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I write about health care policy and marketplace change.

Has Obamacare Really Reduced The Uninsured By 16 Million And Continued To Show Strong Growth?

Recent reports have touted a significant drop in the number of uninsured and generally credited Obamacare for it. And, other reports have recently highlighted about 950,000 more people signing up for Obamacare since the 2015 open enrollment closed but haven't said anything about the number of people who dropped their coverage during the same period.

As one headline put it, "[After Obamacare Number of Uninsured Hits Five Year-Low.](#)" Now, this headline might be technically correct but it hardly gives us the proper impression for why the uninsured rate has dropped so low.

Obamacare supporters have been citing two recent reports about the decline in the number of those uninsured:

The federal government's National Health Interview Survey found that 7 million fewer people were uninsured in the first three months of this year, when compared to the average for all of 2014. The uninsured rate has dropped to 9.2 percent of the population—a modern day low.

A large independent survey called the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index found a statistically significant drop in the uninsured rate for most states since Obamacare launched in 2013. States that expanded Medicaid expansion saw bigger declines than the states that didn't.

Some press reports credited Obamacare for this improvement in the number of people insured or at least strongly inferred that Obamacare is responsible for a reduction in the uninsured of 16 million.

[CQ HealthBeat](#): "Mounting evidence suggests that more people are benefiting from the 2010 health care law, with the number of Americans without medical coverage declining by one-third, or 15.8 million people, since 2013, according to the latest report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention."

[The Hill](#): "16M Fewer Uninsured Since Obamacare, Study Finds"

And, in a [Huffington Post article](#): “New Report Confirms What The GOP Won’t Admit: Obamacare is working” – “The report doesn’t identify a reason for the decline [in the uninsured]. It simply communicates survey findings. But the timing and characteristics of the trend make the primary reason obvious: It’s President Barack Obama’s signature health care law.”

[Yahoo Finance](#): “Obamacare Drives Uninsured Rate to New Low”

But where are these newly covered people getting their coverage?

A [May, 2015 Rand Corporation study](#) for a comparable period found about the same decline in the number of those uninsured but gave us the rest of the story. From the study summary:

Insurance coverage has increased across all types of insurance since the major provisions of the federal Affordable Care Act took effect, with a net total of 16.9 million people becoming newly enrolled through February 2015, according to a new RAND Corporation study.

Researchers estimate that from September 2013 to February 2015, 22.8 million Americans became newly insured and 5.9 million lost coverage, for a net of 16.9 million newly insured Americans.

Among those newly gaining coverage, 9.6 million people enrolled in employer-sponsored health plans, followed by Medicaid (6.5 million), the individual marketplaces (4.1 million), non marketplace individual plans (1.2 million) and other insurance sources (1.5 million).

So, more than half of the reduction in the number of people who are uninsured is coming from an old fashioned increase in the number of people being covered in employer health plans. You will recall that the Obamacare employer mandate was delayed during 2014 so we can hardly credit the big employer gains to that part of Obamacare. Nor, is there much evidence that the individual mandate has had a big impact on enrollment—[few people signed up by the special tax deadline extension](#). I will suggest those employer coverage gains could just as easily have more to do with a recovering economy and employment improvement.

As Rand points out, the Obamacare insurance exchange enrollment is tepid at best—accounting for only a gain in the number of insured of 4.1 million people.

[As I have pointed out before](#), only about 40% of those eligible for the Obamacare insurance exchanges have so far signed up with exchange enrollment far behind the original CBO enrollment estimate of the 13 million for 2015. And, the vast majority of those who have signed up are people with very low incomes who pay the lowest premiums and get the most help with their deductibles and co-pays.

The biggest Obamacare gains are coming from the Medicaid expansion. Something people get for free in the states that have expanded it under Obamacare.

And it was widely reported last week that 943,934 new enrollees have signed up since open enrollment ended on Feb. 22, through the “special enrollment periods (SEPs).” The SEPs are for

people newly eligible after the close of the annual open enrollment because of life changes that caused them to lose their prior coverage, such as divorce or job loss.

For example, this headline on [Kaiser Health News](#): “Nearly 1 Million People Signed Up For Obamacare After the Open Enrollment Closed.” This headline is technically correct but again hardly gives a clear picture of what’s going on.

What these reports overlooked is something that [Stephnie Armour at the Wall Street Journal](#) did not miss:

About 8.8 million people selected a plan or were re-enrolled through HealthCare.gov during open enrollment this year. As of March 31, 7.5 million had coverage and paid premiums.

So, 1.3 million people fell off this spring’s Obamacare rolls while 949,934 signed up after the open enrollment period.

Overall, that is 949,934 steps forward and 1.3 million steps backward for the federal Obamacare exchange enrollment.

More, the Obama administration hasn’t yet told us how many people dropped their coverage since March 31st. Health plans are telling me that their Obamacare enrollment, like last year, melts at the rate of about 2% each month.

I will suggest that it is important for these reporters to ask the administration how many more have dropped their coverage during the same period people used the Special Enrollment Period.

Here’s the bottom line. The Obamacare insurance exchanges aren’t enrolling anywhere near the number of people they were supposed to. And, there is no proof Obamacare has grown since the close of open enrollment. In fact the anecdotal and historical evidence would suggest it is now shrinking.

But we really don’t know because the Obama administration is just reporting the good news and a good share of the press appears to be happy to pass these numbers along—albeit in a technically correct but hardly complete way.