

# Seeing a Pattern Here

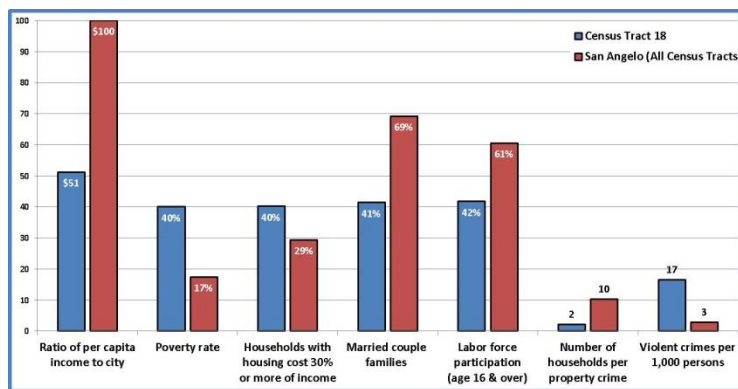
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In the popular book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam claimed, “Over the course of the last generation or two, a variety of technological, economic and social changes have rendered obsolete the stuff of American social capital.” Mindful that communities need more than money to solve their most challenging problems, Putnam lamented a growing disconnect of Americans from family, friends, neighbors, and civic structures. He urged that social capital, the very fabric of our connectedness to each other, needs new weaving for communities to progress and for citizens to lead satisfying lives together.

Results from the fourth straight year of tracking key indicators in ASU’s Neighborhood Development Index give cause to heed Putnam’s message. For the fourth straight time, the quality of life in census tract 18 encompassing the Blackshear and Downtown neighborhoods lags the rest of the city, with few signs of closing the gaps.

## Key Indicators in the San Angelo Neighborhood Development Index



ASU’s Community Development Initiatives updates the Neighborhood Development Index annually. Based on 2012 data, the most recent information from the US Census Bureau, the latest update includes 19 indicators of neighborhood characteristics across San Angelo’s 20 census tracts. Statistics detailing factors such as income levels, family composition, and criminal activity reveal stark differences between the Blackshear-Downtown neighborhoods and the rest of the city.

For instance, it is a fact that households experience increasing degrees of financial risk and instability as housing costs rise above 30 percent of the total household income. In census tract 18, about 40 percent of households experienced housing costs of 30 percent or more in 2012. Across the city, by comparison, only 29 percent carried that level of cost burden.

The per capita income of \$11,606 in the Blackshear-Downtown neighborhoods was approximately half (51%) of the citywide per capita income (\$22,684) in 2012. In line with that, difference was a 40 percent rate of poverty in census tract 18. The city’s overall poverty rate was 17 percent. The rate of labor force participation (based on residents age 16 and over) was 42 percent in Blackshear-Downtown. This compares to a citywide rate of 61 percent for 2012.

Married couples headed only 41 percent of families in census tract 18 during 2012 compared to 69 percent citywide. Rates for both criminal violence and property crime are at least five times higher in the Blackshear-Downtown neighborhoods than the city overall.

These gaps are shocking illustrations of what Putnam was saying when he wrote, “Americans are right that the bonds of our communities have withered, and we are right to fear that this transformation has very real costs.” Those “real costs” can come in the form of whole sections of the community hopelessly mired in household instability, lack of employment, poverty, and crime.

Putnam, however, believes that projects to rekindle neighborhood and civic engagement can change the inner workings of local communities, as well as their outward appearance. Leaders from Atlanta to Indianapolis to Omaha and San Antonio need no convincing because they have seen neighborhoods transformed. Some of San Angelo’s leaders are moving to build citizen engagement and social capital too.

During April, the City’s Development Services division launched a new Development Task Force as an on-going opportunity for greater dialogue about improvements to City processes like zoning, infrastructure development, building regulation, and code enforcement. This start, however, was just an initial step toward opening new pathways for expanded citizen engagement in the development of the community and its neighborhoods.

Also, under consideration are ideas about a Lunch and Learn Series to provide citizens a forum to learn about City services, City assets such as GIS Mapping capabilities, and receive briefings from key City staff. Another idea is to field a series of Citizen 101 evening workshops for hands-on learning experience on such topics of emergency management, methods of fighting neighborhood blight and decay, or the basics of neighborhood and community organizing.

City of San Angelo (CoSA) University is a concept that could turn into a premier opportunity for citizens to train for civic leadership in the community and its neighborhoods. Such a leadership development framework could operate evenings, at least once a month, over a nine-month period. CoSA U would select students from the full spectrum of city neighborhoods. With tutelage from City management and members of the City Council, CoSA U students could become well versed in the community’s vision and develop a deep understanding of the vital roles for engaged citizens. They could learn the full story on key issues like water, waste management, roads and highways, or safety measures. Students could develop a rich understanding of how to use the range of community assets for progressive projects. CoSA U graduates could readily serve on key City advisory boards or commissions, or take part in big actions and projects that will make a better San Angelo.

Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* is certainly among the most widely read books in the world about the ways Americans govern themselves. Writing in the 1830s, Tocqueville originated the concept of “American exceptionalism” as a way of expressing his opinion that America was “qualitatively different from all other countries.” While he never used the term social capital, he did claim “it was the Americans’ propensity for civic association that most impressed him as the key to their unprecedented ability to make democracy work.”

An exceptional community must not accept the notion that residents in neighborhoods like Blackshear and Downtown will persistently endure households that are more unstable, higher

unemployment, greater poverty, and higher crime levels than the rest of us. Help the leaders working to energize new civic associations to form the foundation of a community moving forward together.