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Utah less insured, less healthy than once thought
Survey • Change in how state calculates, conducts poll leads to a 49 percent jump.

By kirsten stewart

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Utah has devised a more accurate way to gauge the health of its residents, and the new numbers aren't flattering.

More Utahns are uninsured than previously thought — 368,200 adults in 2010, a 49 percent jump from the prior estimate of 247,100. And more of us smoke: 11.2 percent of adults, instead of 8.8 percent.

But that's just the beginning.

Changes in how the state conducts and calculates its largest public health poll, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) survey, are yielding new estimates on just about every health indicator, from smoking and drug use to exercise and cancer screenings, said Michael Friedrichs, epidemiologist for the Utah Department of Health's Bureau of Health Promotion.

Some indicators budged by just a percentage point or two, within the margin of error. Rates of asthma and arthritis, for example, are statistically the same.

But all the indicators moved in the wrong direction toward a "greater burden" of unhealthy habits, Friedrichs said. "We've been overestimating mammography and colonoscopy [screening] rates and underestimating binge drinking by a few percentage points."

The changes are a reflection of how the state collects data. Pollsters are now calling cellphones instead of just land lines to reach a wider range of residents. In 2004, only about 5 percent of households had ditched their land lines in favor of cellphones, said Friedrichs. Now about a third are cellphone-only, he said.

And the state is weighting responses with greater precision, aided by new U.S. census data known as the American Community Survey. In the past, the state was able to adjust its findings only for age, sex and county of residence.

The new data now allow officials to adjust for race, marital status, education, whether a person rents or owns a home and what type of phone they use — land line, cellphone or both.

Statisticians give more weight to some people's responses than others to avoid bias. Women, for example, are more likely to respond to surveys so their answers count less, said Friedrichs. "If you were to put everyone in Utah in a big hat and draw from that hat, you would get an unbiased sample. But we can't do that."

The pronounced jumps in the uninsured and smoking rates are largely due to better accounting for cellphone-only users, because they tend to be younger, Friedrichs said. "Young people are the people who don't have health insurance and who are more likely to smoke."

Some statisticians argue against changing the yardstick, since it makes it harder to track trends.

"But the world changes, and my belief is you should do what you can to get the best possible estimates," said Friedrichs. "This fix won't last forever. Skype and Google will probably also force changes in the next 10 years in survey research."

In the coming months, the health department will publish more updated figures.

"Having more accurate data will allow us to better target efforts to help make Utah the healthiest state," said the department's executive director, David Patton, in a prepared statement.

Consumer advocates have long complained of state estimates underplaying the uninsured rate. The state's new number — 21.5 percent uninsured — is even higher than the official U.S. census estimate of 19.9 percent, notes Lincoln Nehring, a health policy analyst at Voices for Utah Children.

A new rate for children is not yet available. But Nehring said he expects it to jump by at least 7 percent, maybe by as much as 12 percent.

The BRFSS is a household health survey overseen by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and conducted by individual state health departments.

kstewart@sltrib.com Twitter: @kirstendstewart