

LEFT BEHIND



North Dakota's Uninsured Children

Families USA
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**Left Behind:
North Dakota's Uninsured Children**

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INTRODUCTION

An estimated 8.6 million children in the United States lacked health insurance coverage in 2007. That same year, Congress debated and passed two pieces of legislation that would have reduced the number of uninsured children by almost half, covering as many as 4 million additional children. President Bush vetoed both bills. Since then, the mounting national economic crisis has driven up unemployment rates at a time when working families are already struggling with the rising cost of everything from gasoline to health insurance premiums. When the economy plunges, the number of uninsured Americans typically increases. This, in turn increases demand for safety net programs like Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP; Healthy Steps in North Dakota). According to the most recent Census data, North Dakota is currently home to an estimated 14,000 uninsured children.

Just a year ago, states were working to expand coverage in CHIP to finish the job of covering uninsured children. Since then, the Bush Administration's opposition to expanding CHIP and the national economic recession have put new pressure on states to deal with increasing demand for coverage, while their budgets are facing shortfalls.

This report presents data generated by the U.S. Census Bureau from the Current Population Survey (CPS), a national survey of health insurance coverage that is performed annually. Families USA contracted with the Census Bureau to provide detailed national and state-level data about health insurance coverage for children between the ages of 0 and 18. (For state-level estimates, a three-year data merge [2005-2007] was used to improve data reliability. A detailed methodology is available upon request.) This report examines these new data and what they mean for the future of children's health coverage in North Dakota and around the country.

KEY FINDINGS

14,000 Children Are Uninsured in North Dakota

- More than one in 12 children in North Dakota is uninsured (8.9 percent of North Dakota's children). (Table 1)

Table 1. All Children in North Dakota

Coverage	North Dakota		U.S.	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Medicaid	31,000	20.2%	21,511,000	27.6%
Other Public Coverage*	6,000	4.2%	2,241,000	2.9%
Private Coverage	102,000	66.6%	45,522,000	58.4%
Uninsured	14,000	8.9%	8,618,000	11.1%
		100.0%		100.0%

Source: Analysis conducted by the Census Bureau for Families USA based on the Current Population Survey. National data reflect the 2007 CPS, while state data reflect a three-year merge of the 2005-2007 CPS data. (A detailed methodology and more information about sample sizes and confidence intervals are available upon request.)

* Other public coverage includes Medicare and the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services (CHAMPUS).

North Dakota's Uninsured Children Come from Working Families

- The vast majority of uninsured children in North Dakota (94.1 percent) come from families where at least one parent works. (Table 2)
- Nearly three-quarters of uninsured children (72.3 percent) in North Dakota live in households where at least one family member works full-time, year-round. (Table 2)
- Still, 66.9 percent of North Dakota's uninsured children come from low-income families (families with income below twice the poverty level, or \$35,200 for a family of three in 2008) who may be eligible for Medicaid or Healthy Steps. (Table 2)

Most Uninsured Children in North Dakota Come from Two-Parent Households

- Among uninsured children living with a parent, more than half (58.5 percent) live in two-parent households. (Table 2)

Table 2. Uninsured Children in North Dakota

	North Dakota		U.S.	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Income*				
0-200% of Poverty	9,000	66.9%	5,164,000	60.4%
201-400% of Poverty	3,000	22.7%	2,450,000	28.7%
401% of Poverty or More	1,000	10.4%	931,000	10.9%
		100.0%		100.0%
Family and Working Status*				
Uninsured Children with at Least One Working Parent	11,000	94.1%	6,737,000	88.2%
Uninsured Children with at Least One Parent Working Full-Time	9,000	72.3%	5,230,000	68.5%
Uninsured Children in Two-Parent Families	7,000	58.5%	4,489,000	58.8%

Source: Analysis conducted by the Census Bureau for Families USA based on the Current Population Survey. National data reflect the 2007 CPS, while state data reflect a three-year merge of the 2005-2007 CPS data. (A detailed methodology and more information about sample sizes and confidence intervals are available upon request.)

* Note that statistics for income and family and working status do not add up to the total number of uninsured children in the state because data availability for these indicators is more limited. More information is available in the detailed methodology.

DISCUSSION

Who Are North Dakota's Uninsured Children?

