

RESEARCH INSTITUTE EXAMINES CHILDREN'S HEALTH, INSURANCE NEEDS IN 5 NORTH TEXAS COUNTIES

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RICHARDSON, Texas, Nov. 19 -- The University of Texas at Dallas issued the following news release:

Texas' uninsured rate for children remains among the highest in the nation, according to the latest report on children's health care, education, economic security and safety from Children's Health and researchers at UT Dallas.

The 2014 report, "Beyond ABC: Assessing Children's Health in the North Texas Corridor," focuses on five North Texas counties: Collin, Cooke, Denton, Fannin and Grayson. Researchers at UT Dallas' **Institute for Urban Policy Research** compiled data for the 13th annual edition of the report.

Dr. Timothy M. Bray, director of the institute and faculty member in the School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences, joined a panel discussion Nov. 10 at Children's Health Children's Medical Center Plano to discuss the findings and recommendations.

"You could fit Delaware and Rhode Island into the five-county footprint of North Texas," Bray said. "When we talk about a challenge, we really have a diversity of vibrant, thriving communities that all operate in a different way. One of the things that we've learned in working in North Texas is there is no cookie-cutter approach."

This year's report highlighted concerns including above-average rates of uninsured children, a gap between high school completion rates and college readiness rates, the overburdening of Child Protective Services caseworkers and the fact that the region's children are becoming poorer.

Each of the five counties reported rates of uninsured children at or above the national average, but recent trends show that the proportion of children without health insurance is decreasing across the region. Enrollment in Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and children's Medicaid is generally trending upward.

The panelists also discussed the importance of consistent access to medical homes, or patient-centered primary care facilities.

"It's great that we're getting more kids insured. But less than half, and soon less than a third of doctors in Texas, will take Medicaid and CHIP," Bray said. "What does it mean if you can get insurance, but you can't get a doctor?"

Other findings showed steady and continuous improvement. During a 10-year period across all counties, the number of children enrolled in public prekindergarten increased, and the rate of adolescent pregnancies declined considerably.

North Texas communities have evolved to meet the needs of the region's children, Bray said, referring to teachers who bring students food for the weekend and doctors who serve patients at no charge. But he said he doesn't know how much longer those types of fixes will be sufficient.

"These are our kids," Bray said. "The children who are struggling in school today, they're going to live in your neighborhood. ... When we talk about the reality of poverty that is moving into North Texas, it is forcing us to acknowledge a problem that has been here that we've been conveniently able to turn a blind eye toward, and we can't do that."

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