Living and Retiring in San Angelo

Laurence F. Jones and Kenneth L. Stewart
August 4, 2019

As people age and consider life after retirement, many face decisions about where they will live after leaving work.

Surveys by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) consistently show older adults overwhelmingly desire to age in place, in their present homes and communities where they have meaningful bonds and friendships. On the other hand, some seniors, especially if they are financially able, decide to move to a different place better suited to their changing needs.

Whether they age in place or relocate, retirees want to live in safe places with pleasant climates, low costs of living, and easy access to local amenities. Since the advent of the Internet and social media, a number of "best retirement" resources have developed in recent years. Some popular lists are at the Center for a Secure Retirement, Bert Sperling's Best Places, and Forbes' Best Places to Retire in Each State.

Many lists allow ecstatic public and civic leaders to promote their communities in competitions for a place on their sites. Listing may attract an influx of more affluent residents and increase economic development in certain neighborhoods. Local issues can also develop over gentrification that force out low-income residents and leads to an evolution of "closed gate" communities.

Best places sites usually compare cities on rankings that rely on only a few characteristics such as weather conditions or living costs. Important as these factors may be, they are only part of the intricacies affecting aging people.

Top retirement city lists typically do not provide comprehensive assessments of the range of economic, social and environmental elements affecting the evolving needs, priorities, and interests of all senior residents and their families. An outstanding exception is the "Livability Index" produced by AARP.

AARP's Public Policy Institute (PPI) uses a diverse set of indicators that form the foundation for its Livability Index. Its comprehensive data and information can be useful to retirees interested in finding a new community to meet their needs. Beyond that, however, AARP bills its Index as a way of identifying "Great Neighborhoods for All Ages."

Data for the Livability Index is collected at the neighborhood level. The indicators are divided into seven categories that measure qualities of housing, neighborhood access to the local services and infrastructure, transportation, the environment, health, civic and social engagement, and opportunities available to residents. Cities, counties, and states receive scores based on the neighborhoods within their boundaries.

Scores fall on a scale from a low of zero to a high of 100. Each neighborhood's livability score is its average across the seven indicator categories. Since the Institute makes nationwide comparisons, the average score for neighborhoods is 50. Above-average communities score higher than 50. Scores below 50 identify below-average areas.

The Livability Index reveals a number of interesting facts about Texas. The average score for Texas neighborhoods on the zero to 100 scale is 49. Minnesota has the highest score at 59 while Oklahoma and Mississippi share the lowest livability scores of 46.

In addition to Oklahoma, other states sharing borders with Texas have slightly lower Livability Index scores (Arkansas = 47, Louisiana = 48, and New Mexico = 47). The nearby State of Colorado sports a higher score of 55. Overall, 37 states have higher livability scores than Texas. Where is San Angelo on the scale?

Comparison of San Angelo to seven other major West Texas urban areas yields observations that are disappointing for local advocates. Three cities in West Texas have livability scores that are above average for the state and nation. Amarillo leads with a score of 53, followed by Lubbock's 52 score and Odessa's 51. Wichita Falls weighs in with a score that is equal to the average score of 49 for Texas overall.

The remaining four West Texas urban centers are below average for the state and nation. Abilene, Midland, and El Paso are a tick under the state average with scores of 48 each. San Angelo's score of 45 rates it as the least livable of the eight West Texas core cities.

Livability Index Scores for Eight West Texas Cities
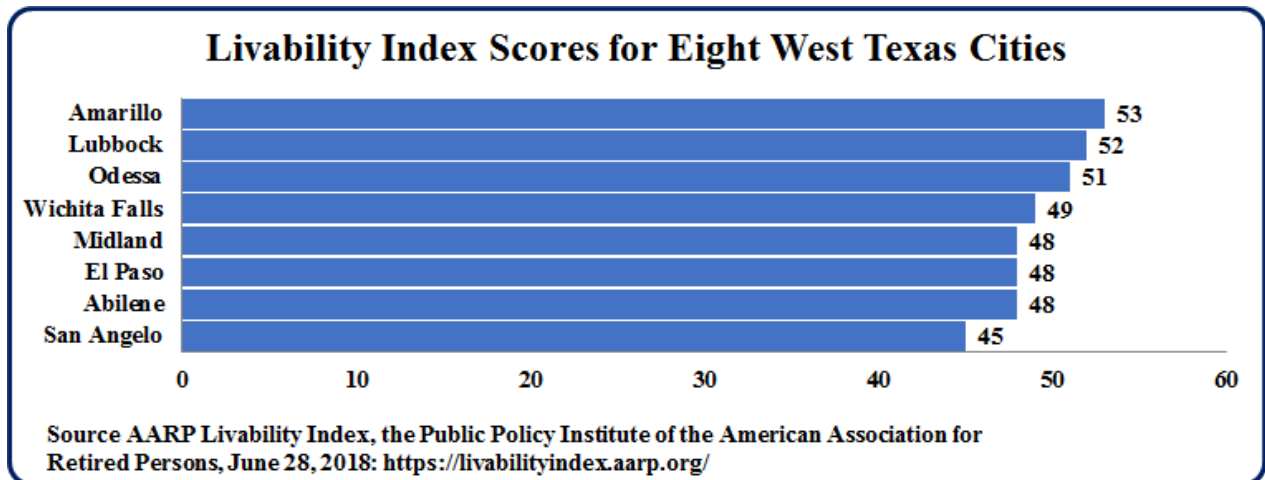
To gain deeper understanding of this disappointing result for San Angelo, we dug into the seven Livability Index category scores for the city and its neighborhoods. The categorical and summary scores we collected for 22 San Angelo neighborhoods and for the city overall are listed in the following table

