

Two Steps Forward, Two Steps Back in Measure

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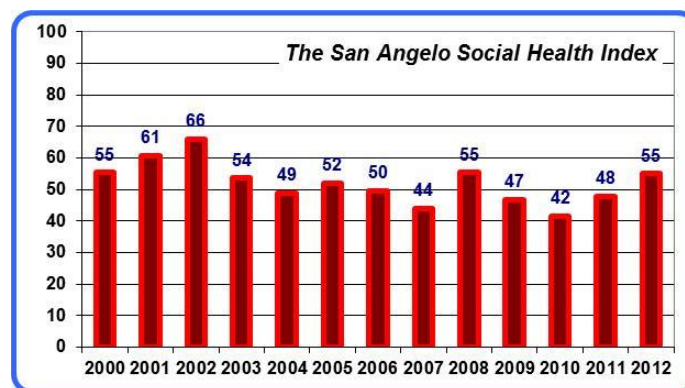
Marc Maringoff first published America's Index of Social Health in 1985. A professor of public policy at Fordham University, Maringoff was working to improve on a situation identified earlier by Robert F. Kennedy.

Noticing the tendency of Americans to accept various economic indicators as primary measures of the state of the nation, Kennedy commented in 1968 that frequent tallies and tracking of the gross domestic product and other economic measures actually tell us very little about "that which makes life worthwhile." He had in mind things like the worth of our children's education, the strength of our marriages and households, and the quality of life in our neighborhoods and communities.

In the same spirit of working toward an evidence-based review of the local pathway toward improvement, Community Development Initiatives (CDI) at the ASU Center updates the San Angelo Social Health Index each year. A particular strength of the index is that it goes beyond a single point-in-time snapshot to review progress over time. Following Maringoff's lead and RFK's insight, it tracks 21 statistical indicators, some focused on the local economy but many others on the households, children, and elders.

The measurements trace back to the year 2000 up through 2012 – the most recent data available for most of the factors. Community Development Initiatives scores the results for each year on a 100-point scale. CDI bases half of the score on how a year compares to other years. The other half compares local results to statewide outcomes. Higher scores indicate progress in the community on significant problems and improvements in the local quality of life compared to the rest of Texas.

San Angelo Social Health Index

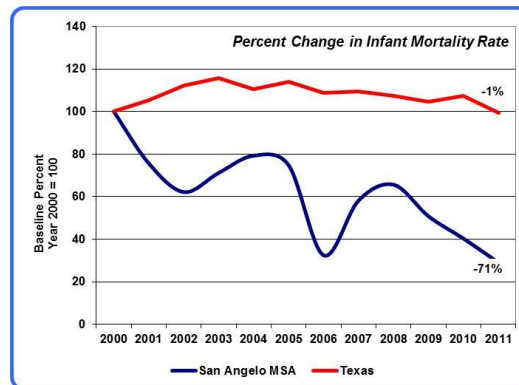


The overall score for 2012 is 55 on the 100-point scale. This represents an improvement over the previous year, and it is equal to the community's score before the economic plunge in the closing months of 2008. The community had better results on the index only twice in 2001 and 2002

The current outcomes of the San Angelo Social Health Index include some wonderful achievements for the community. For example, the local infant mortality rate, illustrated below,

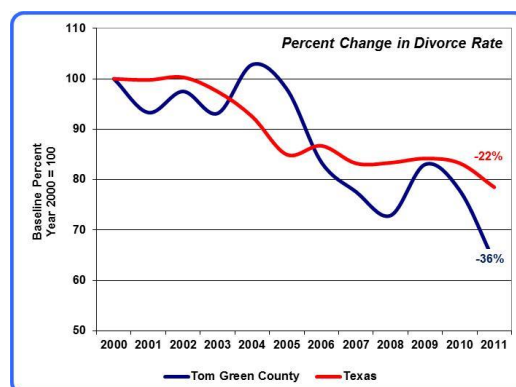
was 3.2 infant deaths per 1,000 live births in 2011. This rate had been higher than state as a whole for eight of the 12 years between 2000 and 2011, but it crossed below the state level in 2009 and has remained lower than the overall state for the three most recent years of data. The infant mortality rate has fallen by 71 percent since the year 2000. This is a major public health improvement for the community.

Percent Change in Infant Mortality Rate



On a similarly positive note, there are some signs that local families are on stronger footings. The local divorce rate, for instance, stands at 3.2 divorces per 1,000 residents of Tom Green County according to the most recent data for 2011. While this is a close match to the statewide rate of 3.1 per 1,000 residents, the local community has a more impressive trend toward fewer divorces than the state as a whole. The current local divorce rate is 36 percent lower than the level of 5.1 divorces per 1,000 residents in the year 2000. The statewide rate fell by 22 percent in the same time.

