Disentangling the ACA’s Coverage Effects — Lessons for Policymakers

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Since the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), an estimated 20 million Americans have gained health insurance, and the country’s uninsured rate has dropped from 16% to 9% since 2010.\(^1\)

In the upcoming presidential election, the ACA’s future is again at stake. Understanding how the law has achieved these coverage changes is critical to evaluating its progress.

The primary ACA tools that took effect in 2014 are by now familiar: the expansion of Medicaid (made optional for states by the Supreme Court in 2012), the availability of tax credits to help consumers purchase coverage on the new health insurance exchanges, and the implementation of an individual requirement to purchase health insurance or pay a tax penalty (the individual mandate).

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Molly Frean, B.A., Jonathan Gruber, Ph.D., and Benjamin D. Sommers, M.D., Ph.D.
Disentangling the ACA’s Coverage Effects

In 2014, several million poor adults in the states that didn’t expand Medicaid were left without viable coverage options. Perhaps less obviously, we also found a substantial increase in Medicaid coverage among children and eligible for Medicaid under pre-ACA standards. This population accounted for 44% of the coverage increase. One component of this increase occurred in states that started the ACA’s expansion process earlier than 2014. In six states, most notably California, the ACA Medicaid expansion took effect at least in part in 2012–2013. We find that these early efforts laid the groundwork for even larger gains in 2014, offering the first example of what will become a recurring theme: state implementation plays a key role in the ACA’s effectiveness.

But even among people who were eligible for Medicaid under pre-ACA criteria, we found a large increase in coverage. That increase was made possible by the ACA’s streamlining of the application process for Medicaid, removal of onerous asset tests for determining eligibility for most applicants, and increased public awareness about insurance coverage options. Moreover, expanding eligibility to the parents of children who were already eligible can help bring coverage to entire families. We found evidence of this “woodwork,” or “welcome mat,” effect in all states, whether or not they expanded Medicaid. Meanwhile, another potential spillover effect of expanding Medicaid — the replacement of private coverage with public coverage (“crowd-out”) — did not occur. This finding suggests that the ACA’s Medicaid dollars have been effectively targeted to increasing coverage among people who would otherwise be uninsured.

While Medicaid accounted for roughly 60% of ACA coverage gains identified in 2014, the other nearly 40% was attributable to the law’s premium subsidies for coverage purchased on the new insurance exchanges. Our estimates suggest that for each additional 10% subsidy for the average
family premium, nearly 1.5 million more Americans obtained health insurance. Though that gain is substantial in population terms, in economic terms it indicates that 2014 participation rates in the exchanges were more modest than originally projected. Participation will probably increase over time, however — a prediction that’s supported by exchange enrollment statistics from 2015–2016.

And there’s reason to think that state efforts can facilitate even greater participation. We found that premium subsidies were nearly twice as effective in getting people to enroll in coverage if they lived in states operating their own exchanges rather than in states participating in the federal exchange. This finding probably reflects multiple factors, such as more aggressive outreach and the creation of application-assistance programs in these states, as well as political environments that are generally more supportive of the ACA.

The law’s third key feature was the individual mandate. When we assessed the mandate’s detailed provisions, which include income-based penalties for lacking coverage and various specific exemptions from those penalties, we did not find that overall coverage rates responded to these aspects of the law. Does that mean the mandate had no effect? Not necessarily. If its primary result was to make all Americans more likely to obtain coverage — whether or not they were subject to the penalty and irrespective of how much it would cost them — our analysis would not capture that effect. Indeed, there is some evidence from analysis of a similar insurance mandate enacted in Massachusetts in 2006 to suggest that this phenomenon may explain part of the Medicaid woodwork effect and may also have induced some ambivalent consumers to purchase private coverage. Moreover, the dollar value of the mandate penalty was quite modest in 2014 ($95 per person or 1% of taxable income, whichever was greater), but it increased substantially by 2016 ($695 per person or 2.5% of taxable income). Thus, the mandate may play a larger role over time.

Finally, according to our analysis, the ACA’s effects on employer-sponsored insurance were essentially nil. Though some opponents have demonized the ACA as a “job killer” and a disrupter of health insurance for millions of people, our data and others’ analyses have shown no adverse effects on rates of employer-sponsored health insurance coverage, unemployment, or part-time work.

As the country focuses on the 2016 election, we offer several key messages from our findings. State implementation continues to strongly affect the success — or shortcomings — of the ACA. This reality is most obvious in changes seen in part-time employment as a consequence of the mandate penalty. Though undermining coverage effects may play a larger role in states with their own exchanges, federal exchange and those in states with their own exchanges. Though undermining coverage expansion may be politically expedient in some places, it is indefensible from a public health perspective.

With one presidential candidate pledging to build on the ACA and the other pledging to repeal it, and with state-level battles over the law ongoing, much is at stake in this year’s election. Overall, our results reveal several ACA provisions working effectively to expand health insurance coverage to millions of Americans. Whether the law continues to expand coverage in the future most likely hinges on the outcome of the November election.

Disclosure forms provided by the authors are available at NEJM.org.

From the Department of Health Policy and Management, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston (M.F., B.D.S.), and the Department of Economics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge (J.G.) — both in Massachusetts.

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