

Annual 'N.M. Kids Count Data Book' shows mixed bag for child well-being

Written by Sharon Kayne New Mexico Voices for Children
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N.M. loses ground in some areas, moves from 48 to 49 in Child Poverty

ALBUQUERQUE, - It's a case of good news/bad news for New Mexico's children in the *2019 New Mexico Kids Count Data Book*

. The most notable change in the annual accounting of child well-being, which was released Jan. 15 by New Mexico Voices for Children shows an improvement in child poverty rates. The data book also shows that teen birth rates, child health insurance rates, and preschool attendance, among other indicators, have also improved over time.

But that's countered by the bad news. While our child poverty rate has improved - from 27% in last year's data book to 26% in this year's report - New Mexico now ranks 49th in the nation on this indicator - that's down from 48th. And we've still not fully recovered from the recession, as 5,000 more children live in poverty now than did in 2008. Young children, and Hispanic and Native American children all fared worse on the child poverty indicator (with 28%, 30% and 41% living in poverty, respectively).

"We're clearly not adequately providing opportunity for children of color, who make up the largest segment of our child population," NM Voices executive director James Jimenez said. "When we're OK with the fact that so many of our children lack the opportunities they need to be successful, we really paint a dire picture for the future."

Children of color are making headway in some areas, however, with the teen birth rate dropping most dramatically among Hispanic and Native American teens. Our overall improvement in teen birth rates pulls our national ranking from 49th in 2008, up to 44th. Hispanic and Native American youth also saw the biggest improvements in the percentage of students graduating high school on time from 2008 to 2017.

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However, big disparities are seen for children of color in other areas. While the state as a whole saw a larger share of children living in high-poverty areas, the rate worsened most dramatically for black children - rising from 20% in 2012-2016 to 26% in 2013-2017.

The annual report includes data on the 16 indicators that are tracked by Kids Count, a program of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, as well as several other indicators. Most data is provided at the state and county levels, but some data is also available for the state's tribal areas. Education data is presented by school district. Of the 16 indicators, New Mexico improved in seven, worsened in three, saw no change in four, and had mixed outcomes in two. Child advocates hope state officials will take the data to heart.

"We release the data book every year just before the legislative session because we want lawmakers to be aware of how the youngest New Mexicans are doing - what their unmet needs are, and where we can better support their healthy development," N.M. Voices' deputy director Amber Wallin said. "We also include policy recommendations for proven remedies, so our legislators have a handle on what they can do to improve outcomes for our kids. Equality of opportunity is not something that just happens," she added. "It's the product of systems, policies and programs that create a foundation upon which everyone has a chance to strive for success."

Some of the policies enacted in the 2019 legislative session should lead to better outcomes within the next few years - including investments in education and tax cuts for families with children. Advocates caution, though, that New Mexico still has a long way to go.

By Sharon Kayne
New Mexico Voices for Children