

KIDS COUNT

State ranked 48th for child well-being

By Heather Clark
The Associated Press

ALBUQUERQUE — New Mexico ranks 48th in the nation for child well-being with poor showings in its teen pregnancy and child death rates, and the number of high school dropouts and youths living in poverty, according to an annual Kids Count report.

New Mexico's ranking dropped one slot from 47th last year. The state is followed by Louisiana and Mississippi, while Alabama moved up into the 47th spot. New Hampshire ranked No. 1 for child well-being, the report released Thursday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found.

"Eliminating poverty and having the state move up into the top half is going to take a long-term committed effort," said Lisa Adams-Shafer, Kids Count program manager for New Mexico Voices for Children.

The report ranked all 50 states on 10 indicators of child well-being using the latest statistics available. New Mexico ranked 41st nationwide when the Casey Foundation began doing Kids Count reports in 1990, but it has hovered around 46th to 48th since 1993.

New Mexico tied with Texas for the worst teen pregnancy rate in the country with 62 births per 1,000 females, ages 15 to 19, in 2005. New Mexico's teen pregnancy rate has declined since 2000, but the national rate decreased at a faster rate.

New Mexico's child death rate for 1- to 14-year-olds grew by 55 percent since 2000 with 31 deaths per 100,000 children in 2005, placing the state at 48th nationally, the report said.

Adams-Shafer said many of the deaths were accidental.

"We need to make sure kids are just using their seat belts and parents are making sure their kids are wearing helmets on their bikes," she said.

New Mexico also ranked 48th in the nation for two other indicators. Twelve percent of 16- to 19-year-olds were not attending school and not working, and 26 percent of children live in poverty with annual incomes below \$20,444 for a family of two adults and two children in 2006, the report found.

The good news was New Mexico ranked 16th for its infant mortality rate of 6.1 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2005.

New Mexico's indicators and the state's ranking nationally included:

- ◆ A teen death rate of 87 deaths per 100,000 children, ages 15 to 19 in 2005 (40th).
- ◆ 10 percent high-school dropouts for 16- to 19-year-olds in 2006 (47th).
- ◆ 38 percent of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment (46th).
- ◆ 37 percent of children living in single parent families (46th).

The effects of state initiatives, such as raising the minimum wage and creating a state working families tax credit, are not reflected in the data, which was for 2005 and 2006, the latest years available, Adams-Shafer said.

"These kinds of programs are a great start, but it will take a lot more to move New Mexico out of the bottom 10," Adams-Shafer said.

The state needs to decrease the number of children living in poverty, expand early child-care and education programs, and make sure all children have health insurance coverage, she said.