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## State sees drop in uninsured

Census » Numbers dip 3.9 percentage points for 2009; experts say 2009 will likely be worse.

By Lisa Rosetta  
The Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 09/11/2009 06:58:55 AM MDT

New census data released Thursday show the two-year average percentage of Utahns without health insurance has dropped 3.9 percentage points -- second only to Massachusetts, which had the largest dip in the country.

In 2005 and 2006, 16.9 percent of state residents lacked coverage; in 2007 and 2008, that number fell to 13 percent, the state-by-state Current Population Survey shows.

The census finding tracks with state surveys, which have also found a slight dip in the number of Utah's uninsured.

Korey Capozza, senior health policy analyst for Voices for Utah Children, said the drop was largely because of an increase in the number of Utahns who got coverage through their workplace.

Utahns surveyed by the Census Bureau were asked about 2008, but the downturn did not become severe until late in the year, Capozza noted.

"These new estimates highlight the relationship between economic prosperity and insurance coverage," she said. "With the severity of job loss we've seen in this recession, the numbers for 2009 are bound to be much worse."

And long-term, workplace coverage is declining, she said. Compared to 2000-2001 levels, the rate of job-based coverage has dropped 3.3 percent, she noted.

The number of Utahns under 65 without insurance increased slightly in 2008, reaching 14.3 percent, noted Judi Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project, which supports comprehensive national reforms this year.

"Utah and the nation's uninsured rates are unacceptably high and moving in the wrong direction," she said. "The uninsured are our family members, friends, neighbors and fellow community members who are left to pray they won't get sick or injured and are just one health crisis away from financial ruin."

Nationally, the number of uninsured increased slightly to 46.3 million in 2008, from 45.7 million in 2007.

Ron Pollock, executive director of the pro-health reform consumer health organization Families USA, said the actual number may be higher. He pointed out the unemployment rate during 2008 ranged from 4.8 percent to 7.2 percent, but stood at 9.7 percent in August.

"Based on previous analyses, each one percentage point increase in the unemployment rate means approximately 1.1 million additional people joined the ranks of the uninsured," Pollock said. "As a result, the number of uninsured today is probably close to 50 million."

Karlene Peart is among those Utahns who have lost their health insurance since the census information was collected. The 50-year-old Layton woman had coverage through the state's Primary Care Network until March, when she got a modest raise at work. That made



Karlene Peart, 50, of Layton, had health insurance through... (Leah Hogsten / The Salt Lake Tribune)

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her ineligible for the program, based on her income.

"I made \$100 too much to qualify," she said.

Peart, who shared her story this week at a Utah Health Policy Project roundtable, said she feels stuck.

"I kind of fall in the cracks," she said. "I'm working, but I don't make enough money to buy good insurance [and] I'm not poor enough to have free insurance."

The census figures show the percentage of Americans covered by government health insurance programs increased to 29 percent in 2008, from 27.8 percent in 2007.

The survey was conducted over a three-month period -- in February, March and April -- with most data collection occurring in the month of March.

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