

Expanding Health Care Coverage

The number of Americans without health care coverage remains persistently high. Nationwide, in 2005, 46.6 million people – 15.9 percent of the population – were without health insurance coverage, up from 45.3 million – 15.6 percent – in 2004, according to [U.S. Census Bureau](#) data released in late August.

Montana's uninsured rate continues to run higher than the national average, ranging between 18.4 and 19.3 percent of the state's population between 2003 and 2005. This seems due to the large percentage of small employers and self-employed persons in the state. In addition, the steady escalation in insurance premiums has begun to make it difficult for some employers to afford the cost of insurance.

The uninsured population affects the health care system in several ways. First, because the uninsured are often less able to pay for their health care services, providers aren't compensated for a significant amount of the care provided to this population. This is reflected in the amount of charity care provided by hospitals, which in 2005, amounted to about \$40 million. Because the cost of this care has to be recovered, hospitals are forced to raise charges to cover these unpaid costs.

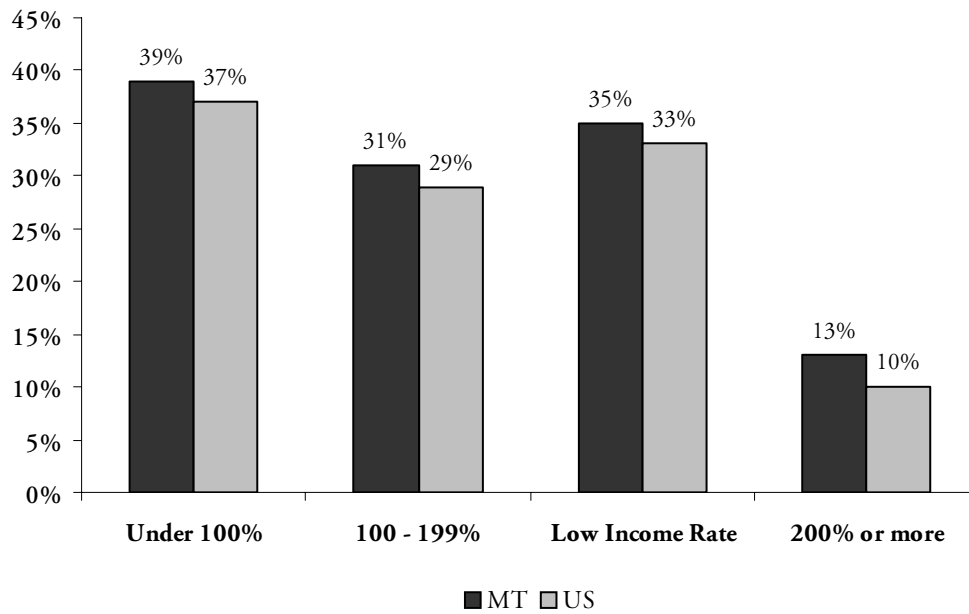
Second, persons who are uninsured or underinsured often skip routine and preventive care and only seek medical treatment when a serious illness occurs. Not only are these serious illnesses more expensive to treat, treatment is often provided in hospital emergency rooms – the most expensive venue in which to provide care. The failure of uninsured persons to obtain preventive care adds to the overall cost of medical treatment.

Montana's not-for-profit community-based hospitals treat all patients regardless of their ability to pay. In addition, hospitals have policies that allow them to offer discounted prices and financial assistance to patients who meet certain income qualifications. In most cases, persons with a family income at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level are provided care free-of-charge.

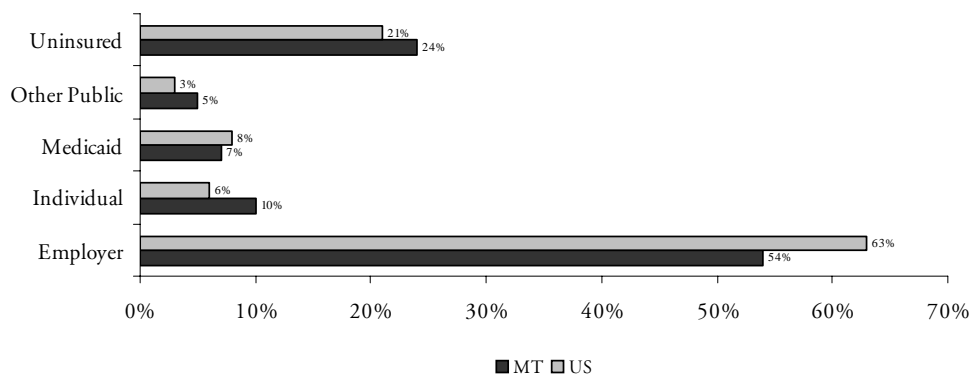
Providing medical treatment to the uninsured comes at a cost. For this reason, MHA has long advocated legislation that would increase the number of Montanans with health care coverage.

