

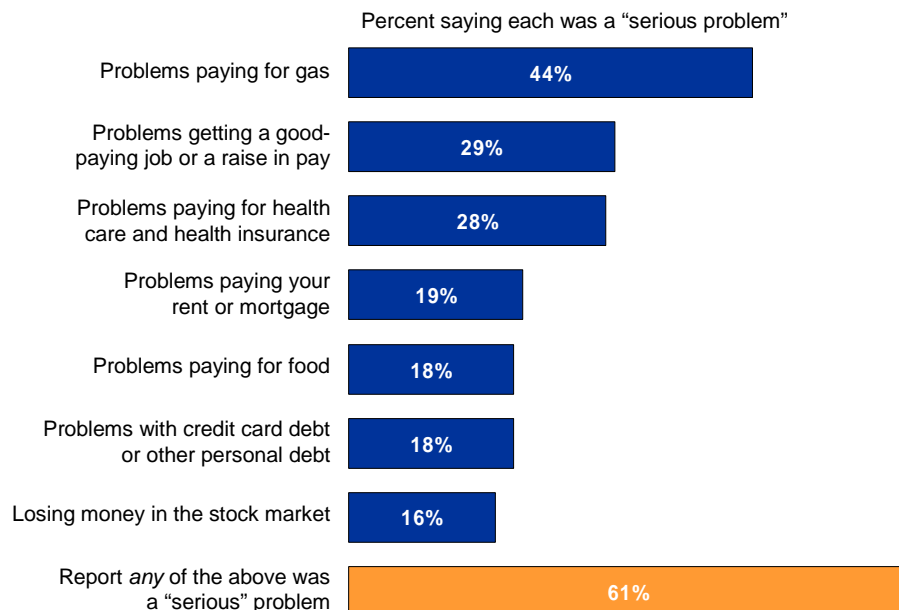
Economic Problems Facing Families

Recent surveys from the Kaiser Family Foundation and other groups have reported an increase in the public's concerns about the economy on a variety of levels. In particular, Kaiser tracking polls have shown a large increase over the past several months in the share of voters naming the economy as the most important issue for candidates to discuss in the 2008 presidential campaign, and have shown that concern about health care costs is one element of voters' concerns about the economy. In this Survey Brief, we take a closer look at the public's reports of how changes in the economy are affecting them and their families personally, with an in-depth look at reported problems accessing and paying for health care in particular.¹

In a series of questions about how recent changes in the economy have affected people's lives, six in ten (61 percent) report that at least one of the seven potential problems asked about has been a "serious problem" for them and their families. Topping the list is problems paying for gas (44 percent say this has been a serious problem), followed by problems getting a good-paying job or a raise in pay (29 percent) and problems paying for health care and insurance (28 percent). Nearly two in ten report serious problems paying their rent or mortgage (19 percent), problems paying for food (18 percent), and problems with credit cards and other personal debt (18 percent), while slightly fewer report serious problems with losing money in the stock market (16 percent).

