

# Community Woes Linger

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The Standard Times published the first Pathways to Progress Viewpoints column four years ago. We believed the articles would stimulate thought and discussion about the social problems facing our city and other communities throughout the Concho Valley by following a general format to identify a critical problem, provide some basic facts, and suggest options, or pathways, to move toward progress.

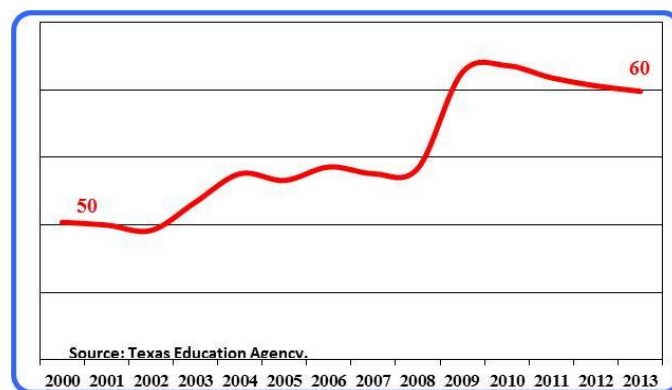
Some citizens think the issues we deal with in Pathways are permanent. This view holds that certain social problems are unsolvable. Consequently, it is taken-for-granted that issues like many of the ones in Pathways are “normal” problems that communities simply have to live with.

In the first Pathways for September of 2011, we highlighted a plan to focus the series on problems involving vulnerable community members most at risk of falling through the cracks and exclusion from the benefits most of us enjoy. To illustrate such a vulnerable group, we cited the fact that, back then, 61 percent of San Angelo's public school children were eligible for reduced or free school meals. We estimated that there were at least 10,000 or more vulnerable children in the community needing help with food and nutrition.

We applauded the local Hunger Initiative Kids Eat Free program in that first article. We praised the program for bringing a coalition of many community organizations together to provide 26,000 free meals to children and their caregivers during the summer of 2011. Most of all, however, we celebrated the vision of the local and statewide Hunger Initiative.

Their vision embraces the need to move past stopgap charity fixes and temporary aid to change the local community and wider society so that every person has access to three healthy meals a day, every day. Hunger, after all, is not a problem of food scarcity. It is a problem of food insecurity, which tolerates the existence of vulnerable community members with no access to the abundance of food.

## Percentage of Children Eligible for Reduced or Free Lunch



Still, the needle has not moved. The percent of children who are eligible for reduced or free school meals remains at 60 percent. More troubling is the fact that this percentage climbed from

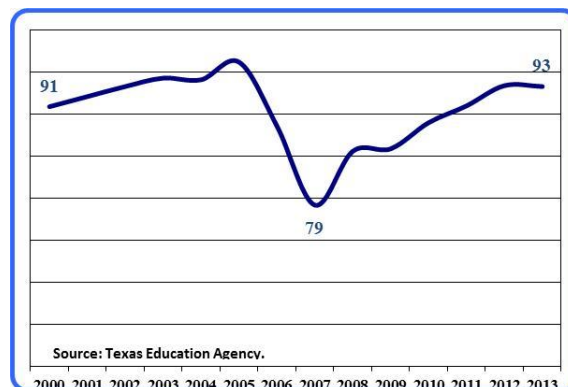
50 percent since the year 2000, and the state as a whole is following a similar trajectory. Is this really a problem San Angelo and Texas should take-for-granted as unsolvable, assuming it is a normal condition that families, children, and communities must learn to live with?

Pathways revisited the vulnerabilities of children in several additional articles since that first one in 2011. Immigrants, minorities, seniors, women, and the medically uninsured are among other vulnerable groups that have appeared. We have discussed poverty, housing, health, employment, inequality, and violence issues.

There are reasons to prize progress made in parts of the local community. For example, the infant death rate fell by 52 percent from 11 per 1,000 live births in 2000 to five per 1,000 in the most recent available data for 2012. As noted in Pathways last month, health care in San Angelo is delivering in important ways compared to other places in Texas.

Other essential institutions of the local community are also delivering in key ways. San Angelo ISD, for instance, increased the high school completion rate by 14 points from its low of 79 percent for the class of 2007 to 93 percent for the class of 2014. The crime rate in 2013 was 44 percent lower than its peak in 2003, and income per person in San Angelo grew by 72 percent from 2000 to 2013.

### High School Completion Rate



Noteworthy achievements, but frankly, these are performance indicators that should set the norm for our community institutions. On the other hand, it is even more shameful that the community's economic achievements allow six of ten children to experience insecure access to food.

Similarly, local levels of domestic violence are astounding despite the community's success at reducing crime. Four-hundred-eighty-three is the number of confirmed victims of child abuse in Tom Green County reported by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services for 2013.

This computes to a child abuse rate of 18 victims per 1,000 children and compares to a statewide rate of nine per 1,000 children. Our local rate was 114 percent higher than in the year 2000. The statewide increase was 12 percent over the same period.

Criminal family violence incidents are another manifestation of the stunning local level of domestic violence. Most family violence incidents encountered by police in Texas are assaults

(97% of more than 185,000 incidents in 2013) between family members. Sex offenses between family members are the next most frequent type (2.4% in 2013).

The San Angelo Police Department responded to 1,348 family violence incidents in 2013. This translates to a rate of 1,395 incidents per 100,000 people in the city and compares to a statewide rate of 701 incidents per 100,000 Texans. Sadly, since the year 2000, the local level of family violence has increased by 54 percent while the statewide number declined by 17 percent.

At ASU Community Development Initiatives, we believe that vigorous public discussion of community problems is an important key to finding pathways for progress. The Standard Times graciously gives us opportunities to probe some the community's most difficult and complicated social problems.

We, in turn, are immensely grateful to the many individuals who read Pathways and take away small morsels they find useful to work with others toward solutions and betterment in the community. We profoundly admire and appreciate your countless contributions.

At same time, it amazes us that some citizens accept issues like violence, degradation, and tragic poverty with cynical or fatalistic assumptions leading them to relegate these and other serious social problems to a dustbin of nuisances in their lives. This, in itself, is tragic.

Every sustainable community needs to be nimble at making change to patch the cracks in its institutions that the most vulnerable members fall through. The support of citizens, and optimally, some of every person's talent, is crucial for making change.

We look forward in Pathways to Progress to modest contributions by learning and sharing to help members of the community team up for institutionalizing change. We begin by remembering that to elevate the least among us goes to benefit every one of us.

As Michael Harrington, the noted analyst of poverty and social problems, said, "One cannot raise the bottom of a society without benefiting everyone above."