One of the easiest ways to accomplish this goal is to expand the [Children's Health Insurance Program \(CHIP\)](#) to cover more kids and the parents of CHIP-eligible kids. A variety of other proposals has been discussed, including tax subsidies to encourage businesses to purchase coverage for their employees and subsidize premiums for certain populations.

Non-Elderly Uninsured by Federal Poverty Level

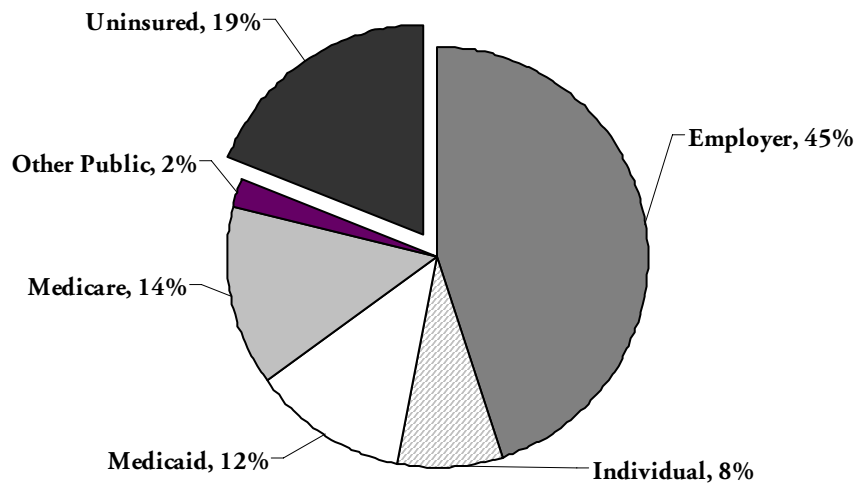


Montana's Population Age 16 - 64 by Insurance Status

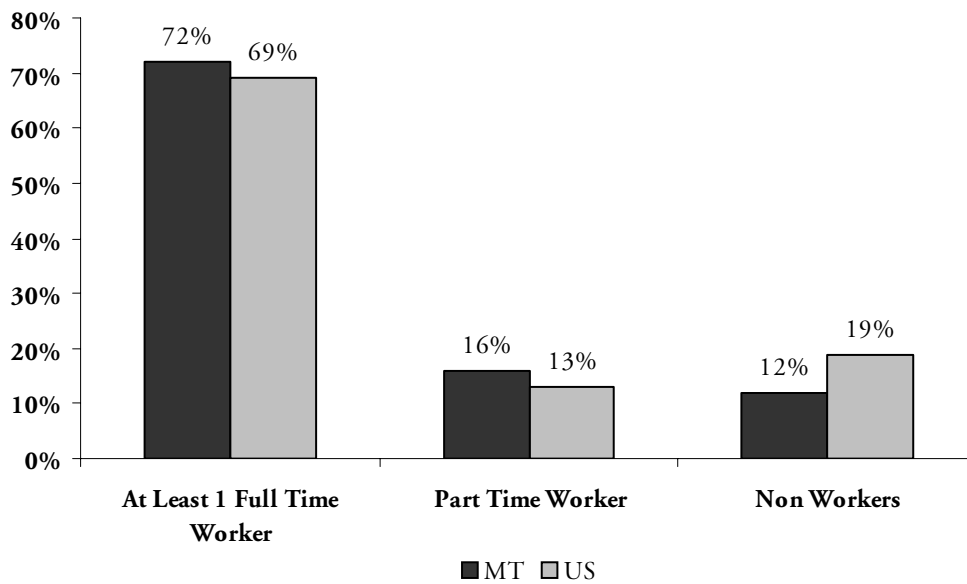


Source: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, State Health Facts, State Data 2003-2004, U.S. Data 2004.

Montana Insurance Coverage by Type of Insurance



Non-Elderly Uninsured by Employment Status



Source: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, State Health Facts, State Data 2003-2004, U.S. Data 2004.