

New Mexico again ranks low in child well-being

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Farmington Daily Times

Article Launched:07/25/2007 12:00:00 AM MDT

http://www.daily-times.com/news/ci_6456353

FARMINGTON — An annual report released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that New Mexico continues to be among the worst states when it comes to child well-being.

According to the Foundation's Kids Count national state rankings, New Mexico ranked 47th. Only Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi fared worse.

In the last 17 years, New Mexico's consistent low ranking on the list has not gone unnoticed by child advocacy groups.

This "unfortunate" consistency is something that needs to be addressed through more aggressive policy making, said Lisa Adams-Shafer, Kids Count director at New Mexico Voices for Children, an advocacy group for low-income children and families.

"We're always at the bottom, unfortunately," she said. "The general message you can take from this is we are ranked low and we have a long way to go and a lot of work to do to move up."

The highest ranking the state has received occurred in 1990 when New Mexico was 41st. The year after that, the state slipped three spots and, in the years since, it has not climbed higher than 46th. In four of the last eight years, New Mexico was ranked 48th.

State rankings are based on 10 factors. These indicators are: percentage of low-birth weight babies; infant-mortality rate; child-death rate; teen-death rate; teen-birth rate; percentage of teens who are high school dropouts; percentage of teens who neither attend school nor have jobs; percentage of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment; percentage of children living in poverty; and percentage of children in single-parent families.

New Mexico ranked among the 10 worst states in eight of the 10 categories: child deaths, teen deaths, teen-pregnancy rates, high school dropouts, inactive teens, parents without secure jobs, child poverty and single-parent families.

These findings are consistent with the current conditions found in San Juan County, said T.C. Shaffer, the northwest projects director of New Mexico Voices for Children.

The reason New Mexico is always "wrestling with Louisiana" for last place on the list is because of the nature of the state's geography and population, Shaffer said.

"It's extremely rural, per-capita income is low and access to health care or prenatal care is low," he said.

As for the high teen-pregnancy rate — New Mexico ranks 48th on the list, with approximately one out of every 16 females 15 to 19 years old having a child. Shaffer said that too can be attributed to the nature of the state.

"It's not a new phenomenon here. Teen sexual activity is part of the social norm in rural, isolated communities," he said.

The problem indicators on Kids Count's list also share a common trait, he added. Low-income populations tend to have more of these problems — from health-care coverage to drug use to single-parent homes.

According to the report, in 2006, nearly 26 percent of children lived below the poverty line in New Mexico, which

meant living in households with income of less than \$20,000 for a family of two adults and two children.

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