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Another year… another ranking at the bottom of the barrel. New Mexico has ranked among the worst states in which to be a child for so long that it hardly seems like news anymore. In the 25-plus years that the Annie E. Casey Foundation has been publishing the KIDS COUNT Data Book, we've never ranked above 40th. Most years, we've ranked in the bottom five, but we can and we must do better by our kids

We have made progress in some areas. Over the last several years, child and teen death rates and teen birth rates have gone down, along with the percentage of children who lack health insurance, while high school graduation rates have gone up.

While these are positive trends, they align with national trends, so our improvements don't necessarily change our placement among the states because most other states are seeing these improvements too.

There are some equally significant negative trends as well—such as increases in child poverty, children living in areas where there is widespread poverty, and children whose parents do not have secure employment.

And then there are those indicators that seem intractable—where, from children attending preschool to fourth grade reading scores, we've seen no real movement one way or the other. When taken in the aggregate, child well-being seems to have flat-lined in the state. When will New Mexico's lawmakers and leaders make improving child well-being their top priority? When will the people of New Mexico demand it?

When our children aren't doing well it's an indication that our whole state isn't doing well. Our future workforce is being shaped now. Almost one-third of our children live in poverty, and children in poverty do not have the same opportunities their better-off peers have; opportunities that help them be successful in school and life. With so many of our children missing out on these opportunities, what kind of workforce will we have in the next decade or so? Will we have workers who are well educated, skilled, and ready to take on the challenges of the coming years or will we have a workforce fit for low-wage jobs?

Children do better when their parents do better, but unemployment is high and we were recently ranked as having highest long-term unemployment in the nation. Despite that, the state's Human Services Department wants to take SNA benefits away from children whose parents cannot find work. Our future parents and families are also being shaped now. With nearly one-third of our children living in poverty, what kinds of families will we have in the decades to come? Will we have parents who delayed starting a family until they were older, better educated and more financially secure? Or will we have parents who were still children themselves when they had kids, didn't go far in school, and won't do better than low-wage work if they can find a job at all? Better-educated parents lead to better-educated children. Children in families with less well-educated parents don't do as well in school.

This is why poverty is generational. Poverty is so difficult to break out of because it puts children at a significant disadvantage—whether it's a lack of health care, not enough nutritious food, no books in the home, no safe places to play outdoors, few or no opportunities that enrich them and stimulate the brain development that ensures them success in school, or the presence of chronic stressors that actually diminish this all-important brain development. For many children, it's a combination of all of the above.

We can shake our heads and say other people's children are not our responsibility, or we can demand that all children have access to the opportunities that put them on the path to success in school and beyond. Their futures depend upon it, to be sure. But so do ours. Today's children, each with his or her own unique potential, are tomorrow's doctors, teachers, entrepreneurs and engineers. Or not. They can also be tomorrow's economically disenfranchised who will not reach their own potential and, therefore, will have little in the way of positive contributions to offer their communities and the state.

We can help kids in poverty reach their full potential, but only if we take intentional action and we take it early. As NM Voices for Children has been saying for years, one of the best ways to turn things around for our state is to make investments in our children in their early years. So much of a child's life trajectory is determined in the first five years of life. Home visiting, high-quality child care, pre-K—these programs lay the foundation for healthy brain and social development and positive educational outcomes. They make up for the opportunities low-income kids so often miss out on. They work, and they are the best investment in the future that we can make. The state is increasing its investments in early childhood care and education programs like these, but the increases in funding have been incremental. Kids can't put their childhood on hold, so when we fail to invest in those early years we've missed the best opportunity to put children on a path to success.

Our *NM KIDS ARE COUNTing on Us* campaign offers numerous actions our leaders and lawmakers can take to improve child well-being. It's time we demand they put child well-being first.

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