Problems Experienced as a Result of Changes in the Economy

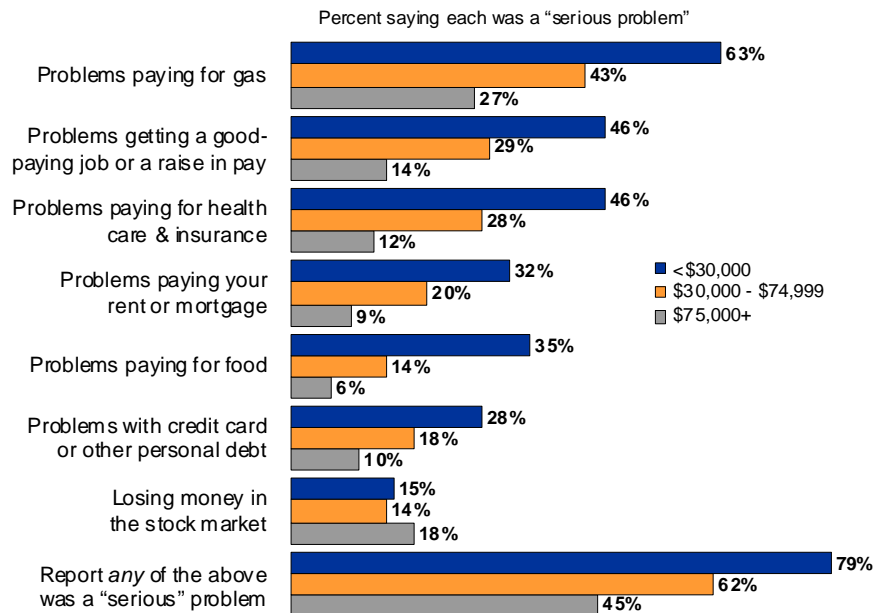
As a result of recent changes in the economy, have you and your family experienced any of the following problems, or not? Was this a serious problem, or not?



¹ Note that while the main report for the Kaiser Health Tracking Poll: Election 2008 reports results of campaign- and voting-related questions based on registered voters, the economic experiences reported here are based on the general public.

Economic problems are more common among people with lower and middle incomes. For example, more than six in ten (63 percent) of those with household incomes under \$30,000, and more than four in ten (43 percent) of those with incomes between \$30,000 and \$75,000 report problems paying for gas, compared with just over a quarter (27 percent) of those earning \$75,000 or more. When it comes to health care costs, nearly half (46 percent) of those earning less than \$30,000 report having serious problems paying for health care and insurance, compared with just 12 percent of those with incomes of \$75,000 or more. Middle-income families are also feeling the squeeze of health care costs, with nearly three in ten (28 percent) of those earning between \$30,000 and \$75,000 reporting problems paying for health care and insurance. Overall, nearly eight in ten (79 percent) of those in lower income families, more than six in ten (62 percent) of those in middle income families, and almost half (45 percent) of those with higher incomes report that their family has experienced at least one serious problem as a result of recent changes in the economy.

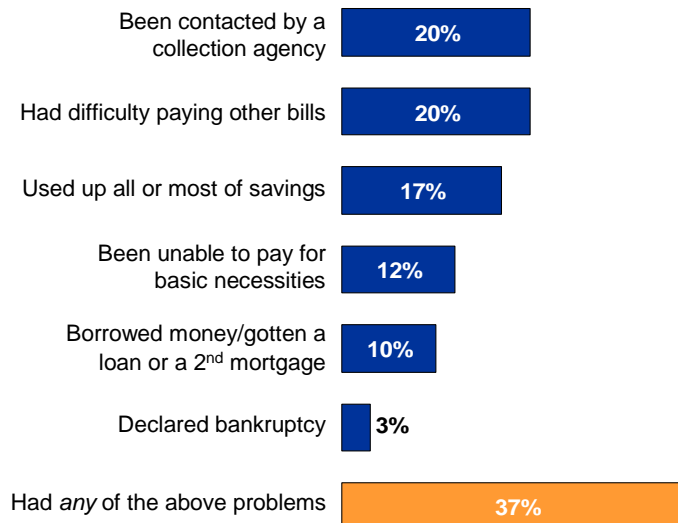
Problems Experienced as a Result of Changes in the Economy, by Household Income



In addition to reporting problems paying for health care and insurance, medical bills have led to a variety of consequences for many families. One in five adults (20 percent) say that in the past five years they have been contacted by a collection agency because of medical bills, and the same share report that they have had difficulty paying other bills. Nearly as many (17 percent) say they have used up all or most of their savings in the past five years because of medical bills. About one in ten report being unable to pay for basic necessities (12 percent) and having to borrow money or take out a second mortgage (10 percent), while a smaller share (3 percent) report declaring bankruptcy. Nearly four in ten (37 percent) say that they have experienced at least one of these problems due to medical bills in the past five years.

