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State's Poor Children Mostly Minorities

By Angela Turner

Journal Northern Bureau

SANTA FE— Eight out of 10 poor children in New Mexico are either Hispanic, American Indian or black, a nonprofit child advocacy organization reported Thursday.

New Mexico Voices for Children, a statewide nonprofit child advocacy organization, released new Census data on the state's minority children in poverty at a news conference at Santa Fe's La Fonda.

New Mexico, a majority minority state, leads the nation in child poverty, the organization's research director, Kelly O'Donnell, said. One in four children is poor, she said, and one in three is born in poverty.

"Growing up in poverty is probably the single best indicator that you will raise your own child in poverty," O'Donnell said.

She said at the next state legislative session she will lobby lawmakers to consider policies on taxes, health insurance and child care that would help poor people.

Thursday's press conference was part of a meeting of the New Mexico Collaborative of Hispanics in Philanthropy.

Ernesto Garcia, who represented the nonprofit organization Tapetes de Lana at the meeting, said he found the data depressing. He said he never knew he was poor while he was growing up happy and content in a home in Mora that had a dirt floor and farm animals nearby.

"I figure this tells you that you're poor, and it sometimes lowers you more," Garcia said in an interview.

During the meeting, Ben Tafoya, representing Hoy Recovery Program in Española, said times have changed from when poor people were concentrated around other poor people.

"We also have to see we didn't know what our opportunities were," he said. "Kids today do."

While the poverty rate for children decreased from 27 percent in 1990 to 25 percent in 2000, the actual numbers of children in poverty increased, the data showed. The numbers of children in poverty increased from 119,000 to 127,300, according to the statistics.

The depth of poverty increased for poor children from 1990 to 2000. The depth of poverty is the extent to which a family's income falls short of the federal poverty threshold.

The median family income for poor Hispanic families with children dropped from 49 percent of the federal poverty level in 1990 to 39 percent in 2000.

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