

Worries about the Coronavirus Caused Nearly 1 in 10 Parents to Delay or Forgo Needed Health Care for Their Children in Spring 2021

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Though children face a lower risk of getting severely ill from COVID-19 than adults, many families have avoided getting health care for their children during the pandemic for fear that their children could be exposed to the coronavirus.¹ Children's receipt of screenings, routine vaccinations, and other care was lower in 2020 than prior years.² New data from the Urban Institute's April 2021 Health Reform Monitoring Survey (HRMS) indicate parents' worries about exposure to the virus continued affecting children's receipt of care this past spring, even as COVID-19 case rates fell from their peak. In April 2021, nearly 1 in 5 parents (19.4 percent) reported they had delayed or forgone care for their children under age 19 in the past 12 months over concerns about exposure to the virus (data not shown); nearly 1 in 10 (9.2 percent) delayed or did not get care for their children in the past 30 days for this reason (figure 1). Not receiving needed care can adversely affect children's health in the short and long terms.³

Findings

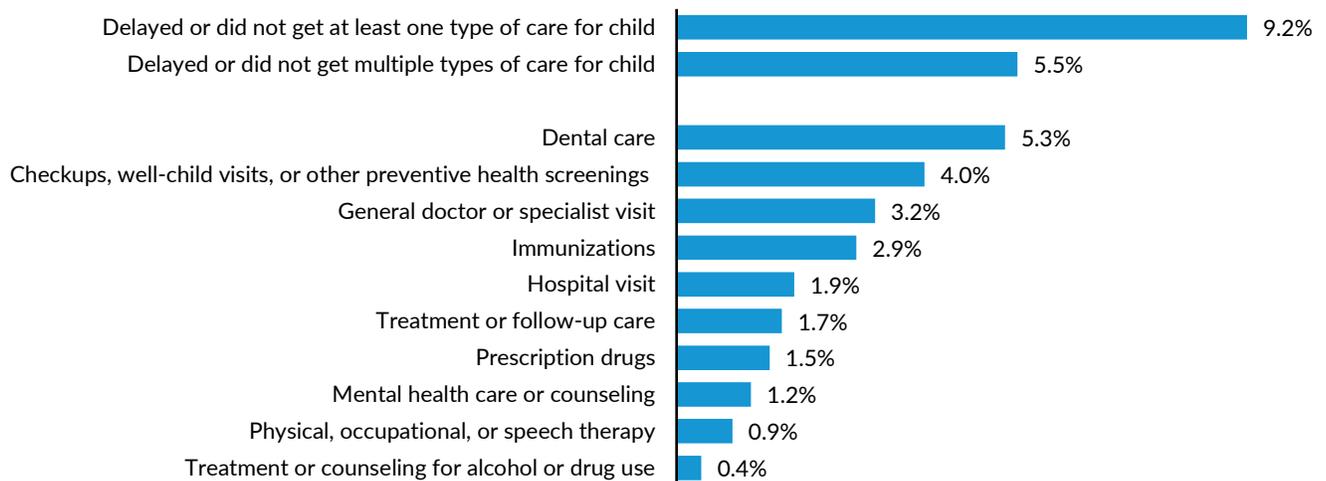
In April 2021, 9.2 percent of parents ages 18 to 64 reported that worries about the coronavirus had caused them to delay or forgo at least one type of care for their children in the past 30 days, and 5.5 percent reported their children had missed out on multiple types of care for this reason (figure 1). Dental care was the most common type of delayed or forgone care (5.3 percent), followed by checkups, well-child visits, or other preventive health screenings; general doctor or specialist visits; and routine immunizations. Parents with family incomes below 250 percent of the federal poverty level were more likely than those with higher incomes to report delaying or forgoing care for their children in the past 30 days (12.3 percent versus 6.5 percent) and to miss out on multiple types of care (8.1 percent versus 3.3 percent; figure 2). Parents with lower family incomes were also more likely to report their children had unmet needs for dental care, check-ups, or other preventive care (data not shown).