Financial Consequences of Medical Bills

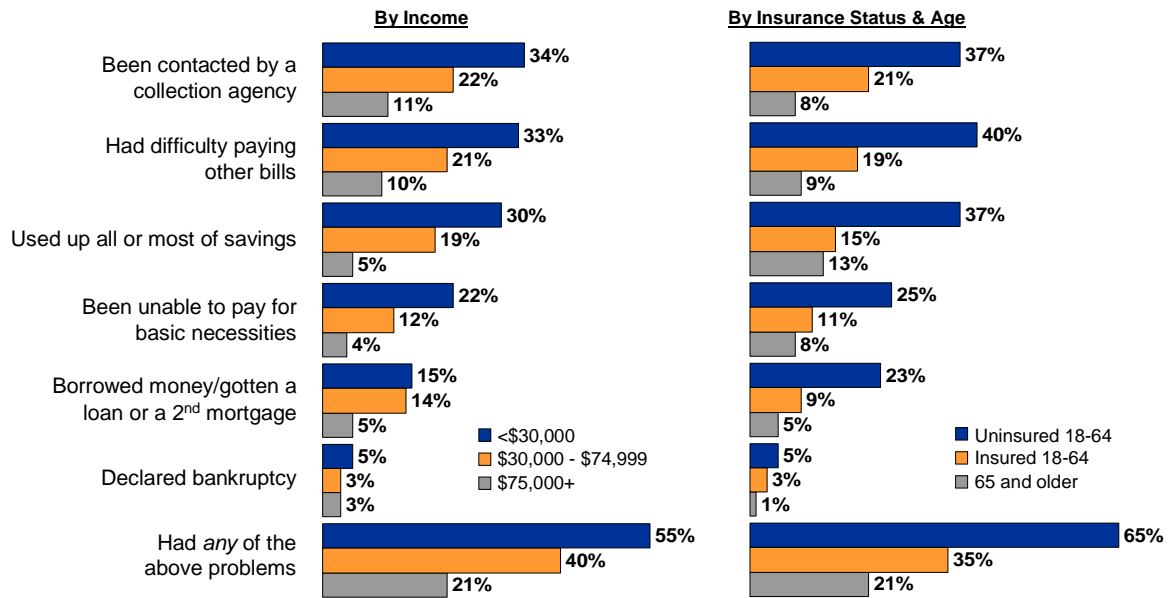
Percent who say they have experienced each of the following in the past 5 years because of medical bills...



Adverse financial consequences of medical bills are more common among those in lower and middle income families, and among those without health insurance. More than twice as many people in low-income households (55 percent of those earning less than \$30,000) as in higher income households (21 percent of those earning \$75,000 or more) report at least one financial problem in the past five years due to medical bills. And, four in ten of those in middle income families report at least one adverse financial consequence of medical bills over the past five years, including one in five who say they have either been contacted by a collection agency (22 percent), had difficulty paying other bills (21 percent), and/or used up all or most of their savings (19 percent); and more than one in ten who say they have borrowed money or taken out a second mortgage on their home (14 percent) or been unable to pay for basic necessities (12 percent).

