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Study targets health insurance in New Mexico

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SANTA FE - U.S. Census figures show the average percentage of New Mexicans without health insurance over the past three years has remained relatively unchanged, but state officials say the figures don't take into account their efforts to address the problem.

About 402,000 New Mexicans - or 21.1 percent - were without insurance at any given time between 2003 and 2005, according to the Census Bureau. Neighboring Texas had the highest three-year average at 24.6 percent, and the uninsured rate for the nation was 15.7 percent.

"Today's report shows that nationally people are losing coverage, while New Mexico as a whole is not losing ground and with new initiatives more New Mexicans will get health care coverage," state Human Services Secretary Pamela Hyde said Tuesday.

She pointed to a public-private partnership to help small employers afford health insurance, changes in Medicaid eligibility for young children and a program for children up to age 12 whose families make too much to qualify for Medicaid.

"There is no reason a child under 12 should be without health coverage," Hyde said. "We are working very hard through our outreach efforts to enroll more children in Medicaid and other public programs."

Gov. Bill Richardson said Tuesday he was pleased with New Mexico's accomplishments over the past few years, but he vowed that the state would not stop until all New Mexicans have access to health insurance.

Earlier this year, Richardson unveiled what he called his five-point plan. Companies that do business in the state would have to offer insurance benefits to their New Mexico workers by 2007 and the State Coverage Insurance Program would be expanded to cover more working adults.

The plan also called for the creation of the Health Coverage for New Mexicans committee. That group had its first meeting in August.

The figures released by the Census Bureau on Tuesday also cover poverty rates and incomes in 2005.

America's median household income - the point at which half earn more and half earn less - increased slightly from 2004 to 2005 but was still below the level in 1999. In New Mexico, the median household income decreased from \$40,013 in 1999 to \$37,492 last year, according to the Census Bureau.

However, the figures show no statistically significant change in the poverty rate for New Mexico, which stood at 18.5 percent last year. Nationally, 37 million people - or 12.6 percent - were still living below the poverty line, about the same as in 2004.

Gerry Bradley, research director for New Mexico Voices for Children, said the state has seen job growth since 2004, but it has yet to translate into higher median incomes.

"Next year, our poverty rate should be considerably better," Bradley said.