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N.M. Children's Mortality Among Worst

By Jackie Jadrnak

Journal Staff Writer

New Mexicans do a good job of saving newborns' lives. Keeping them alive until adulthood, though, is a real problem.

The state ranks 16th in infant mortality, but 48th in mortality for children ages 1 to 14, a death rate that increased 55 percent from 2000 to 2005, according to the Kids Count data book to be released today. In the mortality categories, the No. 1-ranked state has the lowest death rate, and the 50th-ranked state has the highest death rate.

The biggest contributor to childhood deaths is accidental injury, most often from a motor vehicle accident.

In the Kids Count report, New Mexico fell one ranking from last year to 48th— Alabama moved up— in overall well-being of its children. The report is compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

"We've been in the bottom five for many years now," said Lisa Adams-Shafer, Kids Count program director with New Mexico Voices for Children. "It's going to take a long time to also move up. We need to start now."

New Mexico's consistently low rankings usually are attributed to the state's poverty rate.

"We know that poverty is a risk factor for child abuse, drug use, teen pregnancy— a whole host of issues," said Romaine Serna, spokeswoman for the Children, Youth and Families Department.

New policies put in place last year, such as an increase in the minimum wage and the working family tax credit, might help, according to Adams-Shafer.

The Kids Count book showed New Mexico's death rate for youngsters 1 to 14 increasing from 20 per 100,000 in 2000 to 31 per 100,000 in 2005.

"It's tragic," Serna said.

In comparison, the national rate fell to 20 from 22.

New Mexico's population is low, so the actual number of

childhood fatalities is very small— and "rates can go up and down quite a bit," said Deborah Busemeyer, spokeswoman for the state Department of Health.

Any increase in children's deaths can't be blamed on child abuse— those fatalities have remained steady in recent years, according to Serna.

The Kids Count report does not break down causes of death. The state Department of Health provided statistics to the Journal showing that childhood deaths were low in 2000 and rose steadily again to 2005. But about as many children (114) died in 2005 as did in 1998 (115).

No clear cause emerged for the more recent upward trend, with increases among birth defects, unintentional injuries— but not motor vehicle accidents— and "other natural causes."

Besides its child death rate, New Mexico ranked in the bottom 10 states for births to teens; high school dropouts; teens neither attending school nor working; poverty; parents who don't have a full-time job; and single-parent families.

Far fewer youths ages 10 to 15 are in juvenile detention in New Mexico: 47 per 100,000, compared with the national average of 125.

Both Serna and Adams-Shafer attributed that to juvenile justice reform, particularly in Bernalillo County, where youths are screened using objective criteria for whether they require detention or not. Many can be diverted to mental health treatment, Adams-Shafer said.

"There is a strong and robust commitment to detention reform in this state," Serna said.