

Celebrate the Good, Address the Bad

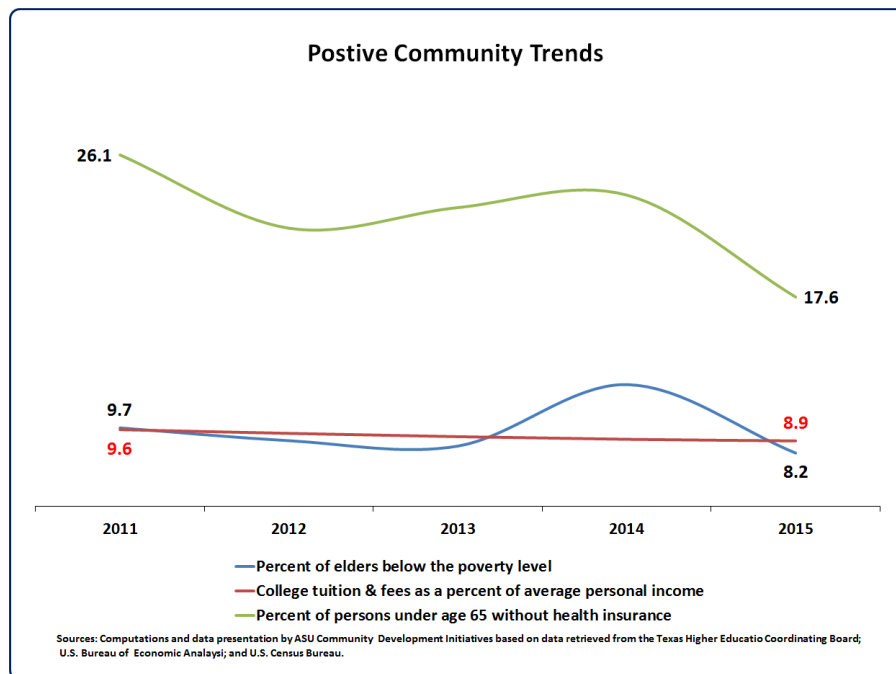
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A famed American journalist, author, and activist lamented the prevalence of bad news in the early year years of this new century. Wistfully, Hunter S. Thompson wrote, “Good news is rare these days, and every glittering ounce of it should be cherished and hoarded and worshipped and fondled like a priceless diamond.” The latest annual update of the San Angelo Social Health Index brings some good news.

Community Development Initiatives at the ASU Center for Community Wellness, Engagement, and Development originally produced the San Angelo Social Health Index in 2008. Going beyond a single point-in-time snapshot to review progress in the community is its particular strength. The index is a collection of 21 statistical indicators measuring and time-tracking key social problems facing children and elders, households, and the economy in San Angelo.

Because of the opportunities it opens, the declining percentage of people’s income taken by college tuition and fees is one of the best news trends in the local community. ASU charged \$3,932 for a full-time Texas resident student in the fall of 2015. This translates to 8.9 percent of the average personal income in the San Angelo Metropolitan Area that year.



Although ASU’s tuition increased by seven percent, the ratio of college charges fell between 2011 and 2015 due to the growth of average personal income by 15 percent from \$38,303 to \$44,072. The rising tide of the local economy over the recent five years eased the financial burden of attending college for local residents. It reversed the aggressive escalation of that burden that had prevailed for more than 10 years prior to 2011.

There was also good news for local children and working-age adults. Health insurance

coverage substantially increased within the population under age 65. In 2011, 26.1 percent of children and adults under age 65 were uninsured. This declined to 17.6 percent by 2015.

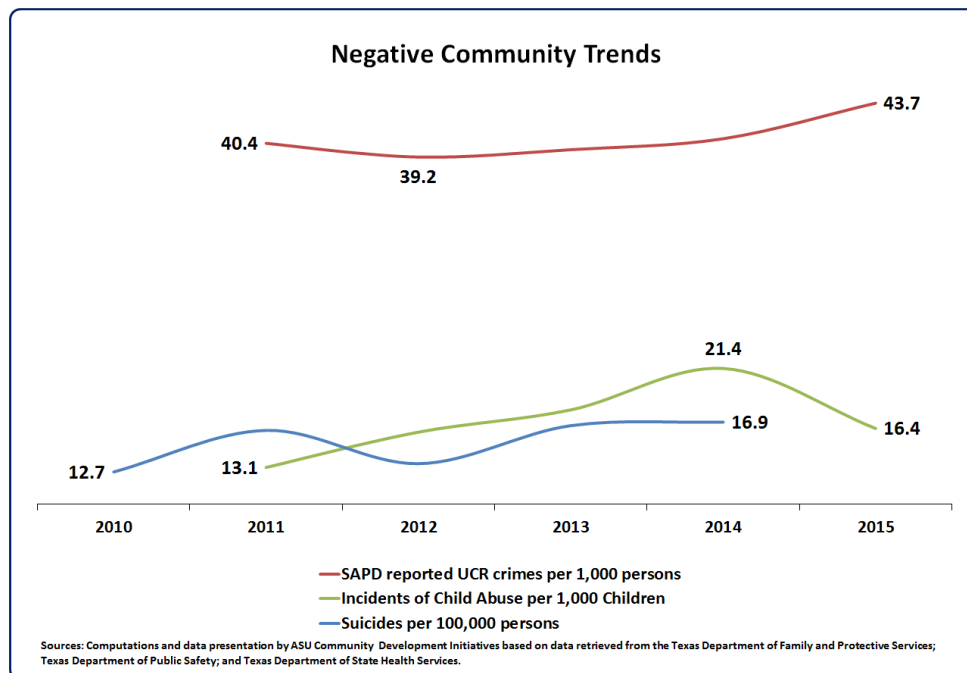
The Affordable Care Act is widely criticized for restricted options, high deductibles and other shortcomings of coverage offerings. Nonetheless, good people in the trenches at Esperanza Clinics, Shannon and Community Medical Centers, and in numerous faith-based and non-profit services across the community connected thousands of San Angelo children and adults to coverage over the years since 2011.

