

Poverty takes toll on Dallas County children's health

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The good news: The percentage of Dallas County children without health insurance is going down, with 13.4 percent of residents under age 18 uninsured in 2012, compared to 16.3 percent in 2011.

The bad news: That percentage is nearly double the rate for the nation and slightly above the rate for the state.

Those numbers come from a report released today from Children's Medical Center in Dallas on the state of children's health and well-being. I talked with one of the report's project directors, Regina Montoya, about the findings.

Montoya told me that poverty is to blame for many of the health challenges in the region and state. Some 30 percent of Dallas County children and 37.6 percent of children in the City of Dallas live below the federal poverty level of \$23,550 — or \$64 a day — for a family of four, Montoya said.

In hard numbers, that's 90,000 children who lack health insurance and 196,252 children living in poverty.

"One-third of the nation's highest-paying jobs created were in Texas," said Montoya, senior vice president of external relations and general counsel for Children's Medical. "That doesn't necessarily mean that all of Dallas County is enjoying this resurgence. It isn't necessarily translating to all of the children in Dallas County."

The reduction in children without insurance is a double-edged sword, Montoya said. Much of the gain came from Medicaid enrollment, an indicator of dire financial need. More Dallas County children than ever — 292,398 — were enrolled in Medicaid in 2012, an increase of 58 percent from the pre-recession year of 2007.

In the same period, enrollment in the Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, grew 65 percent, now covering an additional 66,334 children. CHIP provides federal matching funds to states to provide coverage for children in families above the poverty level but still unable to afford private health insurance.

Even with safety-net programs, questions remain about children's access to basic health care, with fewer than 30 percent of Dallas County physicians, including pediatricians, accepting new Medicaid patients, Montoya said.

More than 50 local community organizations participated on an advisory board for the report, establishing 61 indicators under four categories — health, economic security, education and safety.

The advisory board made several recommendations related to education, including support for universal prekindergarten, early-childhood education for children and their parents in homes where English is not the first language, expanded meal programs, and school-business partnerships to help educate a skilled future workforce.

Other recommendations included safe affordable housing, more foster homes and more specialty courts to handle juvenile justice cases. In the area of health services, the board recommended widespread early assessment of special needs, achieving a 90 percent or better child immunization rate for preventable diseases, and establishment of more pediatric primary care for children.

Data for the report was compiled by the **Institute for Urban Policy Research** at the University of Texas at Dallas.

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