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Report Says One-Third of N.M.'s 10,000 Black Children Live in Poverty

By Debra Dominguez

Journal Staff Writer

Khadijah Bottom has four children and 13 grandchildren.

Poverty and racism plague many of them, she says.

"Some of my grandchildren's parents—a couple of which are single moms— can't seem to keep permanent housing as a result," she said. "Their living conditions aren't stable, and some have to rely on government assistance or welfare."

Bottom knows her grandchildren aren't alone.

Of the 10,000 black children living in New Mexico, an estimated 33 percent live below the federal poverty level, according to New Mexico Voices for Children's recently released report, "The Condition of African American Children in New Mexico."

Of the 33 percent, only 8 percent of the families receive public assistance from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, according to the report.

Only American Indian children have a higher level of impoverishment at 42 percent.

New Mexico Voices for Children Kids Count project manager Sara Beth Koplik said the black community, estimated at 2 percent of the state's population, faces strong discrimination.

The report, which Koplik wrote, found black mothers work longer hours for less pay than all other mothers in New Mexico, and blacks own homes at nearly half the rates of all other ethnicities.

It also found poverty levels remain high for black families despite substantial hours of work. And black children are dramatically over-represented in the juvenile-justice and foster-care systems.

"It is our belief that by presenting an accurate portrait of the conditions of African-American children in New Mexico," Koplik said, "that a healthy dialogue may in turn create a better future."

Bottom, who founded the nonprofit organization "Women in Chains" in 2002 to help area women who are homeless, battered or just out of prison, said there are several reasons New Mexico blacks are disproportionately represented in negative social statistics.

"It's a cycle in the African-American community that doesn't have a quick fix," she said. "These kids live in poverty because many of their parents didn't have role models to help them get through high school and college so that they could compete for jobs to sustain them.

"Many African-Americans grow up in environments where the role models are the drug dealers," she said. "And these kids then turn to crime and steal what they want instead of being the kid who goes to school and gets laughed at because he's poor and has holes in his shoes."

Koplik said New Mexico Voices for Children grew interested in the condition of the state's black children after putting together its 2003 Minority Majority report.

"We noticed some significant discrepancies in income levels, access to health care and housing by ethnicity," she said. "Some of the absolute worst measures were for African-American children."

At a glance

The New Mexico Voices for Children's report on "The Condition of African American Children in New Mexico," found:

- Of the state's 10,000 black children, an estimated 33 percent live below the federal poverty level.
- The greatest percentage of all parents of infants working are black, at 61 percent.
- Infant mortality is highest among black babies: 14 per 1,000 males and 12 per 1,000 female live births.
- While blacks account for only 2 percent of all children in the state, they make up 6 percent of those in foster care and 3.9 percent of those in the juvenile justice system.
- 38 percent of black children live in owner-occupied homes, compared to 69 percent of Hispanic children, 71 percent of American Indian children, 64 percent of Asian children and 74 percent of white children.

More information: For a complete copy of "The Condition of African American Children in New Mexico," visit www.nmvoices.org. To get assistance from "Women in Chains," call Khadijah Bottom at 261-3765.

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