

Worst for child well-being: New Mexico 50th in annual Kids Count report

BY [DAN MCKAY / JOURNAL STAFF WRITER](#)

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In this 2020 photo, a preschooler plays during morning recess in Albuquerque. A constitutional amendment passed in 2022 will boost the funding available to help prepare children for kindergarten. (Roberto E. Rosales/Albuquerque Journal)

SANTA FE — A national report on child well-being ranks New Mexico last in the country again — sunk, in part, by deteriorating academic outcomes in reading and math.

But the annual Kids Count report also highlighted some signs of optimism, including fewer children in poverty and a falling teen birth rate.

It was released Wednesday by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a philanthropic group focused on young people.

The report's bottom line remained dismal for New Mexico — a No. 50 ranking among states, just behind Louisiana at 49 and Mississippi at 48.

The top-performers were New Hampshire at No. 1, followed by Utah and then Massachusetts.

New Mexico has ranked 49th or 50th every year since 2012, according to New Mexico Voices for Children, an advocacy group that participates in the reporting and has pushed for an expanded child tax credit and other legislative policies.

This year's ranking took into account the state's worsening rates of reading and math proficiency among students — an analysis that compared 2019 outcomes to 2022.

But Amber Wallin, executive director of New Mexico Voices for Children, said the state has launched new programs that may take time to show up in the annual report.

The state, she said, dramatically expanded a child care assistance program in mid-2021 — the year much of the data is based on — and voters just last year authorized hefty increases in the funding available for early childhood education and K-12 schools.

“The data show that the state must keep pushing itself to create opportunities for all New Mexico kids to thrive,” Wallin said in a statement, “but we’ve also seen progress in most indicators, and many recent family-focused state policy changes give us strong reasons to expect that we’ll continue to see improvements in the future.”

Some of the long-term trends show substantial progress. The share of children living in poverty, for example, fell 7 percentage points since 2015 — from 31% in that year's report to 24% in this year's.

The percentage of kids without health insurance dropped from 10% in the 2012 report to 6% in this year's report.

Wallin said New Mexico is seeing positive trends, even if its overall ranking doesn't change because other states are enjoying better outcomes, too.

“If we were strictly comparing New Mexico to itself from a decade ago,” she said, “it's clear we've made remarkable progress.”

The COVID-19 pandemic blunted some of the state's improvement, Wallin said, but she credited New Mexico for expansion of a child tax credit and other policy changes that should make a difference.

Poverty progress

New Mexico, the report said, made progress in some areas:

— The share of children in living in high-poverty areas fell from 22% to 19%, a figure that reflects 2012-16 data compared with 2017-2021 numbers.

— Children in poverty also ticked down, from 25% in 2019 to 24% in 2021. The improvement came despite the national trend remaining flat in the same time period.

— The rate of teen births per 1,000 population fell from 24 to 19 between 2019 and 2021.

— The share of high school students not graduating on time also improved, as did the percentage of children living in households where the head adult lacks a high school diploma.

Worsening education outcomes

The report also outlines deterioration in a number of areas:

— The percentage of children whose parents lack secure employment climbed from 32% in 2019 to 35% in 2021.

— Fourth graders not proficient at reading grew from 76% to 79% and eighth graders not proficient in math jumped from 79% to 87%, figures that reflect changes between 2019 and 2022.

— Child and teen deaths per 100,000 population increased from 36 in 2019 to 43 in 2021.

— Teens not in school and not working inched up from 11% in 2019 to 12% in 2021.

Political debate

The annual report is often a factor in debate at the Capitol.

The Republican Party of New Mexico on Wednesday said Democrats deserve blame for the ranking following the failure of proposals to overhaul the state's child-welfare agency.

Democrats control the Governor's Office and both legislative chambers.

On Twitter, the party said "this ranking falls on their shoulders. It is in no way acceptable to hold children in this dire situation year after year."

On its own website, the Rio Grande Foundation, a group that advocates for limited government, said the decline in academic outcomes can be partially attributed to pandemic policy choices, such as school closures.

Democrats, in turn, defended their record.

Caroline Sweeney, a spokeswoman for Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, said the report largely reflects data from 2021, halfway through the governor's first term and in the middle of the pandemic.

“It is not an accurate representation of today’s data related to child welfare,” Sweeney said in a statement.

The administration, she said, has carried out policies recommended in the report, including the allocation of federal relief funds to stabilize child care during the pandemic, waiving copays for families and boosting the pay of child care workers.

House Speaker Javier Martínez, D-Albuquerque, said the data help show why lawmakers and others pushed so long for the 2022 constitutional amendment — expected to generate an extra \$240 million a year for early childhood education and K-12 schools.

“While we know that the 2021 data in this report does not reflect all of our recent progress,” he said in a statement, “these numbers do underscore the urgent need for continued investment in our kids and working families, so that every kid in our state gets the education and the opportunities they deserve.”

By the numbers

87%: Share of eighth graders not proficient in math last year, an 8 point decline since 2019

19%: Share of children living in high-poverty areas, a 3 point improvement comparing 2012-16 to 2017-21.

44%: Share of children in single-parent families, unchanged between 2019 and 2021.