

Study shows fewer Utah kids uninsured

By Wendy Leonard; Wendy Leonard Deseret News

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SALT LAKE CITY - Fewer Utah kids are going without health insurance, according to a new report from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The 22-page analysis shows that about 1 in 10 children in the state remain uninsured, but more kids are getting coverage through public programs.

While government assistance programs are often accused of trapping people in poverty, Lincoln Nehring, senior health policy analyst for Voices for Utah Children, said Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, really help families get a "hand up" and not a handout.

"Making sure children are healthy means they're going to miss less school, they're going to go to college and they're more likely going to have an opportunity to realize the American Dream," Nehring said. "Every child in Utah ought to have the opportunity to succeed."

The percentage of Utah children who lack health insurance fell from 12.4 percent in 2008 to 9.8 percent in 2012, the most recent year of data available. Nationwide, the percentage of uninsured children dropped from 9.7 percent to 7.5 percent during the same time period, according to the report.

"Reducing the number of children who lack health insurance has been a focus of state and federal policymakers for years, and it's encouraging to see that tremendous progress has been made," said Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourley, president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, an organization that works to improve the health and health care of all Americans.

The foundation used data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey to compile the study.

Julie Sonier, lead author of the report and a researcher with the State Health

Access Data Assistance Center in Minnesota, told the Deseret News that despite a national decline of kids covered by private insurance, Utah maintained a healthy percentage, reflecting a stable private insurance market.

Nearly 73 percent of insured kids in Utah have private coverage offered through a parent's employer or insurance purchased by the family, which means a small number of kids (about 17.4 percent) are taking advantage of public options, Sonier said.

Utah, however, has a high number of uninsured Hispanic children, with 25 percent not having enrolled. The report indicates that just 6 percent of white children are not insured in Utah. Only Nebraska has a higher likelihood of a Hispanic child being uninsured, according to the report.

Nehring said reaching minority populations is a primary concern, and Utah has not made great strides in reducing the rate of uninsured children.

Data is not yet available to show what effect, if any, the Affordable Care Act may have had on uninsured rates, though Nehring said he is hopeful it made a difference. Researchers say Thursday's report provides a baseline for measuring the effects of health care reform.

"You're talking about tens of thousands of kids here," Nehring said. "We have a long way to go."

While the open enrollment period to sign up for insurance using the federal marketplace website, www.healthcare.gov, is over, Medicaid and CHIP are perpetually accepting applications and are always open for enrollment, he said.

Health insurance, Nehring said, opens a larger network of providers to those insured, ensuring a wider window of available services and care.

"Health care is expensive. Even just primary care or a regular well-child checkup costs money, and for families trying to access care, that is a real hardship," he said, adding that health insurance can provide a financial safety net for families.

"It can be the difference between a family making it, being able to pay rent and put food on the table and a family that can't," Nehring said.

Children in households with family incomes below 138 percent of the federal poverty line are most likely to be uninsured, according to the foundation's report, but the group also experienced the greatest gains in coverage between 2008 and

2012, dropping from 25.8 percent to 18.4 percent.

Utah has one of the largest gaps between uninsured children in lower- and higher-income households, but researchers say the gap is narrowing, likely due to the Affordable Care Act.

"As eligible parents sign up for free or low-cost health insurance, more children will also gain coverage," said Lynn Blewett, director of the State Health Access Data Assistance Center, which compiled the report.

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