**by Sarah Benavidez**

Every child should have access to the opportunities and resources they need to succeed: economic security, quality education, healthcare, and a supportive family and community. The foundation of the Land of Enchantment's success is also built upon these four pillars. Investing in New Mexico's children means investing in our people, state, and nation. Each year, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT program provides child well-being rankings for the fifty states. Indicators within four primary domains of well-being (economic well-being, education, health, and family and community) are tracked and evaluated by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and by New Mexico Voices for Children, the KIDS COUNT anchor in our state, to understand and tell the story of child well-being in New Mexico. Over time, the results show us where we are, where we are improving, and where we can still do better.

The counties of Chaves, Doña Ana, Luna, and Otero comprise the area of focus for this Southern New Mexico snapshot. With a combined population of 369,881, the southern region has a notably higher percentage of Hispanic-identified children than does the rest of the state. Nearly 69 percent of children ages 0-19 are Hispanic in comparison to the state average of 59 percent (see figure, at right). In Doña Ana County, which is anchored by Las Cruces—the second largest city in New Mexico—78 percent of children are Hispanic.[1] The area also has a significantly smaller Native American population than does the state.
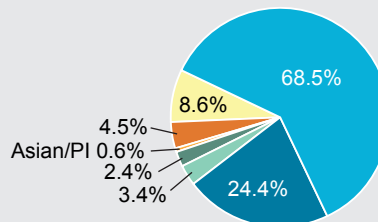
Though this area of the state is similar in some regards to New Mexico as a whole, it has unique strengths and challenges. Within the four domains of child well-being, data suggest that the four previously listed counties tend to lag behind the rest of the state in most indicators; however, there are some outcome areas where southern New Mexico outperforms the rest of the state.

**Economic Well-Being:** The most notable challenges observed are within the economic domain, which is a strong predictor of a child's outcomes later in life.
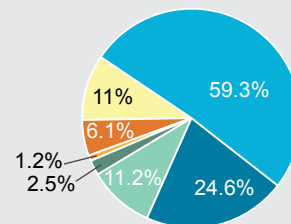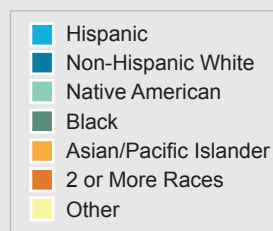
New Mexico's median household income is currently $45,382. In stark contrast, the average median income of the four selected counties is $36,684, with Luna County representing the low end at $27,426 and Chaves County the high end at $40,630.[2] Unsurprisingly given lower income numbers, child poverty numbers were markedly higher in these southern counties, with an average child poverty rate of 36 percent compared to the state average of 30 percent.[3] Another area of concern is the abundance of grandparents who are responsible for their own grandchildren and are living in poverty. Luna, Doña Ana, and Otero counties have rates far higher than the state average of 20 percent, especially Luna County with a rate of 49 percent.[4] Chaves County is an outlier with a lower rate of 16 percent.



## Southern NM counties have a higher share of Hispanic children than state

Child (ages 0-19) population by race and ethnicity,* 2015

- 68.5%
- 8.6%
- 4.5%
- Asian/PI 0.6%
- 2.4%
- 3.4%
- 24.4%

Chavez, Doña Ana, Luna and Otero Counties

Legend:
- Hispanic
- Non-Hispanic White
- Native American
- Black
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- 2 or More Races
- Other

- 59.3%
- 11%
- 6.1%
- 1.2%
- 2.5%
- 11.2%
- 24.6%

New Mexico

Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey data
NEW MEXICO VOICES FOR CHILDREN

*Some children in each race listed may also identify as Hispanic. Thus, the sum of the numbers is greater than 100%.

