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ALBUQUERQUE—New Mexico has seen some improvement in child well-being—particularly in teen birth rates and on-time high school graduation rates—but not everything is looking up. The state now has the highest rate of child poverty in the nation, according to the 2015 New Mexico KIDS COUNT report, which is set for release at a press conference this morning. While child poverty is down slightly—from 31 percent in 2013 to 30 percent in 2014—other states have seen bigger improvements in child poverty, leaving New Mexico dead last in this indicator.

“Child poverty is at the root of all of New Mexico’s poor outcomes for children,” said Amber Wallin, MPA, KIDS COUNT director of New Mexico Voices for Children, which publishes the annual report. “We will not make significant gains in educational outcomes and economic well-being until we make addressing child poverty our top priority.”

The 2015 New Mexico KIDS COUNT data book, which is released every year on the first day of the legislative session, tracks the same 16 indicators of child well-being that are used to rank the 50 states. New Mexico ranks 49th in child well-being, behind Mississippi. The annual state rankings are part of the national KIDS COUNT program, which is run by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

“In tracking these 16 indicators, we do show some promise,” said Veronica C. García, Ed.D., executive director of NM Voices. “In large part, these bright spots mirror national trends, particularly with declining teen birth rates and increasing on-time graduation rates. Still, we can point to some state policies—most notably the switch to comprehensive sex education beginning in the 6th grade and the high school redesign—that likely played big roles. We’ve also seen big gains in health insurance coverage for children, which is due to the federal Affordable Care Act. So while the overall picture isn’t very positive, it’s clear that we can improve things when we have the collective will,” she added.

The areas in which New Mexico did worse include the rates of children living in high-poverty

areas and low birth-weight babies. The state has seen a steady increase in the percentage of children living in high-poverty areas—where overall poverty is 30 percent or higher—as well as in the number of babies who are born at a low birth-weight. Babies born weighing 5.5 pounds or less are at greater risk for developmental delays, disabilities, chronic health conditions, and early death. In addition, New Mexico has not seen much positive long-term change in preschool enrollment. “Preschool enrollment for 3- and 4-year-olds took a huge dive in 2010 and we’re just now getting back to pre-recession levels,” Dr. García said.

The data book also looks at the role of race and ethnicity in child outcomes. “Almost without exception, non-Hispanic white children have better outcomes than children of other races and ethnicities in all 16 indicators,” Wallin said. “Addressing these disparities has to be a high priority when three-quarters of the state’s children are racial or ethnic minorities, yet it’s not an issue that appears to gain much traction in Santa Fe.”

The report also recommends that lawmakers take a two-generation approach to child poverty—that is, funding programs that help parents improve their educational and economic lot (such as adult education programs like I-BEST) as well as funding programs that primarily address children’s needs (such as pre-kindergarten).

The 2015 New Mexico KIDS COUNT data book will be released on Tuesday, Jan. 19, 2016 at a press conference as part of Celebrating Children and Youth Day. The press conference, which begins at 10am, will include a State of the Children and Youth address, presented by youths from various organizations.

The 2015 New Mexico KIDS COUNT Data Book is available online at: http://www.nmvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/2015-NM-KC-data-book.pdf