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Single Parents Face an Uphill Battle

By Toby Smith

Journal Staff Writer

By the time Alishia Almaguer was 18, she had quit high school, gotten pregnant twice and, she says, been hospitalized three times after savage beatings by a boyfriend.

Now 20 and the single mother of an 11-month-old girl, Almaguer lives in Albuquerque's South Valley with her sister. "If I had to do things over," she says, "I probably would do them different."

Almaguer's case may be extreme, but her plight has become increasingly common in New Mexico, where last year nearly half the births were to single mothers.

Almaguer is keenly aware of the uncertainties facing her daughter, who does not even live with her.

Available statistics indicate her worries are well-founded. The future is not particularly bright for children born to single mothers in New Mexico, especially when compared to children here who grow up with two parents.

The biggest reason? Poverty.

More children are being born to single mothers in the state than ever before. And social workers, health officials, and economists cite poverty as the underlying force that influences a laundry list of expected problems for those children— education, violence and health-care access, among others.

The incidence of teen pregnancy in New Mexico has shown a slight decline in recent years. Moreover, there are many success stories of single mothers somehow making everything work. But by and large the battle that confronts children born to single mothers is hard and uphill.

The 2000 Census indicated there were about 26,000 mothers in the state with children under 18 in the home and who had never been married.

Meanwhile, that census disclosed New Mexico had about 170,000 women who were currently married and had their own children under 18 at home.

The state Health Department says that about 22 percent of children born in 1982 were delivered by single mothers. In 2001, that figure had soared to 46.3 percent, which ranks No. 2 of all states.

The periodic birth announcements in the Journal confirm this rise. Single mothers are listed nearly as often as two parents.

According to the last census, 63 percent of New Mexico children live in two-parent households. Twenty-two percent live with a single mother, 8 percent with a single father, and 6 percent don't live with either parent but typically reside with grandparents.

That 22 percent figure is up from 20 percent in the 1990 Census. Just as important, the number of children living in two-parent households is down from 70 percent in 1990.

"If you want one statistic that highlights the well-being of kids, it's poverty," says Kelly O'Donnell, an economist with **New Mexico Voices for Children**, a children's advocacy group.

A mother who can't

"If I had more money, I could have my daughter with me," Almaguer says.

Almaguer's almost year-old daughter, Shawnasie, lives in Alamosa, Colo., with Almaguer's mother, herself once a single mother. Earlier this year, an Alamosa County District Court judge ruled that Almaguer, who previously lived in Alamosa, could not bring her daughter to New Mexico to live unless she had established a home of her own here and had a job.

"It's been hard," admits Almaguer, who shares a small bedroom with her sister's children in their two-bedroom house in the South Valley. "I can only save about \$100 a month, so I think it's going to be a long time before I can afford to have my own place and have my daughter with me."

There may be six times as many two-parent families with minor children as single mothers with minor children in the state, but the children of single mothers are vulnerable to six times as many problems— from locating child care to becoming injured in the home.

"Single moms and their kids are at a high risk for all sorts of things," says Ken Warner, deputy director of the Family Services Division of the Children Youth and Families Department.

The worst culprit by far for children of single mothers is financial hardship. Says O'Donnell: "You can't overstate the role of poverty in determining the outcome of kids."

Census figures reveal that 46 percent of children of working, single mothers in New Mexico live in poverty, and 31 percent in near-poverty. Conversely, 7.2 percent of children of married couples who both work, live in poverty.

In 2002, New Mexico ranked first among all states for children living in poverty, sixth in percentage of families headed by a single parent and third in the teen birth rate. However, the teen birth rate in the state for females ages 15-17 dropped four percentage points during the 1990s.

One in four kids is poor, but on a closer look at the population of children under age 5, it's 35 percent, making more than 1 in 3 kids poor.

"We're at or near the bottom of the barrel in just about everything having to do with children," O'Donnell says.

Almaguer, a short woman with tattoos on her left triceps and wrist, started working a month ago for the first time since her return to New Mexico last year. She works 40 hours a week, mostly at night, as an aide in group homes for mentally disabled people. She had the same job when she lived in Colorado and was able to find work here for the company that runs the homes. She earns \$1,600 a month before taxes, and out of that she gives \$300 to her sister for room and board, \$400 to her mother in Colorado for taking care of her daughter, \$150 for car payments on her '91 Infiniti and \$275 for car insurance.

"What's left," she says, "goes pretty fast."

School is pushed aside

Poverty has a direct correlation to the education of a child of a single mother.

The latest U.S. census reveals that 28 percent of mothers in New Mexico who never married have less than a high school education. It also shows that 33 percent of those mothers are high school graduates who went no further. So, 61 percent of single mothers who never married have no more than a high school education.

Comparatively, 20 percent of mothers of children (under 18 and living at home) who are married

and have a spouse present do not have a high school diploma. Twenty-six percent have a diploma, but no more. Thus, 46 percent have no more than a high school diploma.

"If a single mother works," says Annamarie Luna, clinical director of Hogares, a community-based mental health agency, "when she gets home, she's too tired to take classes, too tired to respond to all her child's needs, to read books, to talk, to look at homework."

