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Census numbers show 51 million uninsured

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The effect of this recession on Americans' health coverage appears to be worse than other downturns.

Uninsured rates in America have soared, according to new U.S. Census data. Nearly 51 million people were without health insurance in 2009, an increase of about 10 percent from the 46 million without coverage in 2008.

The new census report did not contain state-level data, but showed uninsured rates rose more in the Midwest and South than in the West.

In addition, for the first time in 23 years, the actual number of Americans with insurance dropped, which some say points to the need for health reform.

The plunge, more precipitous than past years, is likely an indicator that fewer employers are offering health benefits, said Lincoln Nehring, a policy analyst at the Utah Health Policy Project. "What has largely been viewed as a problem of the unemployed and low-income is now hitting the middle class, the average working American."

Whether President Barack Obama's health overhaul will fix or aggravate the problem was the subject of heated debate among conservative and liberal think tanks on Thursday.

The Heritage Foundation issued a statement denouncing the law as costly and ineffective.

Even with the law, millions of Americans will still be uninsured and most of those who get coverage "will be dumped into Medicaid," the group said.

Other groups underscored how the law will help working Americans afford private coverage.

"Say what you will about the Affordable Care Act, and whether we can afford it, but that's why it provides premium subsidies," said Nehring.

Come 2014, people with household incomes up to 400 percent of the poverty level — or up to \$88,000 for a family of four — will be eligible for subsidies they can use to purchase health plans on exchanges, or online marketplaces. That's more than 70 percent of all Utah families, according to data from the Utah Tax Commission.

Estimates from the Utah Department of Health show a steady rise in the state's uninsured. Last year, 11.2 percent of Utahns went without coverage, compared with 10.6 percent in 2007.

The census survey asked whether anyone in the home has been uninsured in the past year. Utah's poll asked if the person on the phone was uninsured.

Other highlights from the census report:

The number of people with employer-based coverage shrank, though the workplace remains the predominant path to insurance.

Uninsured rates rose for whites, blacks and Hispanics, but did not change for Asians.

Uninsured rates were highest among people with lower incomes.

Seniors over age 65 and children age 18 and under saw no decline in coverage, while the uninsured ranks of middle-aged adults grew.

Government health insurance programs such as Medicaid, Medicare, the Children's Health Insurance Program and military insurance now cover 31 percent of the population, up from 29 percent in 2008. That's the highest percentage since 1987.

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