

State lagging in child well-being, but we can move forward with heart

Written by By Emily Wildau, MPP For New Mexico Voices for Children
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New Mexico has dropped back to 50th for child well-being in the national *2022 KIDS COUNT Data Book* rankings, although this ranking isn't comparable to our 49th ranking last year. Still, everyone is likely feeling disheartened by this news. However, even though we are ranked last, our state has made incredible long-term progress in improving child well-being, and we can continue to make progress if we put kids at the heart of New Mexico's future policy decisions.

Despite New Mexico's ranking, we have seen real improvements in child well-being over the last decade. New Mexico has improved in 11 of the 16 indicators tracked by KIDS COUNT.

Notably, 7% fewer children live in poverty compared to ten years ago. The rate of children in New Mexico without health insurance was cut almost in half and, at 6%, only lags the national rate by one percentage point. The percentage of high school students not graduating on time has improved from 37% to 25%. The decline in teen birth rates is especially impressive, improving precipitously from 53 in 1,000 teen girls to 22 per 1,000.

Of course, there are places where New Mexico continues to fall short. Both New Mexico's child and teen death rate and the percentage of teens who are overweight and obese have increased. These increases may be connected to pandemic-induced increases in childhood anxiety and depression as families faced significant economic uncertainty and health fears.

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In 2020, nearly 13% of New Mexico children and teens ages 3 to 17 experienced anxiety and depression compared to just over 11% in 2016. Although New Mexico children have a slightly higher rate of anxiety and depression than the national rate of 12%, we did see a smaller increase between 2016 and 2020 than did the rest of the country – meaning the gap between New Mexico and the nation is significantly smaller than it was before the pandemic.

Of course, the data doesn't tell the whole story. With much of the data being from 2019 or prior, they aren't reflective of important policy changes New Mexico has made over the past several years such as the creation of the state child tax credit, increases in tax credits for parents earning low incomes, and a big expansion of child care assistance. The data also don't reflect many of the strengths of our communities, such as our diversity and the resilience of our children and families.

Although the data does not tell the whole story, the KIDS COUNT indicators provide a helpful idea of how New Mexico kids are faring. The *Data Book* can help guide New Mexico lawmakers and leaders to keep our kids and families at the heart of policy decisions to further improve child well-being. Lawmakers can do this by bringing more equity into our tax code, supporting paid family medical leave, and continuing to make investments in education from cradle to career.

New Mexico voters can also take action by voting Yes on constitutional amendment #1 on the ballot in November. CA1 would draw down a small portion of the \$26 billion Permanent School Fund in order to support high-quality early childhood care and education services – like home visiting and pre-kindergarten – and services for at-risk students.

A Yes vote on CA1 will increase sustainable funding to provide our youngest children with the best opportunities to succeed as they learn and grow. With focus and long-term commitment, New Mexico can continue to create lasting improvements in child well-being to make our state a better place to be a kid.

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