

# Isolation among the Elderly

*Laurence F. Jones and Kenneth L. Stewart*

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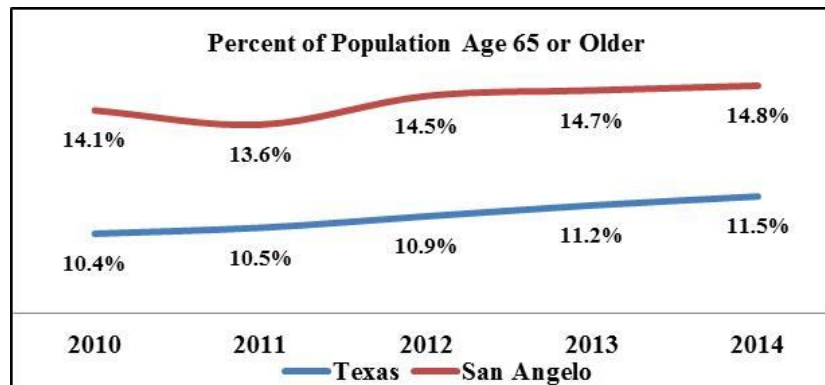
Agnes Gonxha, better known for winning the Nobel Peace Prize as Mother Teresa, believed, “Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.” Most of us want to live longer so that we can enjoy some golden years. Yet, as we age, the possibility of living alone mounts. Social contacts can diminish with retirement, children moving on, spouses and friends passing, and possibly a lack of mobility. The potential for loneliness and social isolation grows, especially for those living alone.

Studies detect numerous problems associated with social isolation. Becky Squires, former Chief writer for AARP, wrote that social isolation among seniors is “... more than ‘just’ a feeling and can be as bad for your health as smoking.” Indeed, health studies report that older, isolated people have higher rates of high blood pressure, heart disease, and other chronic conditions.

The Canadian National Seniors Council reported on the social isolation of seniors in 2014. They observe that social isolation contributes to depression or social anxiety leading to “atrophy of social skills, partly because of disuse, and partly because of the way that psychological symptoms can disrupt social behavior.” At the community level, social isolation of seniors diminishes social cohesion, increases health and welfare costs, and denies the rich experiences that older adults bring to families and neighborhoods.

Mindful of these observations, we looked at U.S. Census data on San Angelo’s 65 or older population to get a sense of the numbers at risk of experiencing social isolation. In 2014, 14,383 people residing in San Angelo were 65 or older. This amounts to 14.8 percent of the city’s population and represents a nine percent gain in the number of seniors since 2010.

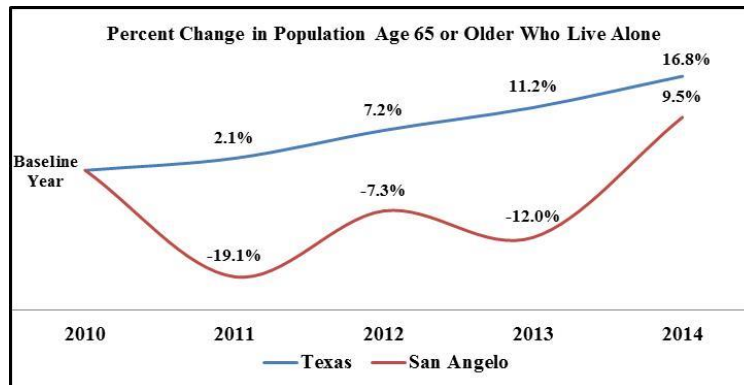
**Percent of Population Age 65 or Older**



In comparison, 3.1 million Texans or 11.5 percent of the state’s population was 65 or older in 2014, an increase of 15.7 percent from the beginning of the decade. The state’s elderly population is increasing more rapidly, but San Angelo has a higher percentage of seniors among its citizens. The numbers support the state demographer’s predictions that the population of elders will continue to grow in San Angelo and across Texas in the coming years. Few communities are ready for the ramifications.

In San Angelo, 8,818 seniors were among the city's 36,051 householders in 2014. Most important for assessing the risk of social isolation is the fact that more than half (4,799) of the senior householders in the city lived alone. This represents an increase of 9.5 percent over the past five years. In comparison, the 743,872 senior Texans who lived alone in 2014 signaled a 16.8 percent surge over 2010.

### Percent Change in Population Age 65+ Who Live Alone



A look at senior householders who live alone in San Angelo neighborhoods reveals an informative pattern. Neighborhoods with the lowest percentages of solitary senior householders are geographically on the perimeter of the city. Nine of the 20 census tract areas are on the city's outer edges including Riverside Lake View and Paulann on the north; Belaire and Glenmore on the east; Bentwood - Nasworthy (including the San Angelo Country Club area) on the south, and the Bluffs, Bonham and Southland to the west.

These areas are home to about 45 percent of senior householders in the city and 36 percent of them live alone. The proportions range from 21.9 percent in Riverside to 57.2 percent in the Bonham neighborhood. The average percent of seniors living alone in the nine tracts on the periphery of the city is 35.9.

Eleven neighborhoods in the city center and stretching southwesterly to the loop generally have higher percentages of elders living alone. The Downtown area forms the center with seven bordering residential sections including Blackshear, Reagan, East San Angelo, Fort Concho, Santa Rita, Central and Angelo Heights. Beyond Fort Concho and Santa Rita extending to the loop are Rio Vista, ASU-College Hills, Sunset and Vista Del Arroyo.

In contrast to the circling outer areas, these neighborhoods have 55 percent of all senior householders, including 64 percent of those who live alone. At the high end of the range is Fort Concho where 70.1 percent of senior householders live by themselves. The Reagan section is lowest among the 11 areas with 38.2 percent.

While living alone does not necessarily mean seniors are socially isolated, it is a leading risk factor. Poverty, disabilities, low access to transportation, and inability to speak English well are examples other risk conditions, and the proportion of elders living under these circumstances range from three to seven percent according to the most recent census estimates. The data highlight the importance of taking meaningful steps to address the potentials and effects of social isolation within the senior population.

Organizations like Adult Enrichment Center, Concho Valley Senior Companion Program, Retired Senior Volunteer Program, and Meals for the Elderly are jewels in our community. So too are the countless churches and other faith-focused groups working to bring seniors together, connect them to younger generations, and engage them in the community at large. Together, these important cornerstones do precious work to improve the quality of life of San Angelo's elder citizens by serving their needs across the spectrum from the physical to the spiritual.

However, the most important contribution of these organizations to countering the risks of social isolation likely reaches beyond the food delivered, the volunteer actions organized, or the sermons conveyed. Carl Jung, the early 20th century Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist, gave an insight.

Jung founded an approach to psychotherapy called analytical psychology, which defines the well-developed self as the "regulating center of the psyche." With this perspective, Jung famously said, "Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate the things that seem important to one's self, or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible."

Citizens should support and claim pride in the city's religious and service organizations that support the elderly. They do much more than serve their needs and help raise the quality of life. They give countless seniors places and ways to communicate what is important. This "hidden thing" they do helps to counter the risks of loneliness and isolation.

Indeed, each of us can do more to enrich the surrounding communities and ourselves by giving seniors, and other overlooked or forgotten people we encounter, a place and a way to communicate what is important!