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N.M. Has Nation's Highest Rate of Children Living in Poverty

By Leslie Hoffman

The Associated Press

A new report highlights New Mexico's continued struggle with children in poverty amid some national improvement in the lives of American youngsters early this decade compared with the mid-1990s.

The annual Kids Count report, released Thursday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, found New Mexico had the highest rate of children living in poverty in 2001 and did better than only Louisiana and Mississippi in its overall ranking of the wellbeing of its children.

That overall ranking fell from a 46th place finish in last year's report.

Nationally, between 1996 and 2001 improvements were reported in eight of the 10 indicators that the report uses to measure success. Among those measures: children in poverty, children living with a parent who lacks a secure year-round job and children dropping out of high school.

New Mexico improved its child poverty rate over the same period, going from 32 percent to 26 percent. The state also improved in six other areas, including the child death rate, high school dropout rate and teen death rate by accident, homicide or suicide.

However, the highest ranking New Mexico attained in any of the improved areas in the latest report was 35th, registering a 59 percent rate for teen deaths by accident, homicide or suicide. That compared with a 50 percent national average, based on 2001 figures.

Kelly O'Donnell, the research director for the New Mexico Voices for Children, said the bottom line is that the numbers for the second straight year show about one in four New Mexico kids lives in poverty.

"The story is essentially the same because our approach as a state to these problems is essentially the same," she said.

The report also ranked New Mexico, at 34 percent, worst for children living with a parent who lacks a secure year-round job and second to last, at 36 percent, for percent of families with children headed by a single parent.

The numbers also show 16 percent of New Mexico children without insurance in 2001 compared with a national average of 12 percent.

Lt. Gov. Diane Denish said state leaders are taking a collaborative approach to reverse the numbers, which predate Gov. Bill Richardson's time in office. She is chair of the "Children's Cabinet," a group of state department heads and representatives from other government and community agencies created last year to address health and economic issues that affect New Mexico's youngsters.

The group is working to draft a set of legislative priorities for the 2005 legislative session, which

Denish said she expects to begin releasing by early fall.

Already, she said officials have made progress on some issues, such as child immunization rates thanks to a public awareness push. The report showed 68 percent of 2-year-olds were immunized in New Mexico in 2002 compared with a 79 percent national average.

But O'Donnell pointed to Medicaid as one important way to provide for the well-being of New Mexico's children and urged state leaders to fully fund the program.

Under a budget passed by the Legislature and signed into law by Richardson, the administration must implement about \$40 million in cost savings in Medicaid in the fiscal year that starts next month.

The program, which has been one of the fastest growing programs in the state budget, pays for medical care for about a fifth of the state's residents — covering more than 400,000 poor, disabled and uninsured children in lower income families.

"Medicaid has been growing at a staggering rate," Denish said. "We are doing some cost-cutting measures, but we are making every effort to make sure Medicaid is available to the children of New Mexico."

Overall, the report found conditions worst for the well-being of children in Mississippi, then Louisiana, New Mexico, Alabama, South Carolina, Arizona, Arkansas, Tennessee, West Virginia and North Carolina.

Conditions were best in Minnesota, followed by New Hampshire, New Jersey, Iowa, Utah, Vermont, Connecticut, North Dakota, Massachusetts and Nebraska.

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On the Net:

Kids Count: <http://www.kidscount.org>

New Mexico Voices for Children: <http://www.nmadvocates.org>

State Children, Youth and Families Department: <http://www.state.nm.us/cyfd/index.htm>

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