

They worked, now it's Up to Us

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The Reverend Billy Graham once commented that people throughout his life taught him how to die, but no one ever taught him how to grow old. His comment suggests an obligation shared by each of us to ensure that San Angelo's senior citizens can manage their health and end of life process in a dignified fashion. After all, being a senior and being with seniors can be rewarding. Together, we can learn much about life's tribulations, joys, and values by listening between the generations.

Community Development Initiatives at ASU created the Seniors of San Angelo Social Health Index to help evaluate the quality of life for elders in different San Angelo neighborhoods. The evaluation includes 17 indicators based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2011 American Community Survey. It includes items describing housing and neighborhood attributes, income and education statistics, social isolation, and custody of grandchildren (guardianship) among elder residents in San Angelo's 20 census tract neighborhoods.

Summary Table for Seniors Social Health Index

Neighborhoods	Census Tract	Seniors Social Health Index (17 Indicators)	Rank	Neighborhood & Housing Indicators (4)	Income & Education Indicators (5)	Social Isolation Indicators (4)	Guardianship Indicators (4)
Sunset	13.03	100	1	100	100	92	99
Vista del Arroyo	13.04	79	2	98	65	60	100
Santa Rita	10	79	3	13	79	85	100
Southland	17.06	68	4	73	97	88	38
Rio Vista	14	56	5	72	60	73	49
Bluffs	11.01	55	6	72	66	95	28
Lake View	2	54	7	66	58	66	53
Paulann	3	50	8	37	50	73	56
Riverside	1	50	9	80	83	95	0
ASU - College Hills	13.01	47	10	57	77	85	13
Bentwood - Nasworthy	17.08	47	11	24	46	100	37
Glenmore	8.01	46	12	22	82	76	24
Belaire	8.02	43	13	8	58	63	48
Central	11.02	42	14	0	48	60	56
Ft. Concho	9	40	15	80	64	10	46
Bonham	17.07	32	16	14	27	67	42
Angelo Heights	12	31	17	9	50	59	28
Fort Concho- East	7	28	18	75	38	54	13
Reagan	4	18	19	8	38	47	15
Blackshear - Downtown	18	0	20	30	0	0	26
San Angelo		45		43	62	69	35

The index uses a 0 to 100-point scale to compare the city's neighborhoods. Higher scores indicate parts of San Angelo where seniors enjoy a higher quality of life.

The summary table for the index gives several interesting bits of information. For starters, the table identifies the Sunset area as the most elder-friendly with a score of 100 based on the 17 indicators. The neighborhood also sets the pace for the quality of neighborhood and housing characteristics, and on the income and education indicators. The high scores for social isolation and guardianship indicate that, compared to other neighborhoods, senior residents in the Sunset area generally enjoy robust opportunities to connect to social activities and that relatively few have assumed any level custodial responsibilities for grandchildren.

While San Angelo experienced an increase in the senior population over the last decade, the year 2011 saw a slight decrease. Ten neighborhoods, paced by the Reagan area, experienced a decline in the percentage of residents who are elderly. Sunset, by contrast, realized a small increase.

The fact that Sunset replaced Santa Rita, last year's top ranked neighborhood for seniors, confirms an observation we made a year ago that the senior population is moving away from the city center neighborhoods to the outlying areas.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Blackshear-Downtown neighborhood repeated this year as the city's lowest scoring neighborhood in terms of the quality of living for seniors. Indeed, a comparison of the two areas – Sunset and Blackshear-Downtown – is like a “tale of two cities.”

To begin, for example, a larger percentage of the Sunset area's total population is seniors (13%) compared to Blackshear-Downtown (10%), but a larger fraction of households in Blackshear-Downtown (38%) has one or more occupants aged 60 or older than in Sunset (26%). This curious detail results from vast differences in family experiences whereby the elders of Sunset more often “age-well” and continue to live with spouses (75%) while more seniors in Blackshear-Downtown (86%) are widowed or divorced.

The neighborhoods also differ a great deal on other basic demographics. For example, more than half of seniors in Blackshear-Downtown are Hispanic, African American, or members of another minority group. Less than three in 10 of Sunset's senior citizens are minorities. Another contrast is that 87 percent of the Sunset seniors attained a high school education compared to only three in ten seniors in the Blackshear-Downtown area.

