

Poll: Parents report challenges accessing care, concerns about influenza and HPV vaccines

More than 1,000 parents across Tennessee were polled in late 2024 by a team of clinicians and researchers at Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt to gauge their concerns about issues impacting their child's health, including health insurance, access to health care and other areas affecting the well-being of their children.

Nearly half (47%) of Tennessee children had public health insurance (TennCare or CoverKids) in 2024. This was the same percentage as private insurance (47%) and an increase from previous years of the poll. About 6% of parents reported their child was uninsured, a small increase from previous years.

About 1 in 6 parents of children with public insurance said their child lost coverage for a period of time in 2024, also a slight increase from prior years. About two thirds (64%) said their child lost coverage due to administrative reasons, including paperwork issues or not receiving a renewal notice.

"Public health insurance is a crucial support to almost half of Tennessee families, providing access to needed health care for their children and preventing them from becoming uninsured," said Joe Zickafoose, MD, MS, assistant professor of Clinical Pediatrics at Monroe Carell. "This is especially important to understand as federal lawmakers consider cuts to public health insurance programs."

About 40% of parents in Tennessee reported sometimes sending their child to health care visits without a parent or guardian in 2024. Among those parents, one in three said their child experienced difficulties getting care, with a larger share of Black parents (39%) saying they had a hard time getting care.

"Parents and guardians can face challenges in accompanying their children to health care visits, such as work schedules or transportation, which can increase the risk of delays in care," said Erin Boyd, MD, MSPH, assistant professor of Pediatrics and an adolescent medicine specialist at Monroe Carell.

"One way parents and guardians can reduce delays in care is by providing blanket consent to their clinic or health care provider for anticipated future health care needs, when possible," Boyd said.

Vaccines

Nearly half (48%) of Tennessee parents said they would be unlikely to vaccinate their child for seasonal influenza in the winter of 2024-2025, with the biggest reason being concerns about the safety of the vaccine, followed by concerns that the vaccine may cause illness.

“Children can often get soreness or swelling at the site of the influenza vaccine, but only about 1 in 10 get a fever and other side effects are extremely rare. The influenza vaccine is inactivated, so it can’t give you the flu,” said Stephanie Rolsma, MD, PhD, a pediatrician and infectious disease expert at Monroe Carell.

Similarly, about 30% of parents said they would be unlikely to have their child receive the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine series. HPV is most commonly spread through sexual contact and is associated with certain cancers in both males and females.

“The HPV vaccine is an important one for kids to get; it prevents cancer!,” Rolsma added. “It is also important for parents to know that discussing or receiving this vaccine won’t make kids more likely to start having sex. This vaccine is most effective when we give it earlier rather than later, which is why I recommend that my patients get it at age 11 to 12.”

About the Poll

The Vanderbilt Child Health Poll is conducted annually in Tennessee to gauge child wellbeing and parents’ concerns about a wide range of topics. The survey includes a representative sample of over 1,000 Tennessee parents across each of the three grand divisions of the state and focuses on child health issues ranging from education and schooling to food security, insurance status and mental health.