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Study:More neglecting health in hard times

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By Nicole C. Brambila

The Desert Sun

Hammered by the recession, more eastern Riverside County residents are jobless, without insurance, putting off the doctor, skipping meals and binge drinking, according to a new health report.

"Some things, quite frankly, are ugly," said Dr. Glen Grayman, board president of the Health Assessment Resource Center, or HARC.

Conducted by HARC, the "2010 Community Health Monitor," is a one-of-a kind study of eastern Riverside County, which includes the Coachella Valley.

The first survey was taken in 2007, so the country's worst economic crisis since the Great Depression is sandwiched between the two, giving researchers a first-time glimpse at the toll.

Among the findings:

- * About one in four adults, double the number three years ago, admitted to binge drinking – or consuming between four and six drinks at a time. An estimated 13,500 people admitted to driving drunk.
- * An estimated 34,800 residents did not have health insurance in 2007. By 2010, that had climbed to 106,600.
- * More than twice as many adults and seniors were out of work.
- * Greater numbers of whites watched their annual income plummet below \$25,000. It was worse for women, rising from 17.9 percent in 2007 to 27.6 percent in 2010. Plus, twice the number of seniors dropped down into the \$25,000 to \$50,000 income bracket.
- * The number of adults needing help to put food on the table roughly doubled in three years. One in eight adults skipped a meal for lack of money.
- * Fewer adults saw a health care provider. Roughly two-thirds did in 2010 compared to three-quarters in 2007.

"It looks like people are pushing off their health care to greater and greater lengths of time," Grayman said.

And that ends up costing everyone.

If picked up earlier, diseases can be treated. If allowed to fester, patients only get sicker, driving up everyone's health costs when the uninsured use the insurance of last resort – the emergency room.

Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage, the valley's only nonprofit hospital, for example, has had to do some belt-tightening – including layoffs – to make up for patients unable to pay, said Martin Massiello, chief operating officer.

Before the recession, Eisenhower typically saw two to three uninsured patients a day, he said. Today, that number is up to about 20.

"The people who are coming to us are very sick," Massiello said.

He noted the bulk of these patients are from Rancho Mirage and Palm Desert – two of the valley's more affluent cities.

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"We think these are folks that at one time would have had insurance."

Drew Williams, 52, of Palm Springs had a good job and health insurance three years ago. He was healthy then, he said.

The now-unemployed architect found himself Thursday at the Palm Springs Family Care Center for an undisclosed illness.

The county clinic charges patients based on their ability to pay.

"I couldn't afford not to come, even if I'm using the last of my food money," he said.

For all the bad news, the report did have a couple of bright spots.

More adults are educated, one of the single most important indicators of better health. The educated are likely to have better-paying jobs with health insurance and other benefits.

The percentage of residents without a high school education dropped from 16.3 percent in 2007 to 9.5 percent in 2010.

Plus, more adults had earned a college degree, rising from 21.1 percent three years ago to 27.6 percent.

Eastern Riverside County also saw a considerable drop in the number of children ages 6 to 11 who did not have health insurance, falling to 5.9 percent from 19 percent in 2007.

"We drastically reduced the number of kids that don't have health care coverage," Grayman said, noting the survey was done before health care reform could impact the findings.

"We're doing something right here."

Conducted every three years, the survey is to provide reliable health data for policymakers and nonprofit organizations.

A separate report pulling Coachella Valley-only data paid for by Eisenhower Medical Center is expected to be released in the coming weeks.





The county's budget woes prevented a countywide snapshot, but Grayman said they are in talks to expand the report for 2013.

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