People see these gaping differences through many lenses depending upon their perspective and interests. Decades ago, however, Americans agreed that markets in local communities should be able – with some stimulation from government – to provide affordable access to adequate and safe housing, healthcare, and other necessities to retired seniors living on the most basic of fixed incomes.

On the housing front, a fundamental criterion used to define affordability is the 30 percent rule. With this rule, a domicile is affordable when housing costs are less than 30 percent of the occupants' household income. As costs exceed the 30 percent level, the less affordable the dwelling is for the occupants.

The “tale of two cities” theme reappears in applying the rule to estimate housing affordability for seniors in San Angelo's neighborhoods. Almost nine of every 10 senior households in Sunset have manageable housing costs that fall below 30 percent of their household income. In Blackshear-Downtown, however, only 66 percent have the same level of manageable housing costs. Too many seniors in this neighborhood find that getting and keeping an affordable residence is a troublesome experience.

Of course, paralleling the affordability of housing are significant income differences between seniors in the two neighborhoods. There are virtually no seniors in the Sunset area with income below the poverty line, for example, but more than four in every 10 Blackshear-Downtown elders live in poverty. The median income for senior households in the Sunset area is more than 25 percent higher than the median for all households in the neighborhood. Conversely, in Blackshear-Downtown the senior median household income is 35 percent lower than the neighborhood median.

The basic idea of social security is to help preserve the ability of citizens to provide for themselves when faced with old age or disability. A drawback for low income and impoverished residents, however, is that the government bases benefits on lifetime earnings. Consequently, the incomes of elders in the Sunset area are supplemented by social security checks that average 21 percent higher than the average for the city overall. The average check going to seniors in Blackshear-Downtown is more than 33 percent lower than the citywide amount.

Integration of seniors into the mainstream of community life is an important factor for aging-well, while social isolation generates opposite effects. In San Angelo, English proficiency is one obstacle to social integration for some Hispanics and other elders from non-English speaking national origins. The census estimates that every senior resident in the Sunset area is proficient in English. In contrast, nearly 18 percent of Blackshear-Downtown' seniors do not speak English "well."

Living alone with no other household members is another socially isolating factor, and seniors in the Blackshear-Downtown section live alone more often than in the Sunset area by a margin of nearly 54 to 18 percent. Seniors in Blackshear-Downtown are also less likely to have access to a vehicle compared to those living in the Sunset neighborhood.

In San Angelo, over 2,700 grandparents (5.5%) live with their own grandchildren for a variety of reasons. Of that number, almost 36 percent have primary responsibility for raising them and more than 77 percent of these individuals have had this responsibility for one year or more.

A "tale of two cities" surfaces again in this matter. In the Sunset section of town, very few seniors (3.1%) have grandchildren living in the household or have any other guardianship responsibilities. More than twice that fraction (7.9%) of grandparents in the Blackshear-Downtown area live with grandkids and about three of every four of those have had guardianship responsibilities for a year or more. The presence of grandkids in the house, no doubt, adds joy to the lives of many of these grandparents. The burdens of having to assume custody in troubled circumstances also take their toll.

According to the latest U.S. Census estimates, 12,407, or 13.6 percent of San Angelo's population were 65 or older in 2011. By working with the City of San Angelo and with neighborhood organizations, non-profit organizations like Galilee Community Development Corporation and Helping Hands have worked magic in recent years to make real improvements for affordable housing and neighborhood revitalization in the Blackshear-Downtown section. The Downtown San Angelo Association is helping to breathe economic vitality into the area. Numerous other local entities pitch in to provide transportation, social activities, and gathering places for seniors, nutrition and health services, uplifting spiritual experiences, and many other heroic actions to improve the quality of life for elder citizens.

Nonetheless, our community needs to press on with the goal to enhance the quality of life for all elder residents, whether they live in Sunset, Blackshear-Downtown, or some other neighborhood. Seniors deserve adequate housing and income, enhanced links to social activities, and compassionate caregiving in their golden years. Where Billy Graham lamented that no one ever taught him how to grow old, it befits each of us to take steps to ensure that our community opens pathways for aging-well.