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More Hispanic children live in poverty

By Diana M. Alba Sun-News reporter

Article Launched: 06/29/2007 12:00:00 AM MDT

Las Cruces Sun-News; Silver City Sun News

LAS CRUCES — Hispanic children in Doña Ana County and other border regions in the state are more likely to live in poverty than white children, according to a report released Thursday by a children's advocacy organization.

Some 40 percent of Hispanic children in Doña Ana County live in poverty, compared to 16 percent of white children. Both rates, however, are higher than averages for the state as a whole.

Several factors are likely behind the disparity, said Sharon Kayne, communications director for the nonprofit New Mexico Voices for Children, which released the report.

"Minorities in general earn less money," she said. "They're less likely to have money to go to college."

In addition, Kayne said, there's a lack of economic activity in the border region and a reliance on agriculture employment, which is seasonal.

Improving infrastructure, reducing public health risks, emphasizing stay-in-school programs and improving job opportunities for parents are among recommendations made in the report to improve border poverty.

Of six border counties studied, poverty rates among Hispanic children were least in Grant County (29 percent) and greatest in Luna County (51 percent). For whites, rates were least in Otero County (15 percent) and greatest in Luna County (28 percent.) Both Hispanics and whites in the six counties had poverty rates greater than those in non-border counties.

According to the report, average high school dropout rates were lower in border counties than the rest of the state, though Hispanics were more likely to drop out than their white counterparts.

A "unique dynamic of factors" plays into educating students in the border region, including culture, language and immigration, said Maria Louisa González, executive director for the Center for Border and Indigenous Education Leadership.

"These factors call for a very specialized, instructional type of program, with very specialized unique interventions that meet the needs of this area," she said. "We need to

prepare our school personnel to understand that the issues related to immigration and their impact on schooling."

González said families of poor children are likely to move frequently, as they search for less expensive rent. That means they're more likely to change schools than other children, which leads to a less-stable education.

Lisa Adams-Shafer, Kids Count director and author of the report, said the document will aid organizations in lobbying.

"The numbers often help give us a more powerful voice when we go to our policymakers in Santa Fe on behalf of our children," she said.

State Rep. Jeff Steinborn, D-Las Cruces, said he hopes the report prompts local businesses to take steps to address poverty.

"What I would love to see is the business community lay down a challenge to create 500 or 1,000 new business internships, targeted at the lower income population — to get kids into the workplace in junior high and high school and give them a taste of an experience they may not have had in life," he said.

Diana M. Alba can be reached at dalba@lcsun-news.com