

Children/Elders Areas See Less Crime

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Emile Durkheim was a Frenchman who played a key role in establishing the field of sociology during the late 1800s. He wrote in his 1897 study of suicide, "Man cannot become attached to higher aims and submit to a rule if he sees nothing above him to which he belongs." He continued, "To free him from all social pressure is to abandon him to himself and demoralize him."

This is certainly a melancholy point to make for the holiday season. However, it informs a curious community pattern we recently observed in doing annual updates for the statistical index projects on children and seniors at Community Development Initiatives.

The pattern that caught our attention is the relationship between crime rates and age dependency levels in neighborhoods across the city. In general, data shows higher crime rates in "low dependency" neighborhoods than "high dependency" areas. The pattern caused us to recall Durkheim's interest in conditions that weaken social ties between the individual and community; what Durkheim called "anomie."

Age dependency is a concept used by demographers to focus on the relationship between working aged residents and other population segments likely to be dependents. Children, for instance, generally depended upon adults for a whole range of things including leadership, advocacy, guidance, education, and of course, material needs such food, shelter, and money.

Seniors are another group likely to be dependent, especially for caretaking and support near the end of life. Research showing a growing "sandwich generation" under strain to balance responsibilities to children and elder parents typify the age dependency idea.

To estimate it, demographers begin by calculating the number of children under age 18 to adults in the working ages 18-64. The same calculation is made between the number of seniors (ages 65 and over) and working aged adults. Then, the child dependency ratio is added to elder dependency ratio to yield the age dependency ratio.

To illustrate, the Census Bureau reports an average of 22,988 children lived in San Angelo between 2011 and 2015. Working aged residents averaged 61,008 during the same time. These numbers compute to a child dependency ratio of 37.7 children per 100 people of working age.

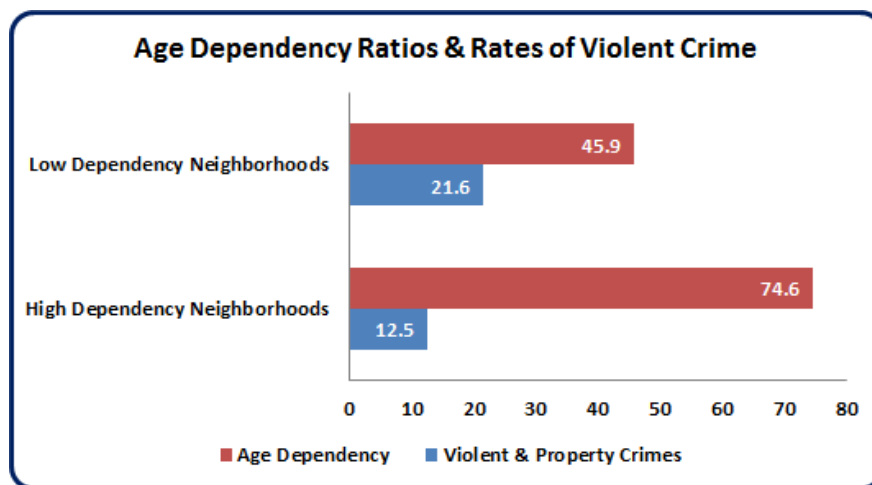
Similarly, seniors comprised 13,599 residents of the city between 2011 and 2015. This number produces an elder dependency ratio of 22.3 per 100 working aged people in the population. The combined results for children and elders lead to an age dependency ratio of 60 per 100 San Angelo residents of working age.

By examining the 2011-2015 Census data for San Angelo neighborhoods, we noticed that six census tracts have both child and elder dependency levels that are lower than the city's 37.7 and 22.3 ratios for children and seniors respectively. These "low dependency" neighborhoods include ASU - College Hills, the Blackshear and Downtown area, the Bluffs, the Central High School neighborhood, Rio Vista, and Santa Rita.

At the same time, we found that nine city sections have higher child and elder dependency than

the respective ratios for San Angelo as a whole. The “high dependency” parts of town include Angelo Heights, the Bentwood and Nasworthy area, East San Angelo, Fort Concho, Glenmore, Reagan, Riverside, Sunset, and Vista del Arroyo.

Compared to the overall age dependency of 60, the high dependency neighborhoods have a level of 74.6 and the low dependency sections have a 45.9 ratio. What really intrigued us, however, is the additional observation that children and seniors living in low dependency areas of town have a notably higher level of exposure to crime.



We computed crime exposure levels in low and high dependency neighborhoods based on local Uniform Crime Index data. Used to track crime over time, the index includes seven particular offenses reported by police departments. Three property crimes included are burglary, larceny, and auto theft. The other four are violent crimes including murder, rape, robbery, and assault.

