

24% of N.M. Kids in Poverty

By Sean Olson

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About one in four New Mexico children lived in poverty in 2007, according to new data released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau in its American Community Survey.

That number is up from previous estimates of a nearly 20 percent poverty level for New Mexicans under 18. National poverty estimates for 2007 are at about 18 percent for children, according to the Census Bureau.

Census Bureau spokesman Jerry O'Donnell said Tuesday that while poverty levels across the nation have leveled off in recent years, the numbers of children in poverty have been growing.

New Mexico had fewer than one in five —about 18 percent — of its total population living in poverty last year, while the United States remained level at about 12.5 percent.

Poverty levels differ based on family size, but a family of four in poverty would make less than \$21,200 annually, according to federal guidelines.

The number of New Mexicans without health insurance also grew, according to data from a separate Census Bureau survey — the Current Population Survey — also released Tuesday.

About 22.5 percent of New Mexico's population was uninsured last year, while 15.3 percent went uninsured across the nation, according to the Census Bureau.

Gerry Bradley, New Mexico Voices for Children research director, said his group tracks health insurance and estimated a 2.4 percent raise in the number of uninsured since 2004-2005 numbers were analyzed.

He said government-sponsored health insurance was not keeping up with those who were losing health insurance benefits at work.

"We all know that fewer and fewer private employers are offering health insurance," Bradley said.

The two surveys, both by the Census Bureau, tackled poverty at a state level with significant differences in results. The varying results can partly be attributed to the two surveys using different samples of people who participated. The American Community Survey had a larger margin of error.

The Current Population Survey estimated poverty as a whole and children in poverty in New Mexico at much lower levels than the American Community Survey.

O'Donnell said that the American Community Survey should be used as the official data at state level, however.

Bradley, who used the lower estimates for his group's findings, said the poverty level in New Mexico was still a big problem.

He said border communities and the Navajo Nation have large poverty problems and are the primary reason jobs and income have grown in New Mexico, but the poverty level remains static.

"I think we're just not involving everyone in the economy," Bradley said.