Conclusions

Delaying or forgoing children's health care can worsen their health and limit their abilities to go to school or day care, complete schoolwork, or do other daily activities. Because children under 12 are not yet eligible for COVID-19 vaccines, some families may still be avoiding care for their children this summer. The rate of missed immunizations on the HRMS aligns with other data and raises concerns about outbreaks of other serious illnesses, especially as schools return to in-person instruction.⁴ Outreach efforts by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other stakeholders and use of state immunization registries to identify children who have missed vaccines could help families receive missed vaccinations.⁵ These findings also show the importance of increasing rates of COVID-19 vaccinations among eligible adolescents and encouraging take-up for children under 12 when they become eligible, not only to protect them from COVID-19 but to help families feel comfortable obtaining care. Greater efforts by federal, state, and local governments, providers, and insurers are necessary to help children catch up on overdue preventive care and other needed health care.

FIGURE 1

Share of Parents Ages 18 to 64 Who Reported Delaying or Forgoing Health Care for Their Children in the Past 30 Days over Coronavirus Concerns, April 2021



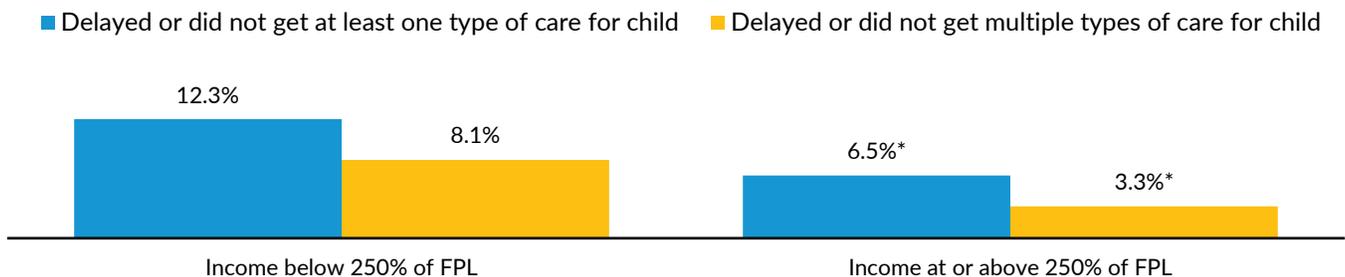
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Source: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, April 2021.

Notes: The survey asked parents whether their children needed care but did not get it because they were worried their children would be exposed to the coronavirus. We cannot distinguish between delayed and forgone care.

TABLE 1

Share of Parents Ages 18 to 64 Who Reported Delaying or Forgoing Health Care for Their Children in the Past 30 Days over Coronavirus Concerns, by Family Income, April 2021



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Source: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, April 2021.

Notes: FPL = federal poverty level. The survey asked parents whether their children needed care but did not get it because they were worried their children would be exposed to the coronavirus. We cannot distinguish between delayed and forgone care.

* Estimate differs significantly from that for parents with incomes below 250 percent of FPL at the 0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

¹ Dulce Gonzalez, Michael Karpman, Genevieve M. Kenney, and Stephen Zuckerman, "Delayed and Forgone Health Care for Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021).

² Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, *Medicaid & CHIP and the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency: Preliminary Medicaid & CHIP Data Snapshot* (Baltimore: Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2021).

³ Stacey McMorrow, Dulce Gonzalez, Clara Alvarez Caraveo, and Genevieve M. Kenney, "Urgent Action Needed to Address Children's Unmet Health Care Needs during the Pandemic" (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021).

⁴ Joan Stephenson, "After Sharp Decline in Routine Childhood Immunizations during COVID-19, CDC Urges 'Catch-Up' Shots to Avert Outbreaks," *JAMA Health Forum* 2, no. 6: e212093. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamahealthforum.2021.2093>.

⁵ "Catch-Up to Get Ahead Toolkit," US Department and Health and Human Services, accessed July 15, 2021.