

Albuquerque Tribune

<http://abqtrib.com/news/2007/jul/25/kids-still-fare-poorly-nm-report-states/>

Kids still fare poorly in N.M., report states

By [Kate Nash \(Contact\)](#)

Wednesday, July 25, 2007

More info

[Download a PDF](#) showing the full Kids Count 2007 report on the status of the nation's children.

SANTA FE — The news is bleak for New Mexico's kids: The state is again stuck near the bottom of national lists that rank children's well-being.

The death rate for New Mexico children got 40 percent worse in 2000-04. The state still has more children without health insurance than the national average. And 26 percent of children lived in poverty from 2000-05, according to Kids Count 2007, a report to be released today.

In short, the state ranked 47th overall and among the bottom 10 in eight of the 10 categories listed in the annual report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The news could also be bad for Gov. Bill Richardson's presidential campaign - should he start to rise in the polls.

"In a field of eight in a Democratic primary, it probably won't get that much attention," said Albuquerque pollster Brian Sanderoff. "At this point, the candidates are hardly even sniping at the front-runners."

However, Sanderoff said, Richardson can expect questions from journalists and bloggers on the state rankings.

"He'll be put on the defensive a little by the bloggers; he'll be at 'Meet-the-Press'-type things where journalists will bring it up."

Richardson's administration has emphasized children, and he dedicated the 2006 legislative session as the Year of the Child.

Even with that, New Mexico didn't fare well in the study, although it is up one notch from 2006, when it ranked 48th overall.

Among the findings:

The rate of New Mexico children who died before their 15th birthday rose, from 20 deaths per 100,000 children in 2000 to 28 deaths in 2004. Nationally, the child death rate fell to 20 deaths per 100,000 in 2004.

The number of children who live in a home where no parent has full-time, year-round employment grew by 8 percent from 2000-05, with 41 percent of New Mexico kids now in that category.

The percentage of children who live in single-parent homes increased 15 percent from 2000-05 and accounted for 38 percent of the state's child population in 2005.

More than 3,900 kids in 2004 needed a "permanent family connection" and eight of every 1,000 lived in foster care.

Only Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi did worse overall.

Gubernatorial spokesman Gilbert Gallegos said many of the conclusions in the report are based on old data "which makes it impossible to measure the effects of the dozens of initiatives the governor has put in place in the past two years."

Gallegos said the state is getting better for children.

"Obviously, it takes time to reverse decades of poverty. But the governor is confident that we are making progress, and (that) our substantial investments in early childhood education, child care and increased access to health care will pay off in the future," he said.

The report did have some good news: The state's high school dropout rate fell from 16 percent to 10 percent in 2005, and its infant mortality rate improved from 2000-04.

But the bright spots aren't enough, said Eric Griego, executive director of New Mexico Voices for Children, who called the rankings "unacceptable."

"The question for the governor and the Legislature is what are we going to do for 20 years to turn this ship around?"

In the past few years, the Legislature has expanded child care, insured more children, expanded Medicaid coverage, provided better breakfasts, given tax credits to working families and raised the minimum wage.

Still, Griego said, it hasn't been enough.

"I think we had a really good session last year, one of the best years we've had on these issues. But the data we got just demonstrates how tough the problems are."

His group will push for further tax reform and more help for working families, among other things, he said.

With the report in hand, the state's Children, Youth and Families Department will consider legislative initiatives to pursue, a spokeswoman said.

"When you look at the overall data, then of course I think there's always a desire for improvement," department spokeswoman Romaine Serna said.

But, she said, the report outlines a "combination of challenges and successes, just like with any other state."

State Republican Party spokesman Scott Darnell said New Mexicans should hope for better results next year.

"Politically, Bill Richardson has no leg to stand on when claiming to the national press that he has improved the lives of New Mexicans. The most vulnerable among us, our children, are still struggling to survive and succeed," Darnell said.

"We owe them more," he said. "We owe them better."