

# **Index Raises Red Flags**

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Dr. Nancy Lee is Director of the Office on Women's Health at the US Department of Health and Human Services. She is a 1970s graduate of Houston's Baylor College of Medicine.

Dr. Lee recently shared an experience from her days in medical school as a means of observing Sexual Assault Awareness Month during April. She and other female classmates in med-school volunteered to support sexual assault survivors who came into the emergency room as part of their commitment to helping other women.

"Several times a month," she said, "I left my house in the middle of the night to hold a woman's hand as she recounted the details of one of the worst experiences of her life. Though I had never been assaulted myself, I could feel her terror and pain. Walking back into my dark apartment ... I felt real fear. Would it happen to me?"

Dr. Lee calls the trauma of sexual violence a "crime against women's health" because it generates many long-lasting health effects. The immediate trauma can involve physical injury to victims, terrible anxiety and stress, unwanted pregnancy, sexual transmission of infections, and dreadfully strained relationships. Years afterward, struggles with hypertension, obesity, migraines, heart disease, chronic pelvic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, and substance abuse are a few of the health problems that may follow the trauma.

The far-reaching public health impact of this "crime against women's health" is good reason to track the extent of this abuse among West Texas women. This year's update of the ASU Women's Health Index (WHI) includes new elements to focus on the issue. Community Development Initiatives at ASU annually produces the WHI as a partnership venture with the San Angelo office of the Laura W. Bush Institute for Women's Health.

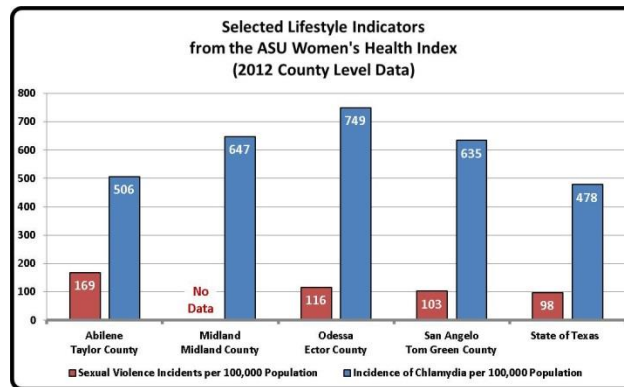
WHI uses more than 20 statistical indicators to compare women's health conditions in four West Texas cities as well as statewide. The four cities are Abilene, Midland, Odessa, and San Angelo. The 2014 update is the third edition of the WHI.

A group of "lifestyle" indicators constitutes the new elements to the WHI this year. The first of the group is a direct measure of sexual violence in Texas and the West Texas cities. We based the WHI sexual violence measurement on the combined number of rape and sexual assault cases as regularly reported by police departments across the state to the Department of Public Safety.

For the year 2012 (the latest available data, shown below), for instance, the three police units in Tom Green County (Sheriff, SAPD & ASU Police) reported 112 cases of sexual assault and five charges of rape adding up to a sexual violence total of 117 incidents. The WHI measure then divides the incidents by the total population and multiplies the result by 100,000.

This procedure yields a sexual violence rate for Tom Green county and San Angelo of 103 per 100,000 residents. Not all victims of sexual violence are female, but by far, women and girls make up the vast majority.

## Selected Lifestyle Indicators



We were unable to apply the measure to Midland and Midland County because correct 2012 data is unavailable. However, the measurement procedure for the state and the two other cities leads to a sexual violence rate of 169 per 100,000 in Abilene and Taylor County, 116 per 100,000 in Odessa and Ector County, and 98 per 100,000 for Texas overall.

It is noteworthy that each West Texas city has a higher rate of sexual violence than the state as a whole. Indeed, the average rate of sexual violence for the three West Texas cities is 129 incidents per 100,000 people – about 32 percent above the statewide incidence rate. The difference is not a happenstance of the oil boom or other current events since the West Texas cities have higher sexual violence rates over the years. The observation demonstrates the importance of the new focus on lifestyle indicators in the WHI.

Most people think of “lifestyles” in terms of the personal choices an individual makes to follow a certain positive or negative way of living. We perceive some people making “responsible choices” toward positive lifestyles such as a healthy one, for example.

The normal progression of thought from there focuses on “irresponsible choices” by other people and typically blames them for individual flaws or problems leading to an unhealthy lifestyle. Funding expensive social programs attempting correction then meets the ire of citizens who blame individuals for perceived “irresponsible choices” and resent paying for it.

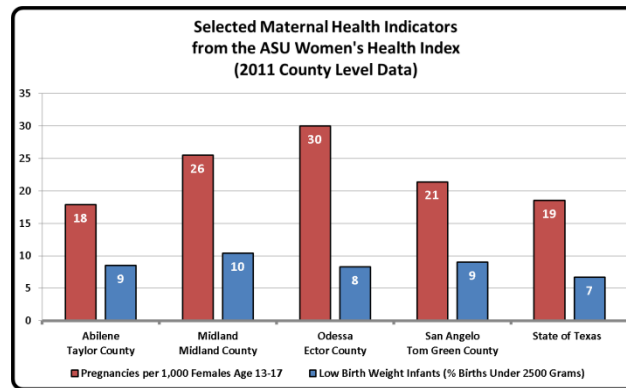
This resentful, blaming view suffers a key oversight though. It is blind to the community’s side of the coin. The fact that individuals choose lifestyles requires that both positive and negative lifestyles coexist in the community.

Yes, alongside the most celebrated community efforts to promote healthy choices is an underbelly of organized community activities – much of it accepted as legitimate - supporting unhealthy options. The higher rate of sexual violence in West Texas cities indicates something about the pulse of that organized activity has in our community. Indeed, other factors in the WHI multiply the concern.

For instance, the incidence rate of chlamydia – the most commonly reported sexually transmitted infection – averages 635 per 100,000 residents in the four West Texas cities. This average is 33 percent higher than the state, mirroring the pattern for sexual violence. Also correlated is an average teen pregnancy rate for the West Texas cities (23.7 per 1,000 females age 13-17) that is 28 percent above Texas overall, and the average rate of low birth weight babies (9.1 per 100

births in the four cities) is 35 percent higher than the state as a whole. (The chart below depicts low birth rate and pregnancies per 1,000 females).

### Selected Maternal Health Indicators



Too many West Texans are hampered by the blame-game, resentful imagery stemming from popular thinking about negative lifestyles. On the other hand, a hopeful sign came to attention at just the moment I was putting the finishing touch on writing this column. The ASU president's office proclaimed April 23, 2014 to be Denim Day on campus as part of Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month!

More and more leaders are recognizing the need to create awareness and manage activity in ways that bend the arc toward healthy lifestyles, just as they do to engender business and occupational success or civic involvement as part of a community's ways of life.

The Concho Valley Rape Crisis Center deserves applause for their leadership and tireless commitment to bending the particular arc revealed in this year's WHI lifestyle indicators.

House of Faith, the Concho Valley Alcohol and Drug Abuse Council, the Concho Valley CARES coalition, and San Angelo's Laura W. Bush Institute for Women's Health are just a few other organizations giving leadership toward the same direction.

These and other community organizations are leading the way. Many more of us need to jump onboard.