

# report: Welfare of children in New Mexico improves

## State moves up 5 spots in national ranking

Las Cruces

Bulletin

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New Mexico has moved up from last year's ranking of 48th in the nation for child well-being to 43rd according to the 2009 Kids Count data book, the newest edition of the annual state-by-state study on the health and welfare of America's youth.

The data book, published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, was released July 28. It shows that New Mexico has also improved its ranking on six of the 10 key indicators of child well-being since 2000.

Still, the report presents a mixed picture for the state's children. New Mexico ranks among the bottom 10 states on four of the 10 key indicators used in the report: teen birth rate (ranking 49th among the states), children without secure parental employment (ranking 44th), child poverty rate (ranking 47th) and children living in single-parent families (ranking 48th).

Some of the most striking improvements are in New Mexico's infant mortality and teen dropout rates.

"Our low infant mortality rate has long been the highlight in the Kids Count data book," said Christine Hollis, Kids Count program manager at New Mexico Voices for Children.

New Mexico's infant mortality rate is lower than the national average, ranking 14th in that indicator.

In addition, New Mexico's teen dropout rate has been cut in half since 2000, ranking New Mexico 36th nationally. Kids Count defines this indicator as the percentage of 16- to 19-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and are not high school graduates. This definition may not track exactly with New Mexico's Public Education Department determine dropout rates, however.

"The expansion of our investment in Medicaid and education, especially Pre-K and K-12, during the Richardson/Denish administration is starting to pay off," Eric Griego, Executive Director of New Mexico Voices said. "However, more investment is still needed to move these numbers further, particularly given the current economic downturn."

The 2009 Kids Count report contains the most recent U.S. Census Bureau data available – most of it from 2006-07 – which does not reflect the effects of the current recession.

NM Voices, the Annie E. Casey Kids Count state affiliate, has prepared a supplement to the Data Book, available at [www.nmvoices.org/kidscount.htm](http://www.nmvoices.org/kidscount.htm), showing more clearly New Mexico's ranking on each of the 10 measures, what the state would need to do to gain a national ranking of No. 1, and policy efforts that could help move New Mexico in this direction. A link to the national data book can also be found there.

Nationally, the data book shows large disparities for children based on race or ethnicity, which may impact New Mexico's ranking.

"Because New Mexico is a minority-majority state, we are concerned that the report shows that, on several measures, Hispanic child well-being is worse than child well-being in the U.S. as a whole," Hollis said.

Hispanic teens, for example, have the highest teen birth rate nationally (83 births per 1,000 females ages 15-19, compared to the overall teen birth rate of 42 per 1,000), and more than one-third of the country's Hispanic children live in single-parent families.

"New Mexico also has the second highest percentage of Native Americans, and the indicators for Native American children are dismal," Hollis added.

Nationally, Native Americans have the highest teen death rate (95 deaths per 100,000 teens ages 15-19,

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as opposed to the national average of 64/100,000), and more than half (52 percent) of Native American children live in families where no parent has full-time, secure employment, versus 33 percent of U.S. children overall.

This year's report marks two decades of Kids Count data collection and includes an essay that takes stock of how much progress the country as a whole has made in collecting data that can help move public policies that improve children's well-being.

In the 20 years of data books, New Mexico has always ranked in the bottom 10 among the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The state hit its highest overall ranking of 40th in 1995. the state's lowest ranking of 48th dogged it for five years in 1999, 2001, 2004, 2006 and 2008.

This year's Data Book is complemented by the launch of an expanded web-based Kids Count Data Center (<http://datacenter.kidscount.org/databook>), containing multiple measures of child well-being that include information on national, state, county and metropolitan levels. Information specific to New Mexico is found at <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/nm>.

Kids Count is a program of NM Voices for Children and is made possible by grants from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

NM Voices for Children is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization advocating for policies to improve the health and well-being of New Mexico's children, families and communities.

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