

Are Americans Happy With Their Health Insurance Coverage?

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Although it is only one component in the ongoing national healthcare reform debate, overhauling America's health insurance system is playing an integral role. The Obama Administration and others have consistently pointed to the 46 million Americans without health insurance as cause to implement a health coverage system that would cover everyone.¹ However, as policymakers consider ways to address the uninsured, many lawmakers on both sides of the debate frequently note that most Americans who have health insurance are satisfied with their coverage. Opponents note it as a reason to reject a comprehensive health care measure while proponents want to fix what does not work. A new Kaiser Family Foundation report² and a separate Gallup poll,³ conclude that although most individuals are generally satisfied with their public or private insurance coverage, it certainly could be better.

Background

Recently, the Census Bureau released data on the number of Americans without health insurance. The number of uninsured individuals rose from 45.7 million in 2007 to 46.3 million in 2008.⁴ Additionally, the economic recession has forced 2.6 million Americans into poverty, wiped out jobs, and consequently, taken away many individuals' access to health insurance.⁵ As a result, the number of people covered with employment-based health insurance fell from 177.4 million to 176.3 million in 2008, while the number of Americans covered by government-sponsored health insurance plans surged to 87.4 million last year – nearly 29 percent of the nation's population.⁶ Due to rising health insurance premiums, many small employers are no longer able to afford health care benefits for their employees.⁷ Companies that do, in fact, offer health insurance coverage often require employees to contribute a larger portion toward their coverage; as a result, many have opted not to take advantage of employer-based health insurance coverage because they cannot afford it.⁸ Despite the wide range of health insurance worries,

¹ Hope Yen and Frank Bass, Assoc. Press, *Growth of Government Insurance Outpaces Private Care*, Sept. 10, 2009, available at <http://www.chron.com/dispatch/story.mpl/ap/top/all/6612803.html>.

² The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Kaiser Public Opinion, *Data Note: Americans' Satisfaction with Insurance Coverage*, Sept. 2009, <http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/upload/7979.pdf>.

³ Jeffrey M. Jones, *Private, Public Health Plan Subscribers Rate Plans Similarly*, GALLUP.COM, Sept. 1, 2009, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/122663/Private-Public-Health-Plan-Subscribers-Rate-Plans-Similarly.aspx>.

⁴ Medical News Today, *Statement from Karen Davis: New Census Data On Uninsured Americans*, Sept. 11, 2009, <http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/163707.php>.

⁵ Carol Morello and Dan Keating, *Millions More Thrust Into Poverty*, WASH. POST, Sept. 11, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/10/AR2009091001637.html>.

⁶ Yen and Bass, *supra* note 1.

⁷ See Nat'l Coalition on Health Care, *Health Care Facts: Health Insurance Coverage*, July 2009, <http://www.nchc.org/documents/Fact%20Sheets/Kellogg%20General%20Coverage%20Fact%20Sheet%2008-11-2009.pdf>.

⁸ *Id.*

however, a large majority of Americans who do have health insurance coverage are generally satisfied with it.

Kaiser Family Foundation Report

In an August 2009 tracking poll conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, most Americans expressed general satisfaction with various aspects of their health insurance coverage.⁹ Approximately 33 percent of those polled had health insurance coverage through an employer while about 27 percent purchased an individual plan.

More than 36 percent of those individuals asked rated their coverage as “excellent” while 54 percent said their coverage was “good” – a figure that has remained consistent in recent years.¹⁰ Only 9 percent of those polled rated their coverage as “not so good” or “poor.”¹¹ Younger individuals with lower incomes and reporting fair or poor health were more likely to be dissatisfied with their insurance compared to their counterparts.¹² While 51 percent of seniors reported their coverage as “excellent,” only 32 percent of those insured under the age of 65 reported the same.

a. Health Care Costs

Satisfaction with coverage was only one facet of the polling. Approximately 20 percent of those asked reported problems paying their medical bills resulting in severe financial strain, including the need to use monetary savings to pay healthcare expenses,¹³ being unable to pay for daily necessities such as food or housing,¹⁴ or feeling forced to declare bankruptcy.¹⁵

