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New Mexico Among Worst in Poverty, Uninsured, Census Bureau Reports

By Barry Massey / *Associated Press*

SANTA FE — New Mexico continues to rank among the worst in the country in its rates of poverty and uninsured people, the Census Bureau reported Tuesday.

Roughly one in five New Mexicans have no health insurance and about that number live in poverty.

The Census Bureau said its new estimates for 2003-2004 showed no statistically meaningful change in those economic and social measures for New Mexico from 2002-2003.

"No change is very disappointing," said Gerry Bradley, an economist and research director for **New Mexico Voices For Children**. "I'd like to see the gears engaging a little better."

Bradley said the Census Bureau figures indicate that the state's economy is stuck in a "holding pattern."

The latest estimates are from a survey by the Census Bureau of a sample of households across the country.

The federal agency uses two-year averages — with the latest being 2003-2004 — for evaluating changes within a state over time because of the relative small sample in its population survey. Three-year averages — 2002-2004 — are used by the agency to make comparisons among states.

The three-year average poverty rate in New Mexico was 17.5 percent. Because of sampling variability, according to the Census Bureau, New Mexico's rate was not statistically different than the poverty rates for Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, the District of Columbia, Texas and West Virginia.

Nationally, the three-year average poverty rate was 12.4 percent.

New Mexico had a three-year average uninsured rate of 21.4 percent, followed by Oklahoma with 19.2 percent. Only Texas had a higher share of its population without health insurance, 25.1 percent.

The national three-year average was 15.5 percent.

New Mexico also ranked near the bottom nationally in median household income.

The state's three-year average median income was \$37,587 and only five states were lower than that. The national average was \$44,473.

Larry Waldman, senior economist with the Bureau of Business and Economic Research at the University of New Mexico, said the small sample of New Mexico households in the Census Bureau survey made it difficult to draw conclusions about short-term changes in the state.

"One could say that New Mexico doesn't stack up well in terms of broad measurements of economic performance or economic well-being. But that's something we have known for decades. The question is, 'Is it changing?' Well, it doesn't appear to be changing much," said Waldman.