

Lubbock, Texas

The Arnett Benson Neighborhood: a Community Assessment

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Introduction

Litter is a serious problem that has damaging effects worldwide. It is a comparatively recent concern in modern medicine, yet many of the various kinds (cigarette butts, plastic, metal, glass) are injuring both humans and wildlife today. The United States, Texas and the City of Lubbock have all taken measures to address the problem, but there is still much to be done. We propose to isolate a population in the zip code of 74915 in general, the neighborhood of Arnett Benson in Lubbock in particular, and the seventh-grade class of Cavazos Middle School specifically, to study this problem. They can test the hypothesis that by making the students aware of the littering problem, and by educating the community around the school, the problem will eventually be solved in both the school and in Arnett Benson. By identifying the demographics, some community characteristics and a few factors that could adversely affect the health of the residents of the community, we hope to create a solid foundation upon which our study can be based.

Demographics

Lubbock County, Texas, has an estimated 2013 population of 289,324, while the state is estimated to have 26,448,193 residents (www.quickfacts.census.gov). The Arnett Benson neighborhood of the City of Lubbock is a largely Hispanic community. The following statistical data used in this paper is taken from the www.point2homes.com (2014), while the slightly older data is from www.city-data.com (2008-2014).

Population: Arnett Benson is an area in the City of Lubbock, Lubbock County, South Plains, Texas, with a population of 17,752. The total number of households is 6,490, with 2.65 people per household on average. Total household expenditures in Arnett Benson are below the national average. The median age of the current population is 29.71 with 5,410 people being married and 9,127 being single (www.point2homes.com).

Race/Ethnicity: 23.3% of residents are foreign born, compared to 6.9% in the City of Lubbock. The vast majority (about 80%) of residents in Arnett Benson are Hispanic/Mexican in origin (www.city-data.com).

Percentage of People that Speak English Not Well or Not at All: 9.45%

(www.city-data.com).

Gender: Currently there are 9,128 males and 8,624 females in the neighborhood (www.point2homes.com). In 2011, there were 5,008 males and 5,034 females (www.city-data.com).

Age Groups: The median age for males in Arnett Benson is 29.7 years, and 28.1 years for females (www.city-data.com).

Arnett Benson: Community Characteristics

Population Density: In Arnett Benson, there are 8,309 people per square mile, compared with Lubbock (2,036 per square mile), in an area of 1.209 square miles total (www.city-data.com).

Married Couples with Children (among all households): 27.3% (www.city-data.com).

Percentage of single-mother households (among all households): 11.3% (www.city-data.com).

Education: of the 17,752 residents, 2,054 (11.57%) have no high school; 1,573 (8.86%) have some high school; 1,905 (10.73%) have some college; 721 (4%) have an Associate Degree; 1,122 (6.32%) have a Bachelor's Degree; and 674 (3.8%) have a Graduate Degree (www.point2homes.com).

Slightly older (2008) data showed that 38.7% of residents had no high school; 10.2% had finished high school or an equivalent; 8% had less than one year of college; 9.8% had one or more years of college; 6.6% had an Associate Degree; 13% had a Bachelor's Degree; but 6.7% had a Master's Degree (compared with 5.8% in all of Lubbock); 4% had a professional-school degree (2.5% for Lubbock); and 3% had a Doctorate (only 1.5% for Lubbock) (www.city-data.com).

Income: The median household income in Arnett Benson is \$25,184, and the average household income is \$33,733. In 2011, the median household income was \$27,116 (compared to \$43,364 in all of Lubbock) (www.city-data.com).

Employment: The employment numbers show that there are 75% white-collar employees and 24% blue-collar employees in Arnett Benson (www.point2homes.com).

Community Leaders and Available Resources

During a brief phone conversation with Joe Riojas — former President of the Arnett Benson Neighborhood Association, and current President of the Board of LUNA (Lubbock United Neighborhood Association) — this writer learned that LUNA is a non-profit that works with the City of Lubbock, and its neighborhoods and local organizations, to build community spirit. Mr. Riojas confirmed that LUNA hopes to empower and inspire residents to take pride in their neighborhoods and build a stronger Lubbock (www.ourlubbock.org). He also said that LUNA hopes to persuade the Lubbock Independent School District (LISD) to pay into a community garden that could be used as a biology “learning center” for students.

Meanwhile, the City of Lubbock created “Keep Lubbock Beautiful,” an agency that has organized separate campaigns to clean up litter and cigarette butts, as well as “Adopt-A-Spot” programs. A strong recycling program has further helped keep the city cleaner than ever. As of July 2012, there were two manned drop-off locations (with two more then in the works), plus five unmanned drop-off locations throughout the city. Penny Morin, interim collection manager for Lubbock’s solid waste residential division, is quoted by the *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal* as saying: “The city collected 1,223 tons — nearly 2.5 million pounds — of recyclables, not including yard debris like trimmed tree limbs, in 2011 alone.” Of course, getting people to put the right trash in the right bin is still a problem (Young, 2012).

According to Raquel Padilla (Staff Liaison for Keep Lubbock Beautiful), the most littered part of Lubbock is the Yellow House Canyon System, which provides the city’s water. When it rains, grass and various kinds of debris get carried into Playa Lake and the canyon lake system. This requires frequent cleaning to keep the water supply safe. She also describes the zip code 79401 as being very heavily littered, since it is the most crowded area of the city and close to downtown.