North Dakota is home to an estimated 14,000 uninsured children and has the least generous eligibility levels for children's coverage in the country.¹ Contrary to popular belief, the majority of uninsured children in North Dakota come from families where at least one parent works (see Table 2). And nearly three-quarters of uninsured children (72.3 percent) live in a home where at least one parent works full-time, year-round. Uninsured children tend to come from low-income, working families that are trying to make ends meet, but coming up short when it comes to health coverage. Their employer might not offer coverage, or the offer might be far too expensive for the family to afford.

In 2007, the average annual out-of-pocket cost to an employee for family coverage in North Dakota was \$3,245,² an amount that is more than 9.0 percent of annual income for a family of three earning \$35,200 (twice the federal poverty level). For parents who are forced to seek coverage in the private market because they do not have access to affordable employer-based coverage, costs can be even higher. And some may not be able to obtain coverage at all. This is why Medicaid and Healthy Steps play such an important role; they offer children in these families high-quality, affordable coverage.

Strengthening North Dakota's Safety Net for Children

In North Dakota, children with family income below 140 percent of the poverty level (\$24,640 for a family of three in 2008) are eligible for Medicaid or Healthy Steps. Many low-income children in North Dakota are uninsured because their families either do not know they are eligible for Medicaid or Healthy Steps or make slightly more than the state's very low eligibility thresholds for these programs. If the state raised its eligibility level from 140 percent of the poverty level to twice the poverty level (\$35,200 for a family of three in 2008), up to two-thirds of the uninsured children in the state could qualify for coverage. All but seven states (including North Dakota) have eligibility thresholds at or above twice the poverty level. Moreover, these statistics do not begin to capture how the national economic crisis is affecting the state's economy. With rising unemployment rates, mounting gas and food prices, and many families struggling simply to keep a roof over their heads, experts expect further growth in the number of Americans without health insurance.³ Demand for Medicaid and Healthy Steps will increase and, unless these programs are funded sufficiently, so will the ranks of North Dakota's uninsured children.

In 2007, Congress and President Bush debated renewing and strengthening CHIP. The program needed more money to keep up with the increasing cost of health coverage for the children who were already enrolled and to meet the growing need of those who were not (and that was before the economic crisis erupted). But despite strong bipartisan support in Congress for expanding CHIP to cover as many as 4 million more uninsured children, the reauthorization process ground to a halt following two presidential vetoes.

The program was ultimately extended through March 2009, and states were provided a little extra money to help maintain their programs. But without a strong reauthorization that includes adequate new federal funding, it is difficult for states to cover more uninsured children in CHIP. Nearly half of the states are facing budget shortfalls for fiscal year 2009, and at least 17 states have implemented or are considering cuts to health programs to meet budgetary demands.⁴ Although North Dakota is not currently facing a budget shortfall or cutting health programs, the tide can turn quickly in this tumultuous economy. Medicaid and CHIP are often targets when states need to make budget cuts. Those kinds of cuts would only exacerbate existing problems for uninsured children in North Dakota.

Why Are Medicaid and CHIP Crucial?

Children make up about half of Medicaid's 42 million enrollees. All children enrolled in Medicaid are guaranteed a benefit package that will cover all the children's medically necessary health care needs, referred to as Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT). Most families pay nothing or only small copayments for their children's Medicaid coverage. This ensures that even very impoverished families can afford to take their children to the doctor.

CHIP was created in 1997 in response to the rising number of American children without health insurance. More than 11 million children were uninsured in 1998: As CHIP took hold across the country, this number rapidly declined. The program sits on top of each state's Medicaid program, providing an affordable source of coverage for children in working families that make too much money to be eligible for Medicaid, but still cannot afford other forms of coverage. Over the years following CHIP implementation, despite steady and sizeable increases in the number of uninsured adults, the number of uninsured children declined by nearly a third.⁵ Children enrolled in CHIP are more likely to have a usual source of care, fewer unmet health care needs, and improved access to dental care compared to uninsured children.⁶ CHIP has also been shown to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in access to health care.⁷ It provided coverage for more than 7 million children during 2007 and is widely regarded as a successful program.⁸

Next Steps

The new Congress and President should take the following steps in early 2009 to shore up the health care safety net for children:

