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New census data confirm that policy matters:
Ohio's uninsured increase with attacks on Medicaid;
Food aid, tax credits both reduce poverty

As state and federal lawmakers find new ways to make it harder for people to access health care, the number of uninsured Ohioans increased by 42,000 last year, according to data released today by the U.S. Census Bureau. The rate of uninsured increased from 5.6 to 6 percent. Ohio is one of only 14 states where the number of uninsured increased.

To undercut the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the Trump administration slashed funding for outreach and consumer assistance during the 2017 open enrollment period. Ohio ACA navigators lost more than 71 percent of their funding – leaving only one navigator group to cover the entire state and 73 of 88 counties without help in navigating the computer site and picking a plan. The rise in the rate of uninsured could reflect this loss.

"Until last year, the number of uninsured Ohioans fell every year since 2010," said Hannah Halbert, project director with Policy Matters Ohio. "Policy and budget choices have a direct impact on the lives of families, Cuts to outreach and consumer assistance funding, plus the divisive national debate on work requirements for Medicaid could be hurting the program."

In spite of these changes, 94 percent of Ohioans had health insurance coverage in 2017. Most, 69.1 percent, had private coverage. Medicaid continued to protect the health of 21 percent of Ohioans. States like Ohio that expanded Medicaid to include more people have higher overall coverage rates than those that did not. In expansion states 6.5 percent were uninsured while non-expansion states' rate was nearly double (12.2 percent). The gap between expansion and non-expansion states also increased, as expansion states saw no change in their overall rate of uninsured and non-expansion states' rate increased by 0.4 percentage points on average.

"Kids whose families get health care through Medicaid perform better at school, miss fewer days, have higher rates of completing high school and going on to college," Halbert said. "Medicaid expansion and the ACA are investments that pay returns over generations."

Other federal programs designed to boost economic mobility and opportunity have helped lift millions of Americans out of poverty. The U.S. Census also released new data on the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) today. This measure, unlike the official poverty rate, considers how taxes, non-cash benefits like food assistance, and costs such as medical and work expenses, affect income. It is a more accurate picture of the impact of anti-poverty programs than the official measure.

Nationally, Social Security helped more than 27 million people escape poverty, more than any other program. Among anti-poverty policies, refundable tax credits for working families, the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child and Dependent Care Credit, had the most impact. These credits helped 8.3 million working families avoid poverty. SNAP, the nation's food assistance program, allowed 3.4 million to live above the poverty line. Unemployment Insurance kept 542,000 out of poverty when they were laid off.

"Many policymakers are trying to find new ways to prevent people who need it from accessing food aid or unemployment insurance, but they should be doing just the opposite," Halbert said. "Policymakers should invest in ways to make these programs more effective instead of ways to hamstring access and coverage through funding cuts."

Data on income and poverty were mixed. National median income increased in 2017 by 1.8 percent from $60,300 to $61,400. When survey changes made in 2013 and 2014 are considered, 2017's median income is statistically the same as that in 2007, the year prior to the last recession, and 1999. Earnings for full-time, year-round workers declined over the year by 1.1 percent. The official poverty rate for the nation was 12.3 percent, down just 0.4 percent from 2016. More than 39.7 million people were in poverty last year, unchanged from 2016.

"Ohio is finally adding jobs nine years after the recession, but earnings are stagnant," Halbert said. "Policymakers should strengthen collective bargaining rights and restore basic workplace protections like overtime and the minimum wage, so workers share in the growth they create."

Tomorrow, September 13th, the Census will release data from a separate survey covering state-level income and poverty statistics.

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Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan state policy research institute with offices in Cleveland and Columbus.