the highly rated Bentwood-Nasworthy and lesser ranked Blackshear-Downtown sections of the city. One detail, for example, indicates that the population of children has actually declined more quickly in trendier Bentwood-Nasworthy during the past decade.

In fact, the Bluffs and Paulann neighborhoods lead a list of only six out of 20 San Angelo neighborhoods that experienced increased numbers of children residing within their boundaries.

Out of the remaining 14 neighborhoods, Blackshear-Downtown's 4.3 percent decrease was among the areas losing children in the population at the slowest pace. The pace of decline in Bentwood-Nasworthy was more average for neighborhoods where the child population is waning.

Other facts contrasting Bentwood-Nasworthy from Blackshear-Downtown show just how much the more than 1,200 children in Bentwood-Nasworthy live in a different world from the 650 or so kids in Blackshear-Downtown. Virtually no children in the Bentwood-Nasworthy, for instance, live in households that relied on some type of public assistance such as Supplemental Security Income or food assistance in 2010.

Conversely, a little more than seven in 10 households in the Blackshear-Downtown neighborhood received such support. The Blackshear-Downtown neighborhood's 60.4 percent child poverty rate is 40 times greater than in the Bentwood-Nasworthy section with a 1.5 percent rate.

Poverty, and the injuring experiences that go with it, separate the worlds of San Angelo's children.

Safety and security is another difference that separates those worlds. An indicator of this is the number of police calls involving family violence or other child-related disturbances in various city neighborhoods.

Local police records show an annual rate of one child-related police call in the Blackshear-Downtown area for every 7.2 children residing there. The same rate for Bentwood-Nasworthy is one call for every 90.3 children. By this measure, kids in Blackshear-Downtown are about 13 times less safe and secure than children with the good fortune to live in Bentwood-Nasworthy.

Children in San Angelo neighborhoods also experience very different families and households. Almost 85 percent of the families with children in Bentwood-Nasworthy have two parents present. In Blackshear-Downtown, only 27 percent have both parents. Increasing numbers of grandparents are encountering situations necessitating the need for them to care for their grandchildren in most city neighborhoods.

In Bentwood-Nasworthy, however, only 8 percent of kids live with grandparents. In the Blackshear-Downtown area more than 42 percent of the children live with a grandparent, and about eight of every 10 of those grandparents have guardianship responsibilities.

Neighborhood schools reflect the separate worlds of San Angelo's kids, too. In the elementary schools that Blackshear-Downtown children attend, for example, 77 percent of the students are economically disadvantaged, with 48 percent officially classified as "at-risk" of failing to complete a high school education.

In the other world of schools serving Bentwood-Nasworthy, only 37 percent of elementary students are economically disadvantaged and 30 percent are seen as at-risk.

It is good news that San Angelo ISD started the long and hard work of melting away the gaps that separate the worlds of the city's children. Important school infrastructure investments in recent years have renewed and revitalized school facilities serving Downtown-Blackshear and other city neighborhoods that are less privileged than Bentwood-Nasworthy.

Beyond the bricks and mortar, moreover, the district has moved to make some of the needed investments in people to close the gaps between the separate worlds of San Angelo children.

One indicator of this is the low student-to-teacher ratio of 14.7 for the elementary schools serving the Downtown-Blackshear neighborhood compared to a higher 17.1 ratio for Bentwood-Nasworthy schools. In fact, it is true at this time that elementary schools serving the most vulnerable children across the city have the lower teacher-to-student ratios in the district.

These, and other significant efforts by the school district to address the gaps that separate the worlds of local children, are still not enough. A key, however, appears to have been discovered.

There is a famous saying that is attributed to an obscure author from ages ago named Stacia Tauscher. To paraphrase, the saying reminds us that while we worry about what a child will become tomorrow, we should not forget that the child is someone today.

San Angelo ISD has begun to focus on that "someone today," but the district cannot do it all alone. The rest of the community must get onboard to help.

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