- **Temporarily increase federal support for Medicaid**

During the last significant economic downturn, one of the steps Congress took to boost state economies and fortify Medicaid was to enact a 15-month increase in the federal matching rate for the program. In exchange for the increased federal support, states had to agree not to cut their Medicaid programs. This simultaneously boosted ailing state economies, provided relief to state budgets strained by rising Medicaid costs, and

ensured the program's availability to vulnerable Americans during the downturn. Because Medicaid is a countercyclical program (enrollment increases when the economy declines), states must spend more money on the program at a time when they have decreased revenue and strained budgets. Temporarily increasing the federal Medicaid matching rate gives *immediate* relief to states—who are saddled with increasing Medicaid costs—and allows them to continue the program *without cutting eligibility or services*. The injection of new federal dollars into state economies also creates additional business activity, jobs, and wages.

Bills were introduced in both the House and the Senate in 2008 to boost the Medicaid matching rate, but they were ultimately not included in the economic stimulus package Congress passed.⁹ The economy is now in worse shape than it was when the first stimulus bill was passed, and there is interest among members of Congress in passing a second stimulus package. Any future stimulus package should include an increase in the Medicaid matching rate to improve state economies and to ensure that Medicaid will be there for the growing numbers of people who will need it, a large portion of whom are children.

■ **Reauthorize CHIP**

The program's current extension expires on March 31, 2009. It is crucial that Congress take action before this deadline to guarantee future federal support for the program. More than 5,400 children in North Dakota received CHIP coverage through Healthy Steps in 2007.¹⁰ If state policy makers enter their 2009 legislative sessions without a guarantee of continued federal support for CHIP, many are likely to halt expansion plans, and others may need to make outright cuts in order to meet state budget requirements.

It is of utmost importance that the next Congress and the new President take these important steps to strengthen Medicaid and CHIP. As the economy continues to deteriorate, more and more families will likely lose employer-based coverage and, if the safety net is not strong enough to respond to this growing demand, low-income children in North Dakota and around the country will suffer.

ENDNOTES

¹ State level data from the Current Population Survey are based on three-year data merges. The most recent estimates reflect data from 2005, 2006, and 2007. North Dakota only provides Medicaid and CHIP to children in families with income up to 140- percent of the poverty level (\$24,640 for a family of three in 2008).

² Kim Bailey, *Premiums versus Paychecks: A Growing Burden for North Dakota's Workers* (Washington: Families USA, September 2008).

³ Paul Fronstin, *Issue Brief #231: Sources of Health Insurance and Characteristics of the Uninsured: Analysis of March 2008 CPS Survey* (Washington: Employee Benefit Research Institute, September 2008).

⁴ Elizabeth McNichol and Iris J. Lav, *State Budget Troubles Worsen* (Washington: Center on Budget & Policy Priorities, October 20, 2008); Nicholas Johnson, Elizabeth Hudgins, and Jeremy Koulish, *Facing Deficits, Many States Are Imposing Cuts That Will Harm Vulnerable Residents* (Washington: Center on Budget & Policy Priorities, October 20, 2008).

⁵ Genevieve Kenney and Justin Yee, "SCHIP at a Crossroads: Experience to Date and Challenges Ahead" *Health Affairs* 26, no. 2 (March/April 2007): 356-369.

⁶ Margo Rosenbach, *Issue Brief Number Four—Increasing Children's Coverage and Access: A Decade of SCHIP Lessons* (Washington: Mathematica Policy Research, September 2007).

⁷ M. Seid, J.W. Varni, L. Cummings, and M. Schonlau, "The Impact of Realized Access to Care on Health-Related Quality of Life: A Two-Year Prospective Cohort Study of Children in the California State Children's Health Insurance Program," *Journal of Pediatrics* 149, no. 3 (September 2006): 354-361.

⁸ Chris L. Peterson, *Memorandum: REVISED: Estimates of SCHIP Child Enrollees Up to 200% of Poverty, Above 200% of Poverty, and of SCHIP Adult Enrollees, FY2007* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, May 30, 2008).

⁹ The House included an increase in the Medicaid matching rate in an economic stimulus bill it passed in September 2008 (H.R. 7110), but the Senate was unable to pass a similar bill.

¹⁰ Chris L. Peterson, op. cit.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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