

Undocumented immigrants in O.C. use fewer health services than rest of population

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(Medical Xpress) -- According to a new UC Irvine study, undocumented immigrants living in Orange County utilized fewer medical services in 2005 than did documented immigrants and citizens of Latino and non-Latino white backgrounds in the region. The discrepancy was found to be, in large part, attributable to a lack of health insurance among undocumented immigrants.

“It’s a common misperception that undocumented immigrants overuse [medical services](#) and rely primarily on hospital emergency rooms for care,” said UCI anthropologist Leo Chavez, author of the study. “Despite what we hear in the public debate, there is not a great deal of social science data on healthcare for undocumented immigrants.”

His work, published online in *Social Science & Medicine*, provides statistical data on the type and frequency of services accessed by undocumented immigrants in comparison to documented immigrants and citizens. Findings are based on information collected in a 2006 telephone survey of 805 Latino and 396 non-Latino white men and women 18 and older with both listed and unlisted phone numbers.

Of the Latino participants, 794 revealed their citizenship status. This self-reported sample comprised 30.4 percent undocumented immigrants, 25.8 percent legal permanent residents, 14.6 percent naturalized citizens, and 29.2 percent U.S.-born citizens. Of the white participants, 5.8 percent were foreign-born but reported being legal permanent residents or naturalized citizens.

The study found that 89.3 percent of non-Latino white survey respondents had accessed medical services in 2005, compared to 68.8 percent of all Latinos and 54.8 percent of undocumented Latino immigrants. The type of care sought varied, with undocumented immigrants more apt to utilize hospital outpatient clinics, health centers and public health clinics, while legal immigrants and citizens – both Latino and white – frequented private doctors' offices at a higher rate.

This contrast, said Chavez, is tied to health coverage. “Latinos with medical [insurance](#) were 2.27 times as likely as those without it to seek medical care,” he said. “As a whole, legal immigrants and citizens were 72 percent more likely than undocumented Latinos to seek medical care.”

The findings are significant, Chavez noted, as underutilization of medical services is associated with poorer health and higher mortality rates. “Healthcare for undocumented immigrants has become so politicized that current healthcare reforms explicitly exclude them,” he said. “The reality is that they face great obstacles to obtaining healthcare, and it’s not clear at this point what will happen to them as a result of reforms.”

Chavez’s study, which may serve as a resource to healthcare policymakers, was funded by the UCI Center for Research on Latinos in a Global Society and will be included in an upcoming special issue of [Social Science](#) & Medicine devoted to immigrant healthcare.

More information: [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...ii/S0277953611003005](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/...ii/S0277953611003005)

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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