

Small improvements bring little change in child well-being

Written by Sharon Kayne Communications Director New Mexico Voices for Children
Friday, 03 July 2020 01:38



ALBUQUERQUE — Despite some improvements in several of the national 2020 KIDS COUNT Data Book indicators, New Mexico continues to rank 50th in the nation on child well-being. This is the fourth year the state has ranked at the very bottom for child well-being, having ranked 50th in 2013, 2018, and 2019.

The Data Book, which is put out every year by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, looks at 16 indicators of child well-being that track economic, education, and health issues, among others, then ranks the 50 states accordingly. Although the annual report uses the most recent data available, most of the data for this edition are from 2018 – so it does not reflect the current pandemic and economic slowdown.

“What this data reflects is the end result of ten years of stingy state budgets under previous administrations that starved our schools, courts, health care, and other services that our families and businesses need in order to thrive,” New Mexico Voices for Children executive director James Jimenez said.

“We were able to undo some of that damage during the 2019 and 2020 legislative sessions, but how lawmakers respond to the current recession will determine whether those gains are sustained,” he added.

Among the improvements was the child poverty rate, which at 26% was the lowest it has been in nearly a decade. The teen birth rate also continued to decline. The rate was 25 births per 1,000 female teens ages 15 to 19 — a big drop from 66 per 1,000 in the 2010 Data Book. As

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the result of the Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act in New Mexico, the percentage of children without health insurance (5%) continued to be a bright spot, ranking it 24th in the nation on that indicator. Still, other data indicate that there is much more work to be done.

“Our educational outcomes are still a big concern and are not indicative of what our children are capable of achieving, given the right resources,” N.M. Voices Deputy Director said Amber Wallin said. “Our share of young children not enrolled in an educational care setting has improved, but only incrementally.

“We did make some gains in education funding over the past year, but sustained investments — especially through the pandemic and economic downturn — will be needed before we see the benefit of those increases in measurable outcomes,” she added.

New this year is a replacement of one of the health indicators. Teens (ages 10 to 17) who are overweight or obese, has replaced the previous indicator, teens who abuse alcohol or drugs.

Changes in how the data were collected in states across the nation made the former indicator less reliable, while comprehensive data on teens who are overweight or obese has recently become available. New Mexico does not do well on this new indicator, with 32% of teens being overweight or obese, ranking the state 33rd in the nation on this measure.

“The continued ranking of 50th should be a call to action for our state lawmakers, who are looking ahead to future state budgets,” Jimenez said. “From 2008 to 2018 we tried to cut our way to prosperity. It didn’t work then and we can’t do it now.

“We’ve got to end our over-reliance on the boom-and-bust oil and gas industries and raise revenue from more reliable, sustainable sources so that we can continue to invest in the education, health care, and public safety services that our families rely on and our economy needs,” he said.

The report’s data and rankings will be discussed in more detail at NM Voices’ virtual Kids Count

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conference on Aug. 25, 2020.

The full 2020 KIDS COUNT Data Book is available from the Annie E. Casey Foundation at aecf.org/databook.

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