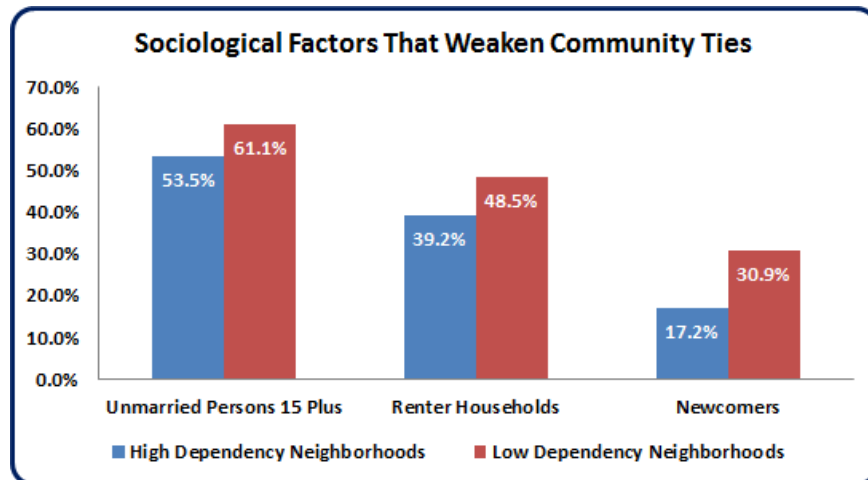
The San Angelo Police Department recorded 1,969 incidents of these crimes in low dependency neighborhoods during 2016, while incidents in high dependency neighborhoods reached a higher numbered of 2,176. Yet, the odds are significantly higher that a child or elderly person living in low dependency areas will be exposed to a criminal event in their neighborhood, despite the fact that a larger number of index crimes occur in the high dependency tracts.

The higher exposure odds in low dependency areas is revealed by comparing the relationship between criminal incidents and the age dependent populations in the neighborhoods. This relationship is measured simply by dividing the number of incidents by the dependent population size.

In the case of the city’s low dependency areas, for instance, 1,969 crimes is divided by 9,105 child and elderly residents to yield an exposure level of 21.6 crimes per 100 age dependent residents. Likewise, 2,176 incidents that took place in high dependency neighborhoods is divided by 17,477 residents resulting in an exposure level of 12.5 per 100.

Children and seniors living in low dependency areas of the city face nearly two-to-one odds of being exposed to crime compared to their peers in more age dependent neighborhoods. Their increased exposure raises chances of falling victim to crime. It also means they are more likely to simply hear about a crime in the neighborhood, or to know someone who was recently victimized.

An examination of factors correlated to these differences in exposure to crime revealed even more interesting results. Our investigation found three correlates that directly call Durkheim's anomie theory back to mind because they loosen social bonds that function for many people as anchors into neighborhoods and communities.



One of these is marital status. Marriage serves as a powerful social tie in the lives of many individuals, and the prevalence of this bond varies according to age dependency levels of local neighborhoods. In San Angelo, about 61.1% of residents in low dependency areas are unmarried. This compares to 53.5% in higher dependency parts of the city.

A second factor is home ownership status, another powerful tie to neighborhood and community. In the high dependency areas of San Angelo, only 39.2% of households are not occupied by home owners, but renters instead. In the low dependency neighborhoods, by contrast, 48.5% of households are renter occupied.

Finally, 30.9% of the residents in low age dependency neighborhoods are newcomers who moved in within the past year. This number drops to only 17.2% in higher dependency areas. Duration of residence is a third factor that relaxes social bonds since it takes at least a minimum time for people to become familiar and develop a sense of identity or stake in a neighborhood or community.

In 1987, eighty years after Durkheim's famous study of suicide in Europe, well-known American sociologist Rodney Stark abstracted 30 research propositions from studies over the years about the features of neighborhoods in American cities that have persistently high crime rates. The factors correlated with exposure to crime in San Angelo's low versus high age dependency neighborhoods are consistent.

Most important, however, is the lesson that Stark learned. Taking note of the fact that "kinds of people" explanations dominate in the research, Stark learned that "kinds of places" explanations are also needed to account for persistent neighborhood concentrations of crime and deviance.

Public debate about solutions on crime and related social problems often pits advocates of punishing or reforming "bad people" against citizens seeking change to "bad places" that breed problems. Now, 120 years after Durkheim's landmark study, we too can see that serious solutions to social problems challenging children, elders, and community itself must focus on

both the character of the people and the quality of the places among us.