There is little doubt that individuals and families are having significant difficulty paying for medical expenses. Americans spend an estimated \$294 billion on annual out-of-pocket medical costs, paying for physician co-payments, surgeries, and prescription medications.¹⁶ More than 79 million Americans are struggling to pay off medical expenses.¹⁷ Roughly 22 percent of those polled in the survey indicated they had to put off seeking health care because they could not afford it.¹⁸

b. Anxiety Regarding an Unknown Future

⁹ See Data Note, *supra* note 2.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.* at p. 5.

¹³ 9 percent of the overall insured polled.

¹⁴ 5 percent of the overall insured polled.

¹⁵ 2 percent of the overall insured polled.

¹⁶ Parija B. Kavalanz, *Can't Pay Your Doctor? Charge It!*, CNN MONEY.COM, July 11, 2009, http://money.cnn.com/2009/07/09/news/economy/healthcare_medical_creditcards/index.htm.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ See Data Note, *supra* note 2.

Many Americans are also concerned about an uncertain future, particularly when it comes to health care costs. In a March 2009 Kaiser survey, about half of the individuals asked responded they were concerned that their current health insurance plan would not cover their health care needs.¹⁹ In a July 2009 survey, approximately 67 percent of those asked said they were worried about having to pay more for their health care or insurance in the future and 52 percent were concerned that they might lose their insurance coverage altogether.²⁰

c. Some Real Dissatisfactions

In the August 2009 survey, approximately 20 percent of those individuals who rated their coverage as “excellent,” reported being dissatisfied with at least one element of their coverage.²¹ Among those who said their coverage was “good,” nearly half are dissatisfied with at least part of their coverage.²² Not surprisingly, 85 percent of those who reported their coverage as “not so good” or “poor” expressed dissatisfaction.²³

Gallup Poll Results

A recent Gallup poll report added another group to the polling mix – those receiving health benefits through Medicaid and Medicare. The group found only a slight difference regarding the quality of health care, and no difference in rating coverage, when compared to those Americans with private insurance.²⁴ The results were based on interviews conducted with more than 3,000 U.S. adults – 1,049 of which receive insurance through a government plan such as Medicare and 1,753 individuals who had a private plan.²⁵

According to the results, more than 8 in 10 Americans rated the quality of health care they receive as either “excellent” or “good,” regardless of the type of coverage they had.²⁶ And for both groups, individuals who rated their health insurance plan as “excellent” was 38 percent.²⁷

According to Gallup, the overall results reinforce the idea that, for the most part, Americans are pleased with their own health insurance coverage, regardless of whether it is privately or publicly funded.²⁸ More specifically, as the Gallup report notes, “[t]he fact that Americans’ ratings of their healthcare differ little, whether they have a private or a government plan, suggests that a properly constructed government health plan may not

¹⁹ *Id.* at p. 2.

²⁰ *Id.* at p. 3.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ See Data Note, *supra* note 2 at p. 3.

²⁴ See Jones, *supra* note 3.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ *Id.* Approximately 87% of privately-insured individuals rate such care as excellent or good compared to 82% of those on Medicare or Medicaid.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

necessarily lead to perceptions of reduced quality or poor coverage from its beneficiaries.”²⁹

Conclusion

Although a large majority of the public reports general satisfaction with their health insurance coverage, a closer examination of the data reveals that significant variations exist in different demographic groups.³⁰ Most of those polled expressed some dissatisfaction with at least one aspect of their coverage and many worry about paying for health care expenses and the uncertainty of having future coverage. Those asked about their plans are only able to report on what they have, and to some degree, what they do not have, in terms of health insurance. It is likely that retaining the health insurance system status quo will reveal similar polling data in the future. But with intelligent reforms, Americans’ health care peace of mind could certainly be better.

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²⁹ See Jones, *supra* note 3.

³⁰ See Data Note, *supra* note 2 at p. 7.