Percent Change in Divorce Rate

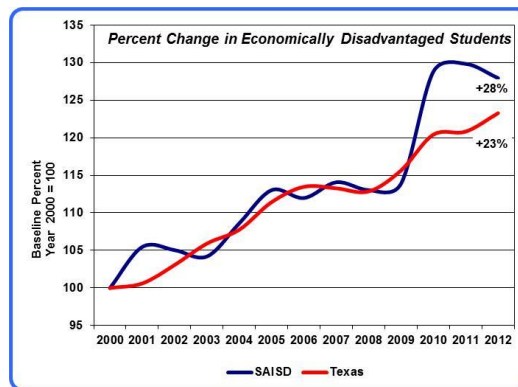


Stronger footings for local families also augment the affordability of housing. Estimates for 2012 indicate that 26.1 percent of San Angelo households are cost-burdened by virtue of paying housing costs equal to 30 percent or more of the household income. The San Angelo percentage is five points lower the state as a whole. For each of the 13 years from 2000 and 2012, San Angelo maintained a more affordable ratio between housing prices and household income levels than the composite of all other Texas Metropolitan areas. This is true even with recent run-ups of housing prices.

Other favorable developments documented in the San Angelo Social Health Index include a 28 percent reduction of the local crime rate between 2000 and 2012 and a 65 percent increase in per capita income over the same period. As intended by RFK back in 1968, these indicators reveal our progress on some of the things making “life worthwhile.” Other factors in the index disclose challenging work required in this vein.

One problem evolving over time is a trend toward more food insecurity in the community. The most recent data on economically disadvantaged students in San Angelo ISD shows a modest decrease from 60.9 percent in 2011 to 60.4 percent.

Percent Change in Economically Disadvantaged Students

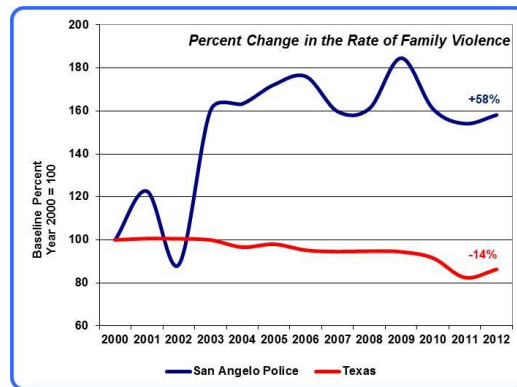


Regardless, this number has hovered above 60 percent since 2010 and has increased by 28 percent since the year 2000. Measuring from mid-year (month of July) SNAP enrollment figures, use of food stamps also has increased by 37 percent since 2000. San Angelo volunteers working at Wesley Soup Kitchen, Grace, and Grub, Kids Eat Free, Meals for the Elderly, Food Bank, and the Texas Hunger Initiative know there are too many hungry who do not know where the next meal will come from.

Another deeply troubling pattern is violence and abuse. The local rate of child abuse for 2012 was 16.1 victims per 1,000 children. This was a spike up from 13.1 per 1,000 the year before. More stunning is that the child abuse rate increased by 92 percent since the year 2000. Additionally, there was a 58 percent increase in the level of family violence incidents requiring police response. This includes a disabled and elder abuse rate that outpaces the overall state each year by an average of 24 incidents per 1,000. In addition, there was a suicide rate that exceeded the statewide rate by yearly average of 3.7 cases per 100,000 residents.

The economic indicators in the San Angelo Social Health Index are in basic agreement with news from the Chamber of Commerce, the Workforce Development Board, and other local economic development agencies. Employment has recovered from the 2008 recession and is on a path of growth. The local amount of personal income per person has grown by more than 20 percent since 2009 and reached a level in 2012 that was 65 percent over the year 2000 mark. Permits to build new housing units are showing robust increases, and the estimated value of all things produced in the local economy -- the local gross domestic product -- is now on a growth path after being stagnant for most of the past decade.

Percent Change in the Rate of Family Violence



One local economic leader recently commented that 2014 promises to be a good year; possibly the “best of times,” he said. This year’s update reveals the possibility for that to come true. Following RFK’s counsel, however, the data tell us that the best of times requires more than a booming economy. The San Angelo Social Health Index reminds us of our social responsibility to reinvest in the community to improve “that, which makes life worthwhile.”