

Public programs help cover Florida's poor youngsters

Poverty affects almost one of four children in Florida.

That gloomy statistic comes with a silver lining: Because they are signing up for taxpayer-supported health insurance for the poor, the number of uninsured children has dropped sharply since that time, a new study finds.

Florida led the nation in reducing its rate of uninsured children, from 16.7 percent to 12.7 percent, between 2007 and 2010, according to the Georgetown University Health Policy Institute's Center for Children and Families.

The drop is largely attributable to coverage by Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, according to the study.

"I think that it does speak to the need," said Jodi Ray, director for Florida Covering Kinds and Families at the University of South Florida. "Also, it's important to recognize that there is this help for families and that they are more and more able to access it. If nothing else, these kids can still get health care services they need."

Though a significant drop, the Sunshine State still had the third-highest rate of children without health insurance, the

Georgetown University study notes. Nationally, an average of 8 percent of children are uninsured.

Other findings:

Thirty-four states saw reductions in the number of children without health insurance since 2008; seven saw an increase. Kansas, Minnesota and Ohio tied for the highest increases – 0.08 percent.

Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, New York and Texas account for about half of U. S. children without health insurance.

Hispanic and Native American children were less likely to be insured, as were those living in families earning below 50 percent of the federal poverty level. The 2011 poverty level for a family of four is about \$22,000.

Even if a child is covered under Medicaid or CHIP, it does not mean they will have an easy time finding a doctor who will accept those low-reimbursing insurance plans.

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The number of private doctors accepting Medicaid in the region served by Family Health Centers of Southwest Florida, a nonprofit that focuses on outpatient medical and dental care for low-income adults and children, dropped from 30 to 19, said Bob Johns, spokesman for the organization.

The number of dentists accepting Medicaid dropped from seven to five over that same period, Johns said.

Family Health Centers has offices in Lee, Charlotte and Hendry counties. Between September 2009 and July 2011, Medicaid eligibility grew almost 19 percent, to 117,420. More than 80,000 children are signed up for state Medicaid programs in that region, an increase of about 49 percent, during that period.

Almost 27,000 children in Collier are now eligible for Medicaid.

"I think that trend's got to change," Johns said. "That's how we're justifying expanding our pediatric practice more than our adult practice."

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