

N.M. Dips in Children's Ranking

By Juan Carlos Rodriguez

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New Mexico moved into the bottom five this year in a national study measuring child well-being.

The state dropped three places to No. 46 in the 2010 Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count report.

The report measures states' performances in 10 categories, including low birth weight, teen death rate and the percentage of children in poverty.

The data in the report come from 2007 and 2008.

An increase in the number of child and teen deaths accounted for some of New Mexico's low ranking.

Last year, the report showed the teen death rate, for those 15 to 19, was 84 out of every 100,000. This year, the number went up to 96. In 2000, it was 99.

New Mexico's ranking in the category fell from 37th to 48th.

The real problem lies in the teen birth rate, poverty and employment categories, where New Mexico again is among the bottom five spots, said Eric Griego, a Democratic state senator and executive director of New Mexico Voices for Children, a nonprofit group that helps compile the report.

"We were all very disappointed that we lost some ground," Griego said. "The economic categories seem to drive a lot of the other indicators."

The state ranked 47th in the number of children in poverty, with 24 percent ending up in the category. And New Mexico ranked 48th in the number of children living in single-parent households, at 40 percent.

"This is where we were 10 years ago," Griego said. "It'd be nice to get out of the bottom 10."

He also warned that the report used data from before the recession, so things could get worse before they get better.

The poverty rates were noticeably different among the races. Forty percent of Native American children are living in poverty, while the percentage for Hispanics is 30 percent and for African-Americans, 25 percent.

"What that means is that we're creating a real cohort of kids of color who are growing up in poverty," Griego said. "Poverty is strongly linked to other indicators, and that's something we've got to think about and address."

New Mexico did get some good news. The state ranked 13th in infant mortality, with 24 deaths per 1,000 live births.

Griego said some experts have said the more-communal Hispanic family culture may account for the state's standing in that category, although he said there are no studies or research to back that up.

For New Mexico to move out of the bottom tier, Griego said the state must invest more in early childhood education and health programs.

"Really aggressive investment in the first five years would really turn this around," he said.