

Census: 1 in 6 Utahns in '06 lacked health plan

By [James Thalman](#) and [Lee Davidson](#)

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As Congress debates health-care reform, the U.S. Census Bureau released estimates Monday that one of every six Utahns under age 65 had no health insurance in 2006.

And that was before the recession began.

Compiling such data from numerous studies and sources takes time and is routinely delayed a few years. Some more up-to-date estimates from newer annual census surveys, which just added questions about whether people are insured, are expected later this year.

Utah does a bit better than the nation as a whole.

The percentage of Utahns under age 65 (when Medicare is available) without insurance was 16.7 percent in 2006. The national average was 17.8 percent.

Still, Utah ranked a low No. 31 out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. And the census estimated that about 400,600 Utahns under age 65 lacked health insurance that year.

The poor and minorities in Utah have a higher rate of being uninsured. About a third of those who are at or below 200 percent of the poverty level are uninsured — 29.9 percent, to be exact.

The census estimated that 37.5 percent of Hispanics had no health insurance, nor did 22.1 percent of blacks. Meanwhile, only 13.2 percent of whites were uninsured.

The Census Bureau also released county-by-county estimates of how many residents were uninsured. (A complete county-by-county chart is available online at deseretnews.com.)

Among Utah counties, Piute County had the highest rate of uninsured, 26.9 percent. It was followed closely by such small, rural counties as Rich, 25.5 percent; Daggett, 24.1; Beaver, 23.6; Wayne, 22.6; and Millard, 21.6 percent.

Suburban Davis County had the lowest percentage of uninsured in the state: 11.9 percent. Others with relatively low percentages for the uninsured were Carbon, 12.1 percent; Juab, 13.5 percent; Tooele and Box Elder, 14 percent; and Sevier, 15 percent.

The percentages for some other large counties were Salt Lake, 16.6 percent; Utah, 18 percent; and Weber, 15.2 percent.

The census makes the estimates through models that combine data from such sources as its Current Population Survey, Census 2000, the Population Estimates Program, the County Business Patterns data set, aggregated federal tax returns and Medicaid participation records.

Given the huge lag time between the census data and now, "and given the number and kind of insurance disaster stories we're getting, things are only getting worse," said Judi Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project, a health care research and advocacy group.

Three weeks ago, Families USA, a national health care consumer group, reported some 370 Utahns are losing their coverage every week or more than 19,000 by the end of this year. Area small businesses last month also reported a record low — 40 percent — in the number of companies offering health insurance as a benefit. That's down from about 70 percent in 2001.

People who don't want reform say plans are moving too fast, "but there is more than politics with the uninsured," said Ron Pollack Families USA executive director. There's pressure to do something now because people are losing their health care coverage at an alarming rate, he added.

Dr. Joseph Jarvis, a local primary care physician and reform advocate, follows uninsured numbers on his Web site, www.utahpatientspac.com. "The figures are more evidence that the days of employer-provided health care insurance are coming to an end," he said.

Even those who buy just catastrophic care regularly find themselves going bankrupt due to medical expense. "So people are feeling there isn't much insurance in having insurance anyway," Jarvis said.