

Poll: Most Tennessee Kids See a Regular Provider, but Many Visit More Than One Type

A new analysis from the Vanderbilt Child Health Poll reveals that most Tennessee parents usually take their kids to a single place for health care needs, but more than 28% also visit other sites for health-related needs, like an urgent care clinic.

The analysis is the first-time researchers at Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt have asked Tennessee parents about their patterns for pediatric health care utilization.

More than 90% of parents said their child or children had been to a doctor or health professional for a check-up in the past year. More than 80% said they most often go to a doctor's office or health center for their kids' health needs. Thirteen percent said they mostly go to an urgent care clinic, and roughly 6% said they go to an emergency department.

"When children have a medical home — a consistent doctor's office or health center for regular care — families can focus on keeping their children healthy and preventing health problems before they start," said Stephanie Douplik, MD, MPSH, assistant professor of Pediatrics and Dr. William R. Long Director in Health Policy.

A quarter of parents said their kids take regular, prescribed medication for health conditions, but nearly 50% of parents said their kids miss a dose of their medication. Eleven percent said their kids miss a dose daily, and 38% said they miss a dose once per week.

The reasons for missing a dose differed among parents. Forty-six percent of parents said they miss a dose because their pharmacy doesn't carry the medication, and 42% said they miss a dose because of cost. Insurance and transportation were other reasons. Parents could select multiple reasons.

"We frequently see children with asthma in the emergency department and hospital because their families were unable to fill prescriptions — often because the pharmacy did not stock the inhaler or insurance did not cover the medication," said Alison Carroll, MD, MPH, assistant professor of Pediatrics at Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt.

Insurance coverage was split evenly between private and public insurance plans, like TennCare or CoverKids, 48% each. Four% of parents said their kids don't have insurance. The number of uninsured kids has declined since it spiked in 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic began. After a rise in private insurance in 2023, parents using public insurance plans have increased to roughly equal as private insurance.

A total of 18% of parents said their child lost TennCare or CoverKids coverage in the past year. A third of those parents said it was because their income was too high or they switched to an employer-sponsored plan, but another 33% said they had issues with the paperwork.

“Insurance churn hurts children,” said Douppnik “Changes in parents’ jobs and income force families to complete burdensome paperwork to switch between Medicaid and private insurance plans, often multiple times.

“Each switch can mean new forms, delays in coverage, and losing trusted doctors, nurses, therapists, and care teams — disrupting the continuity of care children need to stay healthy and develop.”

Researchers also asked parents about school-based health services. About 35% of parents said their kids visited with the school guidance counselor in the past year, 52% said they expected their child to see a guidance counselor in the year ahead, and 62% expected their child to see the school nurse, if they had one.

A growing number of parents (11%, up from 6% in 2024) said their child had difficulty getting help for a health concern while at school. More than half (52%) said their difficulty was because the school didn’t offer the necessary resource, and 32% of parents said they weren’t able to offer permission when the care was needed.

“School nurses and counselors provide essential care that helps children stay healthy, supported, and ready to learn.” Douppnik said.

About the Poll

The Vanderbilt Child Health Poll is conducted annually to gauge parents’ concerns about a wide range of topics. The data, collected from a representative sample of Tennessee parents across each of the three grand divisions of the state, focuses on child health issues ranging from education to food security, insurance status and mental health. Roughly 80% of all parents polled identified as registered voters.