

Local lawmaker counts on 'KIDS COUNT'

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
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Gallup lawmaker Rep. Patricia Lundstrom, D- Gallup, says she refers to the annual KIDS COUNT report from N. M. Voices for Children on a regular basis.

The 102-page document was released last week in conjunction with a virtual press event featuring Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham.

KIDS COUNT is a snapshot of children's wellbeing in New Mexico counties.

Lundstrom, executive director of the Greater Gallup Economic Development Corporation, praised the work of the nonprofit and the data book it provides, saying she examines it every year. Though she cautioned that it alone doesn't drive the legislation she sponsors, the book "does feed into it."

"I've got to look at other sources, also," she told the *Gallup Sun*.

The report is broken up into four main categories — economic well-being; education; health; and family and community — before offering policy prescriptions for each. But with the pandemic, Voices for Children decided to add "hardship data" categories showing how kids and

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families were impacted by COVID-19 (for this particular data, the report only compares state averages with the U.S., rather than county-by-county).

The KIDS COUNT introductory essay urges Voices for Children's constituents to call their elected officials, for whom the data book was compiled.

The "hardship data" on the pandemic shows that slightly more than half (52 percent) of adults in households with children had lost employment income since March 2020, when COVID-19 began to strike the U.S. What's more, during the pandemic, 33 percent of kids were not participating in online classes and 20 percent could not even be reached by teachers.

The hardship data in the health category touches on mental health, saying that New Mexico fares worse than the rest of the nation. Thirty-five percent of adults in households with children nationwide report feeling anxious, while 23 percent are feeling depressed, the report states.

KIDS COUNT reports McKinley County had a population of 72,849 between 2014 and 2018. There were 5,698 children between ages 0 - 4 and 21,366 between 0 - 17.

Forty-five percent of youth in the county live in poverty compared to 36 percent of the population.

McKinley County's median household income is \$31,674, while 24 percent of households that include families with children have no parent working.

Twenty-two percent of teens in the county are not attending school and not working. Fifty-five percent of its "young children" are not in school. Ninety-two percent of the 11,321 students in the Gallup-McKinley County Schools district are eligible for free and reduced lunches. The district has a 4 percent drop out rate while 23 percent of students are "habitually truant," the report states.

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Asked to give her own “snapshot” of youngsters in McKinley County, Lundstrom said it’s “probably the most impoverished county in the whole state.” That factor has led to “some disadvantages” when it comes to issues such as access to broadband, health care, and behavioral health treatment.

“So we’ve got a lot of work to do, my colleagues from McKinley County and I,” she said.

Just weeks into the current legislative session, almost 25 bills have been sponsored on the subject of children and families.

One of the things Lundstrom noted in her response to the data book, was the creation of the state’s Early Childhood Education and Care Department. It is “a major initiative to address some of those low-ranking measures [Voices for Children] has in their report.”

Christopher Hudson, a coordinator with the McKinley Community Health Alliance — one of several state health councils — also spoke about the KIDS COUNT report. He told the *Gallup Sun* he wishes more reports were released showing positive trends in data. He acknowledged that children in the area have reason to be fearful in these times, but he also touted their resilience.

“I really would like legislators to know not only that there is this data and there is this factual information, but they know these families, they live with these families and they interact with them all the time,” he said. “Our kids play with their kids.”

Lundstrom said kids and families are an important legislative priority, but there needs to be a balance.

“We’re elected to be responsive to everybody,” she said. “But, oh, of course [children] are important.”

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More statistics on McKinley County and the rest of the state can be found at: nmvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/KidsCount-DataBook2020-web.pdf

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