Report: N.M. still ranks among worst states for kids

Kids Count update shows some ups, some downs in children's well-being

By Diana Del Mauro
The New Mexican

On measures of child health and welfare, New Mexico now ranks 47th in the nation — one notch better than last year, a new report says.

The latest *Kids Count* report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation shows New Mexico continues to struggle alongside the usual suspects: Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi.

"We're still near the bottom. So I think we need to really take a look at what it will take to move to at least to the top half of child well-being indicators," said Lisa Adams-Shafer, the Kids Count director for New Mexico Voices for Children.

The new report gives an update on 10 key indicators. However, those numbers reflect what was happening two to three years ago.

Some things have gotten better; some things have gotten worse.

While New Mexico continues to have a higher dropout rate than all but three states, the percent of

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Kids: Ratings poor for births, deaths, dropouts

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teens who quit high school fell 38 percent between 2000 and 2005. That was the biggest area of improvement for the state over time.

New Mexico has some of the worst ratings in the nation for child deaths, teen deaths, teen births, high-school dropouts, idle teens, insecurely employed parents, child poverty and single-parent families.

Yet the teen death rate, teen birth rate and the infant mortality rate declined during a four-year period. Also, New Mexico ranks 26th for the percentage of babies weighing less than 5.5 pounds — a substantial improvement over last year's ranking of 33rd.

New Mexico has consistently had an infant-mortality rate lower than the national average, something the New Mexico Health Department partly attributes to breast-feeding.

The report says New Mexico has lost ground in other areas. The state's biggest failing, according to Kids Count, is a 40 percent increase in the child death rate between 2000 and 2004.

A closer examination, though, shows no dramatic change in the death rate for children, and the report's information is not "terribly helpful," said Deputy State Epidemiologist Michael Landen

In 2005, 114 children between the ages of 1 and 14 died compared to 79 in 2000. Motor-vehicle crashes and other unintentional injuries, such as drownings and bike crashes, caused the most deaths.

That sounds like a big change, but the report doesn't make clear that the average number of deaths from 1998 to 2005 was 101, according to the state Health Department.

"To use the year 2000 as the base line is problematic for New Mexico, because this year by far had the lowest number of child deaths," Landen said.

Landen is hopeful new efforts, such as the Child Helmet Safety Act for kids on bicycles, skateboards, scooters and skates, will reduce the number of unintentional deaths in the future.

The report also takes note of a 15 percent increase in single-parent families in New Mexico between 2000 and 2005, because married-couple families usually fare better financially.

The report notes a 15 percent increase in single-parent families between 2000 and 2005, but one author says that number could be exaggerated.

But Laura Beavers, one of the authors of *Kids Count*, said in an interview that the escalation could be exaggerated. The single-parent family category includes households led by one adult as well as households with two unmarried partners. In 2005, New Mexico had 9 percent of children living with cohabitating domestic partners compared to 6 percent nationally, she said, and the financial and socio-emotional impact of that arrangement is less understood.

Secure, full-time, year-round employment for parents is also in short supply here — and a growing problem nationally. In New Mexico, the problem of parents stuck with part-time or seasonal jobs worsened by 8 percent between 2000 and 2005.

Some problems haven't gotten better or worse. The percentage of children living in poverty went up 13 percent over a five-year period nationally, but stayed the same — at 26 percent — in New Mexico. Sixteen percent of the state's children lacked health insurance, compared to 11 percent nationally.

"We hope that some of the successes we had in the 2007 legislative session — such as a statewide increase in the minimum wage, a state-level earned income tax credit, and budget expansions for childcare and Medicaid — will help improve these numbers," New Mexico Voices for Children's executive director Eric Griego said in a news release.

Another stagnant area: Too many kids ages 16 to 19 in New Mexico are twiddling their thumbs. They are neither in school nor working — so what are they doing? The report doesn't get at that. In 2005, 11 percent of the state's teens fit this category.

The Kids Count report devoted a special section to what states could do to create more stability for children who are removed from their homes because of abuse or neglect.

New Mexico places fewer children in foster care than what's typical in the U.S., with eight children out of 1,000 in the child welfare system compared to 10 out of 1,000 nationally.

"Unfortunately, those numbers don't tell us whether this is good news or bad," Adams-Shafer said in a news release. "It could mean that we're better at getting children placed into permanent homes or reuniting them with their families, or it could mean that we're not as good at getting them out of dangerous home situations in the first place."

An average of 19 months in foster care is common here. The New Mexico Children Youth and Families Department is already using some approaches endorsed in the report.

In Bernalillo County, a team of family members and people in the community regularly sit down with health care professionals to help decide where to place children who are on 48-hour police hold or about to be removed from their home.

"We've enjoyed great success with that," CYFD spokeswoman Romaine Serna said. "The big push now is family involvement."

Nine months ago, biological parents and foster parents started meeting at "ice-breakers" in Albuquerque. The goal of the program is to mitigate the tension between the two sets of parents and share important information, such as what the child likes to eat.

A new effort to honor connections in the child's life starts Aug. 1 in Bernalillo County. During a formal ceremony, the biological parents will hand over their child to the new adoptive parents, giving their child permission to move on.

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