Given the city's low overall Livability Index, it is not surprising no neighborhood had a score above the national average of 50. However, it may surprise some readers to see that the Fort Concho neighborhood had the highest score at 48, while PaulAnn had the lowest at 36.

In scanning through results of specific neighborhoods, some readers may be shocked to see Blackshear's almost perfect housing score of 97. Understanding this begins by noting the city's strongest result is its 55 score on the Housing category of indicators. In addition to Blackshear, other strong neighborhood scores are registered for areas like Rio Vista (79), Fort Concho (73), and Downtown (72).

Community efforts to create accessible and affordable housing weigh heavily in Livability Index metrics. Thus, the city's Housing score is strong because the percentage of housing that is

accessible without going up steps is equal to the national median (43.6%). Also, its 25.8% stock of multifamily housing exceeds the national median and the local average monthly cost of housing ($796) is below the national median. The availability of subsidized housing at 118 units per 10,000 people places San Angelo in the top third of communities in the U.S.

San Angelo's housing coalition includes the city's Department of Community and Housing Support, the Housing Authority of San Angelo, Galilee Community Development Corporation, Habitat for Humanity, and the local banks, builders, and construction workers who participate in revitalizing neighborhoods and building affordable housing. Their contributions to the community have a large positive weight on the city's Livability Index results.

Regrettably, San Angelo's livability score for environmental quality is a dismal 30 on the zero to 100 scale. Water and air quality measurements dominate the environment indicators in the Index. Of particular concern for San Angelo is the Institute's estimate more than 4 of 10 Tom Green County residents in 2018 were exposed to water that did not meet health standards. That rate of exposure placed the community in the bottom third nationwide according to the Livability Index.

Currently, the City of San Angelo harvests water from O.C. Fisher, O.H. Ivie, and Twin Buttes Reservoirs as well as Lake Nasworthy and Lake Spence. The Hickory Aquifer project is the latest expansion, and the City is now planning a new project to recycle wastewater to meet drinking standards. Leaders estimate the additional recycling project will enable the City to meet demand, now about 12 million gallons per day, for next 50 years.

Historically, the potential for limited resources to block economic and population growth opportunities has kept water development near the top of the City's list of priorities. Nevertheless, San Angelo's environment score on the Livability Index is a poignant reminder of the need to balance growth with meaningful quality standards.

Over the years, we have received a great deal of interest and feedback from readers; some laudatory, some not so approving. One reader, for example, expressed a concern that we never write anything nice about San Angelo.

Indeed, this article might have been more popular with this critical reader if it pictured San Angelo as a place with pleasant weather and a low cost of living coupled with a long list of amenities like the newly renovated airport, scenic lakes, country clubs, outstanding golf facilities, an award-winning river corridor, a revitalizing downtown, an excellent public library, a unique fine arts museum, and a vibrant performing arts district.

Fox Mulder is a fictional FBI Special Agent in The X-Files, a science fiction television series. Although Mulder's peers in the show consider him to be far-fetched, he persists in each episode to work unsolved cases with mysterious facts about them that have been shelved.

We recognize a recitation of facts extolling the virtues of San Angelo can build the image of a best place to retire that might appeal to some people, including a few who may have an interest and means to relocate. We also know, however, that such a view would leave the question raised by AARP shelved and unsolved.

What does make "Great Neighborhoods for All Ages?" Like Fox Mulder, we think, "The truth is out there."