**Education:** Analysis of education data for these four counties shows that while the percentage of 3- and 4-year-old children enrolled in preschool is significantly lower than the state average (35 versus 46 percent),[5] high school graduation rates were higher on average in the four southern counties (74 versus 71 percent). Graduation rates are an area of encouragement, boosted by the strong performance of schools within Doña Ana County, graduating 80 percent of high school seniors. Breaking the county's average down by individual school districts provides more insight into the large gains in high school diploma attainment. Hatch Valley Municipal Schools, the northernmost of Doña Ana County's three districts, has the lowest graduation rate at 74 percent, which is still higher than the state average of 71 percent. Las Cruces Public Schools graduated 80 percent of its high school seniors. Gadsden Independent Schools, with four high schools, had a graduation rate of 86 percent.[6]

**Health:** Chaves, Doña Ana, Luna, and Otero Counties are close to state averages in two major health categories: the percentage of New Mexico children without health insurance and the percentage of low-birthweight babies. The four counties have a 5.5 percent average of uninsured children, slightly worse than the state rate of 5.1 percent.[7] However, Doña Ana County's average sits at 5 percent, better than the state average, and an encouraging number. The percentage of low-birthweight babies, defined as a child weighing less than 5.5 pounds at birth, within the four counties is 7.6 percent compared to the state average of 8.7 percent.[8] At 8.6 percent, Doña Ana County has a substantially higher percentage of low-birthweight babies in relation to the other three counties, but it is still slightly lower than the state average.

**Family and Community:** Within the domain of family and community, the low educational attainment of heads of households reflects a big challenge area for kids in three of the four counties. In Chaves, Doña Ana, and Luna Counties an average of 25 percent of children live in families where the head of household lacks a high school diploma or equivalent. Otero County, at 11 percent, outperforms both New Mexico (15 percent) and the United States (12 percent), on average.[9] Children born to parents with low educational attainment experience higher rates of poverty, food insecurity, and child abuse. All four counties have extremely high percentages of

children living in high-poverty areas. With an average of 43 percent, these southern counties have far worse rates than New Mexico and the United States, at 26 and 14 percent, respectively.[10] Looking at substantiated child abuse cases, both Chaves and Doña Ana counties had rates of 15 substantiated child victims per 1,000 children while Otero County had a rate of 17 and Luna County had a rate of 22. The New Mexico average for child abuse is 17 substantiated victims per 1,000 children.[11]

In conclusion, analysis of the data for the state of New Mexico and the counties of Chaves, Doña Ana, Luna, and Otero suggests that on average the four counties outperform the state in high school graduation rates while lagging behind in other key child well-being indicators, most notably within the economic domain.

The southern region of New Mexico has a substantially higher percentage of Hispanic children, underscoring the importance of supporting racial and ethnic minority students within a minority-majority state such as New Mexico. New Mexican children, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender deserve equal opportunity to reach their full potential. Investing in our children and our families will make our communities and our state stronger.

## Endnotes

1. US Census Bureau, American Community Survey data, 2015; 5-year estimates
2. American Community Survey, Table B19013; state data are 1-year estimates; county data are 5-year estimates
3. American Community Survey, Table S1701, and Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE); 1-year estimates
4. American Community Survey, Table B10059; state data are 1-year estimates; county data are 5-year estimates
5. American Community Survey, Table S1401; state data are 1-year estimates; county data are 5-year estimates
6. New Mexico Public Education Department, 4-year graduation rates by cohort, http://ped.state.nm.us/ped/Graduation_data.html
7. U.S. Census Bureau, Small Area Health Insurance Estimates (SAHIE)
8. Bureau of Vital Records and Health Statistics, New Mexico Department of Health; http://ibis.health.state.nm.us.
9. American Community Survey, 2010-2014, Table B17018
10. Population Reference Bureau analysis of American Community Survey, 2010-2014
11. New Mexico Children Youth and Families Department (CYFD) Protective Services Publications "360 Yearly" Reports

Get more KIDS COUNT data at datacenter.kidscount.org/data#NM

11.6.2017