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State's Social Health Poor, Study Says

By Patricia L. Garcia

The Associated Press

Samantha Snow has seen a lot in 21 years of life.

At 14, she was homeless. At 17, she was trying to get off the streets and kick a drug habit.

After moving in with her mother a few months later, she found out she was pregnant. She left her mother's place for her father's house, only to move again— this time to her aunt's.

She tried it on her own after her son was born. As an 18-year-old single mother, she soon found that her \$800-a-month paycheck wasn't enough.

"I've been through all of it, through welfare, assisted child care, women's housing," Snow said. "I've tapped into just about every resource."

Snow is just one of many New Mexicans who have been affected by poverty, teenage drug abuse and unemployment— all indicators of the social health of the state.

According to a new report released by the Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy, New Mexico's social health is ailing more than any other state in the nation.

New Mexico is at the bottom for the second consecutive year.

Marc Miringoff, director of the institute, said the study is meant to show where the state's strengths and weaknesses are. He said it could help policymakers apply resources where they are most needed.

Lawmakers need to do just that to move New Mexico forward, said Kay Monaco, executive director of New Mexico Voices for Children.

"Unless we really concentrate and take these kinds of reports as a wake-up call, then we're never going to change our perception," she said, adding that lawmakers shouldn't focus on quick fixes.

"Let's be realistic and make a commitment to be better in five years," she said.

New Mexico received its lowest marks in child poverty and insurance coverage, ranking last in those areas. The state was also given an F for its graduation rates, unemployment, wages, suicide, drunken driving deaths, teenage drug abuse and homicides.

The report shows more than 26 percent of New Mexico's children live in poverty compared with less than 7 percent in Maryland, which ranked first in that area.

The Kids Count study, released in June, also indicated that New Mexico has the highest child poverty rates among states. The study found that 11 percent of New Mexico children live in extreme poverty.

The study noted that child poverty, graduation and health insurance are principal indicators that appear to be vital in shaping the success or failure of a state.

Monaco said lawmakers and community leaders are failing to target the problems.

"We can't just create high-wage jobs in New Mexico when we have a high high-school dropout rate," she said.

This marks the second year for the Fordham study, which takes a comprehensive look at social indicators that affect people's lives. It classifies New Mexico as being in social recession since the state received failing grades in many categories and finished last overall.

Here are highlights of New Mexico's ratings in a study by the Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy:

- 50th overall for its social health policies for the second year.
- 49th in homicides, with almost nine murders and non-negligent manslaughter per 100,000 people.
- 44th in drunken driving deaths, with 46.5 percent of all traffic deaths involving alcohol.
- 14th in food stamp coverage, with 65 percent of all eligible households receiving food stamps.
- Top 10 (6th) in child abuse, with about 24 children per 1,000 who were involved in reports of child abuse.
- Grade of F in high school completion, suicide, homicide, average weekly wages, alcohol traffic deaths, teenage drug abuse, unemployment, poverty and health insurance coverage.

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