

Annual 'N.M. Kids Count Data Book' reflects on how the pandemic affected the children of NM

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
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The continuing COVID-19 pandemic has been hard on New Mexico's children, families, communities, and small businesses. But not all of the hardship has been equally shared. Families of color – Hispanic families in particular – have been hardest hit by income losses and are more likely to have trouble paying their usual household expenses and putting food on the table.

That is one of the findings in the "2021 New Mexico KIDS COUNT Data Book," which was released on Jan. 19.

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This annual accounting of child well-being in the state tracks several indicators across four domains: economic security, education, health, and family, and community. Indicators include issues such as child poverty and food insecurity rates, parental employment and education levels, and teen birth rates.

“From our perspective, it’s not so much each individual piece of data on child wellbeing that’s really important, it’s the story that those things tell when you look at them all together; the story that they tell about child wellbeing in our state and the story that they tell about the opportunities that are available to our kids that is really important to focus on,” Amber Wallin, the executive director of New Mexico Voices for Children said.

Voices for Children publishes the annual KIDS COUNT data book and released it during the 2022 legislative session to put a spotlight on the needs of children and families while legislators are making decisions that are likely to directly affect them..

“Child well-being was steadily improving prior to the onset of the pandemic, and much of that was due to changes in public policies that made kids and working families a priority,” Wallin explained. “If lawmakers continue putting kids and families first, we expect to see even more improvements.

“However, in order to ensure an equitable recovery from the pandemic and recession, these policies must consider the unique barriers faced by our children, families, and communities of color,” Wallin said.

The KIDS COUNT Data Book includes information specific to the COVID-19 pandemic and recession. The report tracks issues such as economic insecurity, the loss of health insurance, and how COVID-19 rates relate to income levels. Not all of this year’s data is comparable with the reports from 2019, since 2020 data is limited as a result of the pandemic.

“...We are able to see that the pandemic has led to increases in childhood - food insecurity, greater numbers of children enrolled in Medicaid, and significantly higher numbers of chronically absent students,” Emily Wildau, the KIDS COUNT coordinator for NM Voices, stated. “It is our

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hope that these data points can inform the Legislature to remain focused on child and family well-being and invest in programs that will specifically address these issues.”

One positive that Wallin and Wildau shared in a virtual press conference was that the 2020 data did show a decrease in child poverty and that more children were enrolled in Medicaid.

“In 2021 we saw around 20,000 more children and youth enrolled in Medicaid with about 3,000 additional Native American youth enrolled compared to 2020,” Wildau said. “Compared to 2019, this is 40,000 more kids on Medicaid than pre-pandemic times and around 7,000 Native American youth.”

“As families have lost jobs and employer-sponsored health insurance since the start of the pandemic, a significant number of children have become newly eligible and enrolled in Medicaid, which also tells us that social safety net programs work,” Wildau continued. “If not for Medicaid, New Mexico might’ve seen 40,000 more kids without any health insurance instead of this increase.”

Wildau and Wallin also discussed the effect the pandemic had on education.

“I think we all know with students going back and forth between remote and in person, it kept them safe largely from the virus, but it also resulted in some real issues with attendance,” Wildau said.

According to Wildau, nine percent of the state’s K-12 students were habitually absent from school during the 2019-2020 school year. That number jumped up to 27 percent in 2020-2021.

While all of the data is available at the state level, several of the indicators (excluding the COVID-19-related data) show data on the county, tribal, and school district levels, and some is separated by race and ethnicity. Each section includes a list of policy recommendations to improve outcomes for New Mexico’s children.

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The "2021 New Mexico KIDS COUNT Data Book" is available for download at <https://www.nmvoices.org/archives/16481>

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