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Study: BadgerCare Plus improving access to health insurance

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Total enrollment in the state's BadgerCare Plus health insurance program increased 34 percent from December 2007 to September 2008, according to early findings of the **University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute's** evaluation of the program.

Enrollment of children, parents and caregiver relatives in the health plan rose from 440,000 to 590,000 over the time period studied by the institute, which is evaluating the program in partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services under a grant from the **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**.

BadgerCare Plus is the state's effort to expand access to health insurance for Wisconsin children and low- and middle-income families.

The enrollment increase evaluated in the study included 57,000 adults and more than 92,000 children, according to a press release from the Department of Health Services.

Other findings were:

- Children in families earning \$26,400 per year or less (under 150 percent of the federal poverty level) account for almost two-thirds of the increase in child enrollments.
- The rates of enrollment as a percentage of the total population of children in Wisconsin are high among poor and near poor children.
- The proportion of children enrolled in Medicaid programs, the federal-state health insurance for the poor, increased from 21 percent before the launch of BadgerCare Plus to 27 percent in September 2008.

In the press release, Karen Timberlake, secretary of the Department of Health Services, attributed the increase in enrollment to a combination of factors, including an initial automated search for eligible children, parents and caregivers who are in other public programs; simplified and expanded categories for eligibility; more aggressive outreach to the community and branding the program as available health coverage "for all kids;" and using community-based groups to identify and enroll eligible individuals.

In addition, the economic downturn may have led to individuals losing private insurance, prompting increased participation in BadgerCare Plus.

"This study is yet another indication that the BadgerCare Plus expansion has been a great success," Timberlake said. "More children and their families are covered and able to obtain the health care that they need simply by making the program easier to apply for and stay enrolled in."

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