

# Not All Seniors Equal

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Millions of Americans remember spending "A Few Minutes with Andy Rooney" on the CBS program 60 Minutes. Until his death in 2011, Rooney amused audiences for more than 30 years with his grouchy satire about current events and trends in the country.

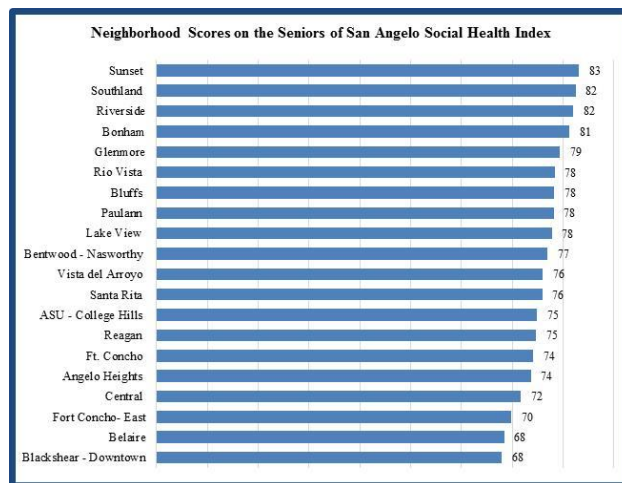
Rooney was a master at capsuling the absurd inconsistencies of our lives in blunt punchlines. One example, "It's paradoxical that the idea of living a long life appeals to everyone, but the idea of getting old doesn't appeal to anyone." We created the Seniors of San Angelo Social Health Index to shine a light on how this contradiction reflects the quality of life experienced by elders across San Angelo's neighborhoods.

The Seniors Index includes 15 quality of life indicators based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2013 American Community Survey. The index links the indicators to neighborhood and housing qualities, income and education levels, and different types of social isolation experienced by seniors.

Based on the data, the best San Angelo neighborhood for seniors is Sunset. This is the third straight year for Sunset to top our rating of areas for seniors to live. The area fans out from Sunset Mall northward to the Red Arroyo and to College Hills on the west. Its score for this year's Seniors of San Angelo Social Health Index is 83.

We based the score on a 0-100-point scale that compares the 20 census tract neighborhoods of the city on the project's quality of life indicators. Positive outcomes on the indicators lead to higher scores.

## Neighborhood Scores on the Seniors of San Angelo



Following closely behind Sunset's high score are the Riverside area in north San Angelo and the Southland neighborhood (score = 82 for both areas). The Blackshear and Downtown areas and the Belaire neighborhood are at the bottom with scores of 68 on the 100-point scale.

More than 18,000 seniors age 60 and over lived in about 12,500 San Angelo households in 2013 according to Census Bureau data. They comprised 19 percent of the population, while more than one-third (35%) of households in the city had at least one senior occupant.

Over 860 seniors lived in Sunset during 2013. Only half as many made their homes in the Blackshear and Downtown areas. Nevertheless, these neighborhoods highlight the contrasting quality of life for seniors like day and night.

September 13 was National Grandparents Day. Each year, we designate the first Sunday after Labor Day to recognize the growing number of American grandparents taking roles in raising the children of their children.

In the September 19 edition of the Standard Times, reporter Michelle Gaitan contributed a touching front-page human-interest story to honor them. The article did not compare various parts of the city, but it put a finger on a topic that depicts the real-life differences between the worlds of seniors in Sunset and Blackshear-Downtown.

Gaytan's article reported the 7.2 million American grandparents the Census Bureau indicates were living in the same household with grandchildren in 2013. Further, the Bureau estimates that 2.6 million of those (36%) had responsibility for meeting the basic needs of raising the children.

The same set of Census numbers show proportionately higher levels of grandparent responsibility for children in San Angelo. The 2013 data identified 2,667 San Angelo grandparents living with grandchildren while indicating that 49 percent of them (1,313) had responsibility for raising the children.

Seniors in the Sunset area, however, share very little of this experience with grandparents in other parts of the city. The data shows only 41 Sunset area residents over the age of 60 who lived in a household with grandchildren in 2013. None of them indicated child-raising responsibility.

The experience is dramatically different in the Blackshear and Downtown areas where the Census registered 34 residents age 60 and over living with grandchildren. In this case, though, more than half (19 or 55.9%) had responsibility for the children. More childcare responsibilities fall to the seniors in these parts of town. Ironically, however, these seniors have much less income and social support capacity to shoulder the responsibilities.

For instance, the poverty rate for seniors in Blackshear and Downtown is six percentage points higher than it is for elders in Sunset. Their average retirement income (including social security) is less than half the average in Sunset. Blackshear and Downtown area seniors are only about one-third as likely to have a high school education or higher as those residing in Sunset. They are only about one-fourth as likely to be engaged in the labor force.

On the social support side of the coin, seniors in Blackshear and Downtown are more than twice as likely as elder residents in Sunset to be living alone or in a group quarters facility.

More than 10 percent of Blackshear and Downtown seniors lack access to a vehicle, and nearly seven percent do not speak English well. They are twice as likely to be unmarried compared to seniors in Sunset, and their disability rate is about nine percent higher.

The idea of aging is paradoxical, as Andy Rooney decried. It is also paradoxical, and a social injustice in our community, that responsibilities like child raising increasingly go to seniors. Too often, the responsibilities fall to elders who are themselves vulnerable and frail.

Morrie Schwartz was the Brandeis University sociology professor featured in Mitch Albom's moving story about spending Tuesdays with Morrie in the weeks and months of terminal illness leading to Schwartz's death in 1995. The experience inspired Albom to "Embrace aging." Schwartz left us with a powerful thought from his painful days at the end of his life, "Dying is only one thing to be sad over... Living unhappily is something else."