

# PATHWAYS TO PROGRESSES: How are the children?

## In San Angelo, it depends a lot on where they live

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — We have been honored for more than two years to share Pathways to Progress each month with the San Angelo community. At least five articles in the series have focused directly on children. We explored the city's inordinately high levels of child poverty and child abuse, as well as the need for better access to health care for local children.

One previous column (October 2012) reviewed the original results of the Children of San Angelo Social Health Index produced by Community Development Initiatives at ASU. Now, with a new year and new opportunities dawning, we revisit the children's index with updated findings.

We created the Children of San Angelo Social Health Index to gauge the well-being of children in different San Angelo neighborhoods. The project compiles relevant data from the U.S. Census, the Texas Education Agency and the San Angelo Police Department into "report cards" for each of the city's 20 census tract neighborhoods.

The report cards are based on 21 indicators monitoring four facets of life that affect children. Six items focus on qualities of the children's neighborhoods and households. The remaining 15 indicators are divided equally (five items each) to measure income support levels, guardianship arrangements and qualities of elementary schools.

Neighborhoods are rated on a 100-point scale with higher scores indicating better conditions for children. The ratings tell us how each neighborhood is doing compared to the others.

One of the positive effects of San Angelo's recent economic growth is evident in the updated findings. The economic surge has reversed what had been a trend toward a reduced population of children in the city.

Specifically, the number of children fell by more than 1,000 between 2000 and 2010. This netted a 5 percent citywide decline in the child population and 14 of the 20 census tract neighborhoods felt the impact of having fewer children in the nest.

Things started changing in 2011 when census estimates indicated a citywide gain of more than 400 children over the 2010 census count. The majority of the neighborhoods shared in the gain with Southland leading the way (23 percent increase) followed by ASU-College Hills (22 percent gain) and Glenmore (19 percent

increase).

Recently released census estimates for 2012 show continued gains in the population of children. Recent school enrollment figures also reflect the new trend.

In the bright light of opportunity that a vibrant economy stimulates, it is important to keep clear eyes on serious disparities lingering under the surface. A striking view of some of our community's most serious gaps is provided by comparing the most and least privileged sections of the city. Children in these neighborhoods live worlds apart.

Census tract 17.08 is an area of the city that stretches from Bentwood Country Club to the south around Lake Nasworthy and then eastward to encompass the San Angelo Country Club area. This Bentwood-Nasworthy neighborhood scored highest on the Children of San Angelo Social Health Index and represents the city's most privileged area.

More than 1,300 kids (about 6 percent of San Angelo children) live in Bentwood-Nasworthy. Eighty-one percent of them live in households run by a married couple. Their households enjoy a median annual income more than \$94,000 — more than double the median for all households across the city.

Children encounter very few poor people in their neighborhood and rarely experience an instance of police investigating a crime. In the elementary school grades, kids in this area attend schools where about 37 percent of their student peers come from an economically disadvantaged household. About 32 percent of fellow students are classified as “at-risk” of becoming a school dropout.

At the other end of the scale, census tract 18 includes the city's Downtown district and the Blackshear area to the north. Some 535 kids live in Blackshear-Downtown, about 2.4 percent of all the city's children. Life for them is more difficult and more dangerous than in Bentwood-Nasworthy.

Difficulties in Blackshear-Downtown begin with the formation of children's families. Only 36 percent of children live in a household with a married couple compared to 81 percent in Bentwood-Nasworthy. In Blackshear-Downtown, children more often live with a single parent or with grandparents.

Income support in Blackshear-Downtown is much more limited than in Bentwood-Nasworthy. The median annual income of children's households in this part of town is \$23,750, about one-quarter of the amount for kids' households in Bentwood-Nasworthy and half the citywide level. The child poverty rate in Blackshear-Downtown is an incredible 54 percent.

The extreme poverty of the area is reflected in schools too. Elementary school-age kids in Blackshear-Downtown attend schools where about 77 percent of students are from economically disadvantaged households and half are classified as “at-risk” of dropping out.

Finally, danger hangs in the environment in ways not equaled in the experiences of Bentwood-Nasworthy children. Chances of being exposed to a crime in the neighborhood, for example, are about 14 times higher in Blackshear-Downtown. The

same is true about the chances of being exposed to incidents of family violence.

Some of the city's anchor institutions are well versed in these disparities and are taking needed action. The San Angelo Independent School District, for example, is maintaining a teacher-to-student ratio that is actually lower in the elementary schools serving Blackshear-Downtown (15.7) than those serving Bentwood-Nasworthy (17.2). The level of experience in the teaching workforce is equal in the elementary schools serving the most and least privileged sections of the city.

This kind of action, along with recent investments in the physical facilities of elementary schools all across the city, makes steps toward real future progress.

Other anchors also are taking such steps. The city's Community and Housing Support Program, for example, has created dramatic improvements in the quality of housing options in Blackshear-Downtown and other less privileged sections of the community. The police department, too, is making important steps to reduce the dangers of crime and violence through its neighborhood-centric community policing actions.

The community is further blessed with nonprofit centers dedicated to uplifting and opening doors for children. The Boys & Girls Club, for example, is there in the neighborhood with the children and families of Blackshear-Downtown every day. House of Faith and other faith-based initiatives are lifting spirits of children and bringing out their better character.

ICD Bridges, the Rape Crisis Center and Children's Advocacy Center work with residents to prevent abuse and violence, and to assuage its pains. The Concho Valley Alcohol and Drug Abuse Council with its CARES Coalition is pushing against substance abuse and working to prevent children from falling prey to its damage+.

It is good news that the city has these and other organizations to form a strong infrastructure to take positive steps toward progress for children. A new year has arrived bubbling with a lively economy and exciting opportunities. Let us connect the dots between our good fortune and closing the gaps between the separate worlds our children.

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