

Survey: US uninsured rate drops; health law cited

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This March 1, 2014 file photo shows part of the website for HealthCare.gov as photographed in Washington. Welcome news for the Obama administration: A major new survey out Monday says the U.S. uninsured rate kept dropping last month and it's now on track to reach the lowest levels since 2008, before President Barack Obama took office. The Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index finds that 15.9 percent of Americans lack health insurance so far in 2014, down from 17.1 percent in the last three months of 2013. Gallup interviewed more than 28,000 adults, making the results highly accurate. (AP Photo/Jon Elswick, File)

The share of Americans without health insurance is dropping to the lowest levels since President Barack Obama took office, but sign-ups under his health care law lag among Hispanics—a big pool of potential beneficiaries.

The Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index found that 15.9 percent of U.S. adults are uninsured thus far in 2014, down from 17.1 percent for the last three months—or calendar quarter— of 2013.

Released Monday, the survey based on more than 28,000 interviews is a major independent effort to track the health care rollout. The drop of 1.2 percentage points in the uninsured rate translates to about 3 million people gaining coverage.

There are three weeks left to sign up for health care under Obama's health care program, his signature—and controversial—domestic policy achievement.

Republicans are virtually uniformly opposed to the 3-year-old law and are seeking to make a major issue of it ahead of the November general elections, when control of Congress will be at stake. Opponents consider taxes associated with the law burdensome for businesses and also object to a requirement that virtually all Americans get covered or risk fines. They also point to the numerous glitches that first plagued the health care website created by the Obama administration to help people find coverage.

Gallup said the drop coincides with the start of coverage under the health care law on Jan. 1. The major elements are now in effect. Insurers can no longer turn away people with health problems. New state-based markets are offering taxpayer-subsidized private insurance to middle-class households.

Gallup said the proportion of Americans who are uninsured is on track to drop to the lowest quarterly level it measured since 2008, before Obama took office.

"It's probably a reasonable hypothesis that the Affordable Care Act is having something to do with this drop," said Frank Newport, Gallup's editor-in-chief, referring to the law by its official name.

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The survey found that almost every major demographic group made progress getting health insurance, although Hispanics lagged.

With the highest uninsured rate of any racial or ethnic group, Latinos were expected to be major beneficiaries of the new health care law. They are a relatively young population and many are on the lower rungs of the middle class, in jobs that don't come with health insurance. They've also gone big for Obama in his two presidential campaigns.

But the administration's outreach effort to Hispanics stumbled from the start. The Spanish-language enrollment website, CuidadodeSalud.gov, was delayed due to technical problems. Its name sounds like a clunky translation from English: "Care of Health."

The feds also translated "Affordable Care Act" as "Law for Care of Health at Low Price"—which doesn't sound too appealing.

A spot check of the Spanish site on Monday showed parts of it still use a mix of Spanish and English to convey information on such basics as insurance copays, risking confusion.

With disappointing Latino sign-ups, the administration is making a special pitch as the end of open enrollment season approaches March 31.

The president was on Spanish-language television networks last week to raise awareness. Obama assured viewers that signing up for health care won't trigger the deportation of any relatives who are in the country illegally. The law's benefits are only for citizens and legal U.S. residents.

Among blacks, the uninsured rate was down by 2.6 percentage points. It declined by 1 percentage point among whites. But Latinos saw a drop of just eight-tenths of a percentage point.

The survey was based on telephone interviews from Jan. 2-Feb. 28 with a random sample of 28,396 adults aged 18 and older in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. For results based on the total national sample, the margin of error is plus or minus 1 percentage point, larger for subgroups.

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