

Medicaid Expansion and Primary Care Utilization: A Post-ACA Analysis

Kevin Sullivan, MPP

Overview

This project examined how Medicaid Expansion under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) affected primary care usage in the United States. While the ACA expanded healthcare coverage for millions of low-income Americans, this study investigated whether that expansion translated into increased access and use of primary care services, an essential component of preventive health and long-term system efficiency.

Data & Methods

Using data from the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey (2005-2022), the analysis applied a difference-in-differences approach to isolate the effects of Medicaid Expansion in 2014. The study compares outcomes for Medicaid recipients (treatment group) and non-recipients (control group) before and after Expansion.

Key Measures of Primary Care Usage

- Doctor Visits (NDV): general healthcare engagement
- Usual Source of Care (USOC): having a primary care provider
- Made Appointment for Primary Care (MAPC): actual usage of primary care

Findings

- Doctor Visits **increased**: Medicaid recipients had a statistically significant increase in annual doctor visits post-expansion.
- Access to Providers **increased**: The likelihood of having a usual source of care also rose for Medicaid patients.
- Actual Usage **decreased**: Surprisingly, Medicaid recipients were less likely to make a primary care appointment post-expansion.
- These trends held even after adjusting for demographic, socioeconomic, and regional differences.

Why It Matters

Expanding coverage does not automatically increase real-world usage of care. Barriers like provider shortages, administrative burdens, and geographic disparities can limit the benefits of insurance, especially for low-income populations.

Policy Implications

To close the gap between coverage and care:

- Incentivize primary care careers with grants or bonuses.
- Support rural access through relocation subsidies for providers.
- Launch public education campaigns on the value of primary care.