Ms. Padilla further stated that Keep Lubbock Beautiful currently has two schools that are applying to “adopt-a-block” (the city is finalizing the details on contracts with them). The schools will, over a two-year period, clean up their chosen block three or more times a year, as needed. Her program will supply everything the students need to collect the trash, and the city will pick up the filled trash bags when they are done.

Oscar Martinez, janitor for Cavazos Middle School, noted in our August 4th interview with him that the students throw papers in the hallways and outside the school building. Lunch times and breaks between classes are the busiest times for him to clean up the trash they leave in the building. He has also noticed a large amount of litter behind the school, even though there are trash containers located there. In fact, the students even throw trash on the ground beside the containers. The trash represents a little of everything in the students’ lives: papers, food containers, food, etc. Isolated areas around the school and the space under the school bleachers are the dirtiest areas the janitor cited, with abundant cigarette butts, among other trash. Clearly, smoking is not limited to adults in this neighborhood.

Local Factors That Could Adversely Affect the Health of the Community

Poverty: The percentage of Arnett Benson that is below the poverty level, according to City-Data.com, is 40.7%, compared to 7.8% in Lubbock proper (www.city-data.com).

Smoking: The purchasing category on which the Arnett Benson residents tend to spend the most money is smoking (www.point2homes.com).

Crime Rate: The crime rate in Arnett Benson is above the national average. The most frequent crime is Assault Risk while the least frequent is Murder Risk (www.city-data.com).

According to a study by the RAND Corporation, poorer people tend to have poorer health. Smoking, of course, can exacerbate the problem. The study found that: “A neighborhood’s *collective efficacy* — i.e., residents’ willingness to help out for the common good — was associated, after controlling for poverty, with lower rates of premature death in general and death from cardiovascular disease and homicide. . . . However, the association between collective efficacy and lower rates of premature death was not seen in neighborhoods

with a high percentage of boarded-up stores and homes, litter, and graffiti.” Litter and vandalism regularly occur in areas where it seems no one cares (www.rand.org).

Summary

Litter is a problem in Lubbock, especially in the downtown area and in the Yellow House Canyon Water System. As already mentioned, Lubbock has a strong recycling program in place, yet people still leave trash beside the bins or put it in the wrong bin. The Arnett Benson neighborhood features a smaller version of Lubbock’s litter problem, an area with more crowding and lower incomes than in Lubbock proper. These factors (among others) create an indifference that is producing a litter hazard. The City of Lubbock has resources, such as LUNA and other neighborhood organizations, plus Keep Lubbock Beautiful, which could be made available for our study of the Arnett Benson area.

Smoking is a health problem in this neighborhood, as residents spend the largest part of their disposable income on cigarettes (www.point2homes.com). Drinking water, fisheries, wildlife and recreational areas can become polluted by cigarette litter. Due to smoking bans, cigarette butts now accumulate outside of buildings. 95% of cigarettes contain cellulose acetate, a plastic that degrades very slowly. Tobacco leaves contain the very toxic alkaloid, nicotine, which is a powerful insecticide and highly soluble in water. Another 4% of each cigarette is “additives,” including the anesthetic, menthol. The sticky yellow-brown “tar” residue is composed of several organic and inorganic chemicals, including several carcinogens (Register, 2000). By educating the population about the hazards of cigarette litter, our study could possibly cause some residents to cut down on their smoking and improve their health, although this is not our immediate aim.

Our goal is to create a study by the children of Arnett Benson that will make its residents aware of the litter problem and, by their helping to solve the issue, will raise “community self-esteem.” This, in turn, will make Arnett Benson a healthier neighborhood as people begin to behave in healthier ways. The area is a crowded, growing, low-income neighborhood with a fairly high crime rate, a low level of education, a young population and many smokers. These

statistics point to a situation where littering, vandalism and other more serious crimes can break down the neighborhood's spirit; we hope to reverse these conditions, given time and a chance to properly survey and educate the residents.

Why an Anti-Litter Study is a Priority

Often it is a grassroots-level effort that pays off. This writer sees litter as a serious problem, one that even potentially threatens Lubbock's water supply. Litter is a threat to public health: it attracts rats and other rodents, and is a breeding ground for both mosquitoes and bacteria. Trash can attract wildlife, potentially hurting both the animals and the students who accidentally come into contact with them, and it is important to make the students and their neighborhood aware of the importance of recycling all forms of litter. Bugs are also attracted to decaying food and liquid in dumped containers. Cigarette butts take a very long time to degrade and when they do, they put toxic chemicals into the soil and the water supply. In short, the health of the community, as well as the health of the soil and the watershed, depend upon a strongly enforced anti-littering policy.

However, it is the spirit of the community that first needs to be addressed. Litter sends a message that no one cares, and this can have an indirect effect on real estate values, as well as individual health problems. For example, one study found that "respiratory complications, diseases from rodent infestation, injuries and depression were often cited as health impacts from litter and trash" (Bennett, 2012).

Cavazos ranked seventh out of the nine middle schools in the Lubbock Independent School District (LISD) and worse than 96.3% of all Texan middle schools (www.city-data.com/zips/79415.html), and its students need to feel empowered and successful to overcome this low rating. The cost would be minimal (especially with Keep Lubbock Beautiful helping out), and the skills the students would gain will be invaluable. Once a school clean-up becomes possible, we hope that it can awaken the residents to the possibility of a neighborhood clean-up. Having accomplished that, pride in the community can create other projects, while positively affecting residents' health. Furthermore, if a side effect of the study is that it reduces smoking in

both the school(s) and the community, so much the better. In short, making litter clean-up a priority would be a win-win situation for both the students and their community.

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