

Group: N.M.'s rate of working poor highest

By Sue Vorenberg
The New Mexican

When it comes to low-income working families, New Mexico can't use the slogan "thank God for Mississippi" this time.

A new national report by the Working Poor Families Project ranked the Land of Enchantment 50th in two of its low-income rankings. About 41 percent of the population fits the group's definition of low-income working families, and 46 percent of the state's children fit that definition.

The group defines a low-income working family's earnings, based on the 2006 U.S. Census Bureau definition, as 200 percent of poverty income threshold, which averages \$41,228 for a family of four. The project used 2006 data for the report.

Mississippi, which might well be saying "thank God for New Mexico," came in 49th for its number of low-income working families, at 40 percent, and children in those families at 44 percent.

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Nationally, about 28 percent of the population qualifies as low-income working families, and 33 percent of children qualify as living in those families.

"The stark reality is that too many American families have been experiencing an economic crisis long before" the recent stock market chaos, said Brandon Roberts, director of the group and author of the report "Still Working Hard, Still Falling Short."

The project sponsored a similar report in 2004 based on 2002 data, and since then, the statistics have only gotten worse nationwide, Roberts said. About 350,000 families have been added to those categories, and almost a million children, he said. "We believe this is more than is typically acknowledged by our government," Roberts said.

In "Working Hard, Falling Short," New Mexico ranked 49th in the nation for its number of low-income working families, at 39.5 percent of the population, and children in those families at 45.7 percent.

Mississippi ranked 50th in that report, with 42.5 percent of its population as low-income working families and 49 percent of its children in those families.

Considering the data for the new report comes from 2006, it's likely the numbers for 2008

are "even more alarming," he added.

The data was gathered from the American Community Survey 2006 and defines a family as either a married couple or single parent with at least one child under age 18. It defines work as a combined family effort of 39 or more weeks at a job in the last 12 months.

The growing number of families fitting into those categories "is an example, we think, of a lack of serious commitment" by the government, Roberts said.

In New Mexico, a lot of the problems come down to economic development, said Gerry Bradley, research director of New Mexico Voices for Children. "It's an issue of the demand for labor and also an issue of working where people are living," Bradley said.

What would help is an increase in the minimum wage and improved access to support services like food stamps, Medicaid and child care support, he said.

For example, about 70 percent of the people eligible for food stamps here aren't getting them,

he said.

"The labor movement is also relatively weak in New Mexico," Bradley said. "There's not many people in unions, particularly in the private sector."

Also, about half New Mexico's low-income working families don't have health insurance, according to the report.

The growing statistics also stem from a lack of education and educational support, Roberts said. "One of the key areas is the education and skills training of adults in these families," he said.

Many of the families are headed by parents who did not graduate from high school and did not get a general equivalency diploma, he said.

In New Mexico, 44 percent of the low-income working families have a parent who didn't graduate from high school or get a GED, and 23 percent of

those families have a parent who never went to college.

"State policies and federal policies are really not up to the task" when it comes to providing enough educational assistance for those families, Roberts said.

Solutions will vary from state to state, but what the Working Poor Families Project would like to see initially is a national commission to investigate ways to support and improve the lot of those families, he said.

"This is an issue of national importance," Roberts said.

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