"In terms of intervention with the child," adds O'Donnell, "the educational outlook for a child with a single mom is bleak."

Almaguer was attending Rio Grande High School when her boyfriend, Dominic Hidalgo, whom she met in Alamosa, started showing up regularly in Albuquerque. She says she was 11 when she began a relationship with Hidalgo, six years her senior. He began asking Almaguer to spend time with him.

"I kept leaving school and getting put behind," Almaguer says. "Finally I just quit."

When she dropped out, she was in 10th grade.

Almaguer now attends Albuquerque Job Corps as a full-time student. She starts classes in the morning, studying the first three hours for her GED. The next three hours she studies for certifications as a nurse's aide and an office business technician. At 4:30, she leaves for her job in the group homes. She typically doesn't get back to the South Valley until after 11 p.m.

"Even if Shawnasie was here with me," Almaguer says, "I don't know how I'd be able to spend much time with her."

A frayed safety net

The vast majority of single mothers in New Mexico who are bringing up children in poverty work menial jobs during unconventional hours. That means their children must be cared for.

"Child care is a huge issue," says Hogares' Luna. "I don't think the system accommodates single moms as it should."

In October, 92 percent of the 13,506 families who received child-care assistance were single-parent households. Eight percent were two-parent families.

Health care is often an additional hurdle for single mothers. New Mexico has ranked No. 1 in the percentage of children— 21 percent— who are uninsured. Moreover, the state ranked first, with 32 percent, in the number of women of child-bearing age who are uninsured.

In a Current Population Survey for 2000-2002, compiled by the U.S. Census, 34 percent of New Mexico children, under the age of 18 and living in poverty, were uninsured.

Says Kelly O'Donnell: "Lack of health insurance goes hand-in-hand with low wages."

The violence factor

Domestic abuse is more likely to occur between a husband and wife than between a single mother and her boyfriend.

"Violence knows no boundaries," says Agnes Maldonado, executive director of the New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence. "Bad things happen if a husband is at home or if the mother has a live-in boyfriend."

Maldonado says 75 percent of the domestic violence incidents in this state occur between a married woman and her husband. When a boyfriend is involved with a single mother, domestic

abuse comprises the other 25 percent.

For every statistic, however, there are exceptions, and Almaguer is a grim exception.

After Hidalgo convinced Almaguer to move with him to Colorado, his violent side surfaced, she says.

"He started beating me," she says. "Badly."

Hidalgo was arrested and charged with domestic violence. Almaguer returned to Albuquerque in June 2002 and, fearing her boyfriend, entered a shelter, where she stayed for a year.

Hidalgo recently began serving a year's sentence in the Alamosa County Jail on a domestic violence conviction. He previously served three years in a Colorado state penitentiary for stabbing one of Almaguer's male friends.

In a telephone interview, Hidalgo denied ever hurting Almaguer. "She ran away. She left her baby here and just ran away. She's just a greedy chick, man."

A rougher world

Kathryn Chaney is director of the Women's Community Association, which runs shelters and programs for victims and abusers.

She says, "A lot of single mothers make choices that are not as good as they might be. Single mothers need to learn how to choose a safe mate. They mistake a lot of possessive jealousy for love. The men are charming in the beginning, but batterers are often hard to spot."

Jonathon LaValley, who works in the University of New Mexico's Department of Emergency Medicine, says that a child is at greater risk for injury if he is reared by a single mother rather than in a two-parent home.

"Supervision in a single-parent home is simply not as good as it is when there are parents and other relatives around much of the time."

In terms of sexual assault, however, single mothers may be better off than mothers with spouses at home, says Betty Caponera, director of the New Mexico Interpersonal Violence Date Central Depository.

"Our data show that the biggest offenders are fathers, brothers, stepfathers or cousins, rather than boyfriends."

Crime outside the home also puts children of single mothers at risk. "In many cases, children of single mothers live in much lower-income neighborhoods than two-parent families," says Luna of Hogares. "Many of the places where single mothers must live are projects or government-assisted homes, and those places tend to breed more crime—gangs and substance abuse, for instance—than traditional neighborhoods."

Almaguer says she likes the neighborhood off Blake Road SW where she lives with her sister in the South Valley. It's the area where she grew up, but it has a history of drug busts, primarily for heroin use, according to the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Department.

No statistics are available on the stresses of being a single mother, but most experts believe the pressures in that role are immense.

"The world has gotten much rougher," says Toni Berg, for 27 years the nurse at New Futures, an Albuquerque high school for teens who are expecting or have given birth.

"When I came here, the problems were pretty straightforward. If a girl got pregnant, she was

thrown out of public school. We have students today who are 'throwaway' kids. They haven't lived with their parents for several years; they are doing everything on their own. That makes it incredibly hard."

Almaguer says her dream is to have her daughter with her, in Albuquerque.

"I also want to graduate from high school and be the best mother I can be." She pauses a moment, then says, "I don't regret my daughter; just the relationship." [Click to enlarge](#)

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