

Nearly 300K uninsured Utahns

By [James Thalman](#)

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The mercurial estimate of Utahns without medical insurance leveled off at just under 300,000 in 2008, according to an annual assessment by the state Department of Health.

Even with the volatile economy factored in, state officials say a modest increase of 11,000 people actually joined the ranks of the uninsured last year, totaling 298,200 without coverage.

Broken down by percentages, the Utah Healthcare Access Survey shows that 10.7 percent of Utahns have no medical insurance, compared with 10.6 percent in 2007. The percentage of Utahns without insurance in 2006 was 11.9 percent, according to the survey.

The most positive element in the survey results is the 13.6 percent decrease in the number of uninsured children under age 18. That decrease was nearly offset by the 12.3 percent increase in the number of uninsured adult Utahns ages 19-64.

The decrease in uncovered children is credited to the year-round open enrollment through 2008 of the Children's Health Insurance Program. When enrollment opened in July 2007 after receiving legislative approval, CHIP covered approximately 25,000 children. At the end of December 2008, enrollment in CHIP had increased to more than 37,000 children.

"Over the past year, we have focused on reaching out to families to make sure their children have access to the coverage they need," said David Sundwall, executive director of the Utah Department of Health. "I'm so happy to report that our efforts are paying off. We now need to continue to work to ensure all people in Utah, including adults, have access to affordable insurance, especially with the current state of the economy."

The department is hoping to induce more coverage for so-called working poor adults through opening enrollment for the state's Primary Care Network, a preventive health coverage plan for uninsured adults. Enrollment is open through April 30 and more information is available at www.health.utah.gov/pcn or 888-222-2542.

In 2008, and again just two weeks ago, Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. signed several bills to address the problem, including HB188 and HB165, measures proposed from the legislative task force to create real changes in the health-care system.

Since 2001, Utah's uninsured population has grown at an average annual rate of 5.9 percent — more than double the rate of the state's overall population growth of 2.8 percent for the same time period. Of the 298,200 uninsured Utahns, more than 72,000 are residents whose income falls below the federal poverty level, more than 100,000 are employed full time and more than 41,000 are self-employed.

The statewide survey found 76,000 Utah children are uninsured, and state health officials estimate 55,000 of them meet income requirements for CHIP or other state programs.

Also uninsured, according to the health department, are:

35 percent of adults ages 19-64 and living below 150 percent of the federal poverty level.

37 percent of Hispanics/Latinos.

42 percent of adults without a high school diploma.

16 percent of self-employed Utahns.

17 percent of Utahns between the ages of 18 and 34.

In addition, 78 percent of Utahns who were insured in 2008 had coverage through a current or former employer or union, down slightly from 79.5 percent in 2007.

The survey is a statewide random-digit-dial telephone survey that measures health insurance status and health-care access. It is representative of the Utah population living in households with land line telephones.

Local health-care advocates say the survey underestimates the uninsured because it does not include the growing number of Utahns who use cell phones as their home phone.

The Utah Health Policy Project estimates the Utah uninsured rate is near 15 percent.

An Internet discussion Wednesday will focus on what can be done to further reduce the number of uninsured Utahns. The online event will run from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. at six sites around the state:

University of Utah Research Park, 650 Komas Drive, Salt Lake City

Salt Lake Valley Environmental Health, 788 E. Woodoak Lane (5380 South), Murray McKay-Dee Hospital, 4403 Harrison Blvd., Ogden

Davis County Health Department, 50 E. State, Farmington

State Regional Office Building, Provo

Dixie Regional Medical Center, 1380 E. Medical Center Drive, St. George To participate, send an e-mail to jessica@healthpolicyproject.org or call 801-433-2299.