



New Study Ties Children that Lack Dental Coverage to Significant Unmet Needs

For the first time since 1998 the percentage of children without health coverage has increased according to the most recent Census data. In 2005, there were more than nine million uninsured children in the U.S. – one-out-of-every nine children in the country. A September 2006 report (*No Shelter from the Storm: America's Uninsured Children*) released by the Campaign for Children's Health Care looked at the impact of the lack of insurance on children's access to care.¹ The findings show children with the greatest unmet dental needs are those without continuous health care coverage. This is also true with regards to dental coverage. The report also highlights the importance of coverage for children to achieve a usual source of care. Although most uninsured children are living in working families, nearly 70 percent are income eligible, but not enrolled, in Medicaid or SCHIP. This research highlights the need to focus on effective strategies for maintaining health coverage, public or private, in order to better meet the oral health needs of children.

Sporadic Coverage Linked to Unmet Dental Needs

Many employer-based plans include supplemental dental insurance for dependents that provides varying coverage for children. However, for children eligible for Medicaid, the Early Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment (EPSDT) benefit provides comprehensive health and dental services for children under 21. Maintaining coverage, public or private, significantly alters a child's ability to receive dental care. Children without health coverage are five times more likely than insured children to have an unmet dental need. Partial year coverage does not improve the likelihood of obtaining dental care. Children that were uninsured for a portion of the year were nearly six times as likely as children insured for a year or more to have an unmet dental need. The new study, using data from 2004-2006, is consistent with a 1997 Urban Institute study that showed uninsured children had three times the treatment need of continuously insured children with private health coverage.²

Key Dental Findings

- Children without health coverage are five times more likely than insured children to have an unmet dental need.
- Children that were uninsured for a portion of the year were nearly six times as likely to have an unmet dental need than children insured for a year or more.
- Of children reported in good, fair or poor health status, over 16 percent of those uninsured for a year or more had an unmet dental need in the past year due to cost.

Implications of Findings

State policy makers have multiple opportunities to improve children's oral health by assuring access to health insurance for children in low-income and working class families.

- ✓ States can provide outreach to seek, identify, and enroll the seven-in-ten uninsured children eligible for public coverage.
- ✓ States can to provide continuous 12-month coverage before requiring families to re-determine eligibility for Medicaid or SCHIP.
- ✓ SCHIP, unlike Medicaid, does not require children to receive dental services – however states can opt to provide dental care through SCHIP packages.

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¹ Sullivan, J. *No Shelter from the Storm: America's Uninsured Children*. Families USA, Campaign for Children's Health Care. Available at: <http://www.childrenshealthcampaign.org/tools/reports/no-shelter-from-the-storm.html> (Accessed 10/6/06).

² Kenney GM, Ko G, and Ormond BA. *Gaps in Prevention and Treatment: Dental Care for Low-Income Children*. The Urban Institute. Series B, No. B-15, April 2000.