Again, this overturned a long-term trend toward growing numbers of medically uninsured over years prior to 2011. Now, it behooves local leaders to reassert the goal of universal coverage to a new regime of federal and state lawmakers seeking to change health policy in who knows what direction. Still, we know that 17.6 percent or nearly 17,000 San Angelo children and adults remain uninsured after years of progress. This is still too many!

San Angelo seniors also enjoyed progress. The number of seniors in the community increased from 14,804 in 2011 to 16,628 in 2015. Yet, the poverty rate for residents age 65 and over fell from 9.7 to 8.2 percent. For sure, severe disparities separate the quality of life among elders across different neighborhoods in the community. Still, taken together, seniors have the lowest rate of poverty for any age group. It got better in recent years.

Thinking good news is too rare these days, like Hunter Thompson, we cherish these facts about the community's progress like priceless diamonds. We wish it were all good news. The bad news is also important, however. It is about a community becoming more violent.

To say to people familiar with crime statistics that the crime rate is falling is a cliché. In fact, as measured by the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Program, the overall national rate has declined annually since 1991.



San Angelo followed the long-term trend until 2012 when it bottomed out at 39.2 crime

incidents per 1,000 residents of the city. That number was well above state and national levels at the time, but the local rate moved upward for the following three years. It peaked at 43.7 incidents per 1,000 residents in 2015. The truth is that crime in San Angelo does not compare favorably to state and national rates, and it is going up, at least in the short-term.

A worse trend, one that contradicts the city's self-image as a family-friendly community, is child abuse. The year 2004 was the last time Tom Green County had a lower rate of abuse than the state's overall level. In 2011, the rate was 13.1 per 1,000 children living in the county. That number was 32 percent higher than the state's rate of 9.9 per 1,000.

By 2014, child abuse in the local community shot up to its highest level of the century at 21.4 per 1,000 kids. Although some relief followed, the 2015 rate of 16.4 per 1,000 was still nearly 80 percent higher than statewide. San Angelo and Tom Green County may be a wonderfully safe and wholesome place for most families to raise their children. For many hundreds of kids, however, it is horrifying, insecure, and threatening.

Suicide is another form of violence reaching an alarmingly high level. The latest available vital statistics for the local community are for 2014. The 19 suicides in Tom Green County that year translate to a rate of 16.9 suicides per 100,000 residents. The rate had been only 12.7 five years earlier in 2010.

Nevertheless, annual rates of suicide in Tom Green County have been higher than statewide numbers in every year this century. The widest gap was in 2009 when the county's rate was 19.9 per 100,000 compared to 11.3 for the state. The local community averaged 3.7 suicides per 100,000 persons more than the state over the first 15 years of this century.

A benefit in the news about violence is that key organizations are stepping up to take action. One example is Tom Green County Children's Advocacy Center where leaders are working to engender closer working relations with Child Protective Services, law enforcement, courts, and numerous other agencies to better address child abuse, and importantly, to also build innovative practices helping families prevent potentially abusive situations in their midst.

The powerful story by Becca Nelson Sankey entitled "Heartbreak and Healing" in last week's Standard Times recounts another inspiring example. At West Texas Counseling Center, counselors are joining with survivors of suicide and strengthening working relationships with crisis intervention actors across the community to offer services that prevent this violence from ripping through families and loved ones.

Many other organizations including the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Council of the Concho Valley, Concho Valley MHMR Services, Open Arms Rape Crisis Center, and the city's new Youth Advocacy Program are working promising strategies to help prevent various forms of violence in the community.

Hopefully, with these gifts to the community, we will all begin celebrating priceless diamonds of progress on this grim side of the city when the next New Year rolls around.

Jessica Barker, student intern at ASU's Community Development Initiatives, contributed to this article.