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Iowa's medical coverage comes in at healthy No. 2

As the U.S. uninsured rate grows, the state ranks No. 2.

By JANE NORMAN
REGISTER WASHINGTON BUREAU

Washington, D.C. - Iowa was a bright spot during the past few years when it comes to health insurance coverage, according to new Census estimates made public Tuesday.

The number of people living in the United States without medical insurance rose 3 percent - to a record 46.6 million people in 2005. But in Iowa, the percentage of people lacking health insurance, based on two-year averages, dropped from 10.4 percent in 2003-04 to 9.1 percent in 2004-05, the Census Bureau said.

Iowa was one of just a handful of states to show statistically significant improvement. Among all states, Iowa was second only to Minnesota in 2004-05 in its uninsured rate.

But the other statistics released Tuesday brought a mixed message for Iowa, with new figures showing that the poverty rate continued to climb in the state and was about 11 percent in 2005.

David Osterberg, executive director of the liberal-leaning Iowa Policy Project in Mount Vernon, pointed out that the poverty rate now has increased by more than three percentage points since the beginning of the decade.

Iowa traditionally has had a lower poverty rate than the rest of the nation. Overall, the U.S. rate remained about the same as last year.

Iowa ranked 38th in the country when it comes to its poverty rate, with Mississippi in the No. 1 spot, with 21.3 percent of its residents living in poverty.

But Osterberg said Iowa continues to creep closer to national averages due to a combination of factors, including job losses in the state, insufficient state tax credits for poor people and a stagnant minimum wage.

"Basically, we've had a time when not many people were doing anything about poverty programs," he said. "Poverty has not been on anybody's agenda."

The Census Bureau's definition of poverty depends on the size of a family and the age of its members. For families of four people, the definition of poverty would be a total family income of less than \$19,971.

Concerning health insurance coverage, Iowa's improvement of 1.3 percentage points from 2003-04 to 2004-05 was the second-best in the nation, after Idaho, and bucked national trends.

Cliff Gold, a top official of Wellmark Health Plan of Iowa, speculated on why insurance coverage is more prevalent in Iowa than elsewhere.

Small employers in the state traditionally have offered health insurance to employees, the state has established a good safety net for the uninsured, including low-income children, and Iowa has relatively low health insurance rates, he said.

"It is the least talked about, maybe the most attractive part of an economic development pitch to come to Iowa - we have some of the lowest rates," Gold said.

However, the Iowa Policy Project, Osterberg's research group, said the uninsured rate is just now getting back to where it was six years ago, and sources of insurance are shifting.

The share of Iowans with job-based health insurance fell to 66 percent, down from 69.5 percent five years ago, an analysis by Osterberg's group said. More than half of Iowans who lost the coverage gained through their jobs had to turn to public health insurance plans.

On income, the Census Bureau estimated that Iowa had a median household income of \$43,609 in 2005.

Update on poverty

U.S. Census officials released new estimates Tuesday of poverty in the United States, including figures that show many of Iowa's large counties and cities had higher poverty rates during the past 12 months than the state overall. The statistics show:

OVERALL POVERTY RATES:

United States: 13.3%
Iowa: 10.9%

IOWA COUNTIES:

Black Hawk County: 14.8%
Dubuque County: 8.1%
Linn County: 11.9%
Polk County: 6.5%
Pottawattamie County: 11.7%
Scott County: 11.6%
Woodbury County: 16.7%

IOWA CITIES:

Cedar Rapids: 14.9%
Davenport: 16.0%
Des Moines: 9.9%
Sioux City: 16.0%
Waterloo: 17.5%
SOURCE: U.S. Census

That ranked the state 29th in the nation, just behind Nebraska's median income of \$43,841.

The U.S. median was \$46,202.

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