

# **Taking a Balanced Approach**

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Signs of San Angelo's recovery from the 2008 recession are evident in the latest version of ASU's San Angelo Social Health Index. Nevertheless, the same study also reveals some challenging work to improve the community that demands attention for a dawning New Year.

A particular strength of the San Angelo Social Health Index is that it goes beyond a single point-in-time snapshot of the community to review progress over time. The Social Health Index tracks 21 indicators going back to the year 2000 up through 2011 that is the last year of available data on all 21 indicators.

We scored each year's numbers on a 100-point scale. We based half of the score on how a year compares to other years. The other half compares local results to statewide outcomes. Higher scores indicate that the community is making progress on significant social problems while improving its quality of life in comparison to the rest of Texas.

The overall average score on the 21 indicators for 2011 is 50 on the 100-point scale. This is up from a score of 44 for 2010 and the current score is the community's highest since it reached 56 in 2008 as the economy went into a tailspin during the closing months that year.

Recent reports from the Chamber of Commerce suggest a good economic recovery continued through the just completed 2012 year, and some local leaders are imagining a feverish expansion for this year due to current developments in the energy sector.

Of course, the actual record of local economic development for 2013 remains to be determined. Nonetheless, there are some noteworthy features about recent progress of the community.

Many people believe that the economy and the whole of the community rise and fall in sync with one another. In reality, however, an automatic, "as the economy goes so goes the community," type of result does not work out exactly.

In fact, the relationship between seven local economic indicators in the San Angelo Social Health Index and another seven factors that track the quality of life among children and elders shows only a modest statistical correlation over the 11 years between 2001 and 2011.

Examination of short-term, year-to-year changes reveals that the ups-and-downs of the economic cycle often move in the opposite direction from the quality of life for children and elders.

These results reflect Robert F. Kennedy's 1968 musing that the economy seemingly "measures everything ... except that which makes life worthwhile."

The San Angelo Social Health Index casts light on the broader development of the community by reaching beyond the economy per se. Indeed, the summary table below is enough to provide perspective on local challenges for future years.

## San Angelo Social Health Indicators

Summary: The San Angelo Social Health Indicators	Current Data more Negative than the State	Data is Persistently more Negative than the State*	Recent Data shows a Current Negative Trend for 3 years or more
<b>Seven San Angelo Children &amp; Elders Indicators</b>			
Infant deaths per 1,000 live births		X	
Percent of students qualified for free or reduced school meals	X		X
Confirmed victims of child abuse per 1,000 children	X	X	
Percent of students graduating, earning GED, or continuing in high school	X	X	
Percent of elders below the poverty level			
Validated cases of abuse per 1,000 elder & disabled persons	X	X	
Suicides per 100,000 persons	X	X	
<b>Seven San Angelo Households Indicators</b>			
Incidents of family violence per 100,000 persons	X	X	
College tuition & fees as a percent of the average wage per job	X	X	X
Divorces per 1,000 persons	X	X	
Month of July SNAP receipts as a percent of the population		X	
Percent of households with costs equal to 30% or more of income			
Ratio of median family income to income required for median mortgage			
SAPD reported index crimes per 100,000 persons	X	X	
<b>Seven San Angelo Economic Indicators</b>			
Percent of persons under age 65 without health insurance	X		
Percent of labor force unemployed			
Year-over-year increase in the number of employed persons	X	X	
Percent of civilian labor force with post high-school education	X	X	
Year-over-year percentage increase in the average wage per job			
Housing permits per 100,000 persons	X	X	X
Real per capita gross domestic product	X	X	
<b>Twenty-One San Angelo Social Health Indicators</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>3</b>

\*This designation means that local data is more negative than statewide outcomes for the majority of years between 2000 and 2011.

This summary divides the 21 indicators in the Social Health Index into three aspects of local community life. There are seven indicators on children and elders, another seven involving local households, and a final group on the economy.

The “X” marks in the table denote indicators that fit the criteria described at the top of the respective columns and the number of “X” marks for each column appears in the bottom row. Thus, the summary table pinpoints 14 indicators with current outcomes that are more negative than statewide results on the same factors. Fourteen indicators also have results that are more negative than statewide outcomes for majority of the years (“persistently more negative”) between 2000 and 2011.

Of these, twelve indicators are both more negative and persistently more negative in comparison to the state. It is not a good thing that, year-after-year, the local community’s results on more than half (57%) of the items in the San Angelo Social Health Index are more negative than the overall state. By working together, the city’s key institutions, organizations, agencies, households, families, and citizens can and should improve that record. That is one challenge for this year and beyond.

Better news from the summary is that only three of the 21 indicators show a current negative trend for the three most recent years or more. However, these deserve attention precisely because they are currently trending in negative directions for the community.

One of these is the number of housing permits issued per 100,000 persons residing in the community. There were 467 permits per 100,000 residents in 2009. This number tumbled to 128 per 100,000 in 2011. It is likely that the 2012 release of data on housing permits will show that continued recovery from the recession has already reversed this negative three-year trend.

At a deeper level, however, local housing permits have lagged behind the state by an average of 404 permits per 100,000 residents over the years since 2000. This fact reflects the challenging long-range pattern of slower population growth, as well as sluggish economic expansion, in the local community.

The rising cost of college as it relates to local wage levels is another indicator plotting a strong negative trend within the community. It is true that college tuition and fees are taking a larger bite out of household and family paychecks all over the nation. In the local community, however, that bite for attending ASU has more than doubled itself from 4.9 percent of the average wage per job in 2000 to 10.2 percent in 2011. That is why we delved into the details of this on-coming community development challenge in the September of 2012 edition of Pathways.

We noted in the column that the year-after-year escalator of college cost is raising the question of what a college education is worth to students and their families. We concluded, then and now, that the way the state and local community addresses this challenge would determine how widely the college door is kept open to aid the personal aspirations of individuals and how effectively the university will perform its civic, social, and economic functions.

The third negative trending indicator spotlights an education challenge focused at the primary and secondary public-school levels. The percent of San Angelo ISD students in 2011 who qualified free or reduced school meals (so-called “economically disadvantaged students”) stood at 62 percent, a number that has increased over each of the last four years and has climbed continuously from 48 percent in the year 2000.

Although the current local percentage is larger than the statewide 59 percent, the state has nevertheless seen a similar explosion of economically disadvantaged students since the year 2000. Both the local and statewide trends reflect a benign neglect of child poverty in Texas that we detailed in the April of 2012 Pathways.

That column recognized that San Angelo has many talented citizens and strong organizations that care deeply about children in poverty and work tirelessly to help. Ironically, they toil in a context of budget cutting and austerity in the state’s safety net for families designed to keep tax burdens low and maximize work incentives within poverty households. Laudable as these objectives are, they do not prevent children from falling through the cracks and they leave the local community to pay severe long-term social costs that only manifest in future generations.

Signs of San Angelo’s recovery from the 2008 economic recession deserve celebration this New Year. The challenging work that remains to improve the community deserves resolve.