

More Americans left uninsured

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The ranks of Americans without medical coverage grew by 1.3 million people last year, the Census Bureau reported Tuesday.

The increase lifted the number of uninsured Americans to a record 46.6 million, 15.9 percent of the total population. By comparison, five years earlier, 38.7 million people were uninsured, or 14 percent of the population.

It's increasingly a middle-class problem. In households with incomes of \$50,000 a year or more, 17 million people had no insurance last year, up 1.5 million from 2004. In contrast, more low-income people received coverage from public programs.

Of the 1.3 million additional people who were uninsured last year, 961,000 reported working full-time--continuing evidence of companies cutting spiraling costs by dropping medical coverage. Last year, 59.5 percent of Americans received health insurance through employers, down from 64.1 percent in 2000.

Meanwhile, the number of uninsured children climbed for the first time since 1998, to 8.3 million kids in 2005 from 7.9 million the year before.

"That's really troubling," said Diane Rowland, executive director of the Kaiser Foundation on Medicaid and the Uninsured, noting that fiscally stressed public programs are increasingly unable to make up for the loss of private insurance.

Some politicians suggested the good news in the census report outweighed the bad.

"More people in America have health coverage today than at any time in our nation's history," said Rep. Joe Barton (R.-Texas), chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. Overall, 247.3 million Americans had private or public coverage in 2005, a jump of 1.4 million from the year before.

Because the population is growing, there are more people with insurance in the country as well as more without.

In Illinois, there was no change in the proportion of residents, 14.2 percent, who had no medical coverage. That's about 1.8 million people, mostly in Chicago and its suburbs.

"There isn't a day that goes by without my seeing at least one or two new patients who don't have a job or who work but don't have health insurance," said Dr. Robert McKersie, a physician at PCC Community Wellness Center on the West Side.

Although many centers such as PCC delivery low-cost primary care, getting specialty care is an enormous problem. Recently, McKersie tried to refer a patient with abdominal pain and other symptoms to the Cook County Health System for a diagnostic colonoscopy. The wait, he was told, was 18 months.

"The only thing I could do is send him to the emergency room and try to get him in the system that way," McKersie said. "The entire safety-net system is bursting at the seams."