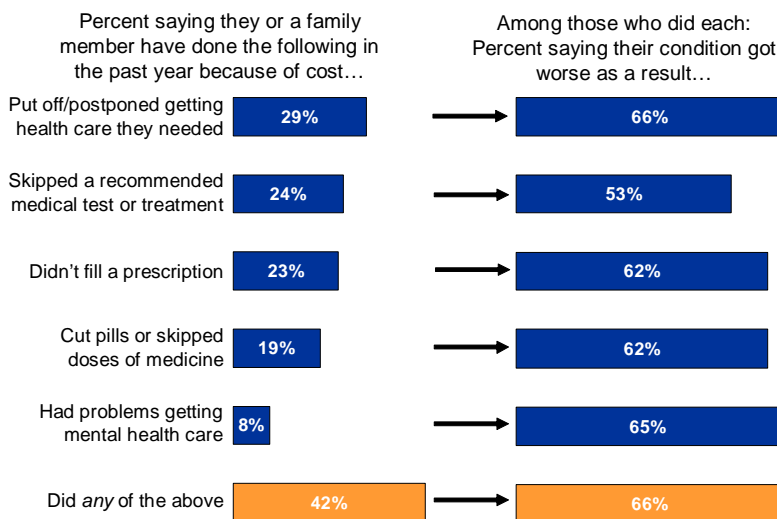
Financial Consequences of Medical Bills, by Income and Insurance

Percent saying they have experienced the following in the past 5 years because of medical bills...



Similarly, the non-elderly uninsured (65 percent) are almost twice as likely as the non-elderly insured (35 percent) to report at least one of these problems. Nearly four in ten of those without health insurance say that in the past five years they have had difficulty paying other bills (40 percent), been contacted by a collection agency (37 percent), or used up all or most of their savings (37 percent) because of medical bills.

Problems Accessing Health Care Due to Cost



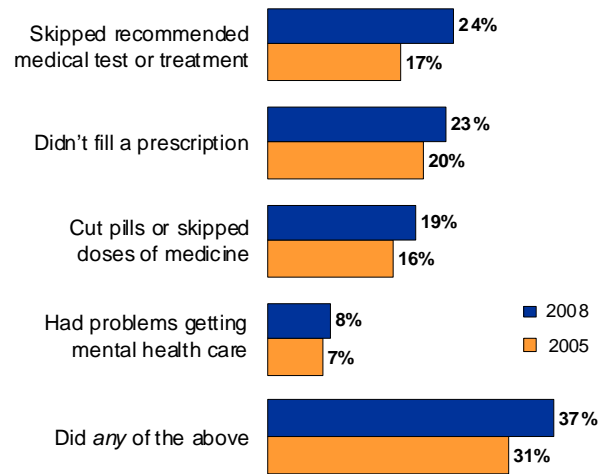
As a result of these difficulties affording health care, many adults report delaying or not getting needed medical care. More than four in ten (42 percent) say that in the past year, they or a family member have done at least one of the following because of the cost: postponed getting needed health care (29 percent), skipped a recommended test or treatment (24 percent), not filled a prescription (23 percent), cut pills in half or skipped doses of a medicine (19 percent), or had problems getting mental health care (8 percent). Among those who report taking one of these actions, two-thirds (66 percent) say their medical condition got worse as a result.

The share of the public reporting problems accessing health care due to cost has increased significantly since 2005². For example, the share who say they or a family member skipped a recommended medical test or treatment in the past year because of the cost increased from 17 percent in 2005 to 24 percent in 2008, and the share who say they skipped doses of a medicine or cut pills in half increased from 16 percent to 19 percent. In 2008, 37 percent report at least one of four problems accessing care due to cost for which trends are available, an increase of 6 percentage points from 2005, when 31 percent reported at least one of these problems.

Like the adverse financial consequences of medical bills, reported problems accessing health care due to cost are also more common among the uninsured and those with lower incomes. Those in households earning less than \$30,000 a year are more than twice as likely as those earning \$75,000 or more to report at least one problem accessing health care in the past year (61 percent compared with 25 percent), while more than four in ten (44 percent) of those in the middle income group also report such problems. Similarly, people under age 65 who are not covered by health insurance are nearly twice as likely as the non-elderly insured to report these types of problems (75 percent compared with 40 percent). Among the uninsured, the shares reporting some specific problems are striking: six in ten (61 percent) say they postponed getting health care they needed because of the cost, and nearly half report skipping a recommended test or treatment (48 percent) and not filling a prescription (45 percent) and not filling a prescription (45 percent).

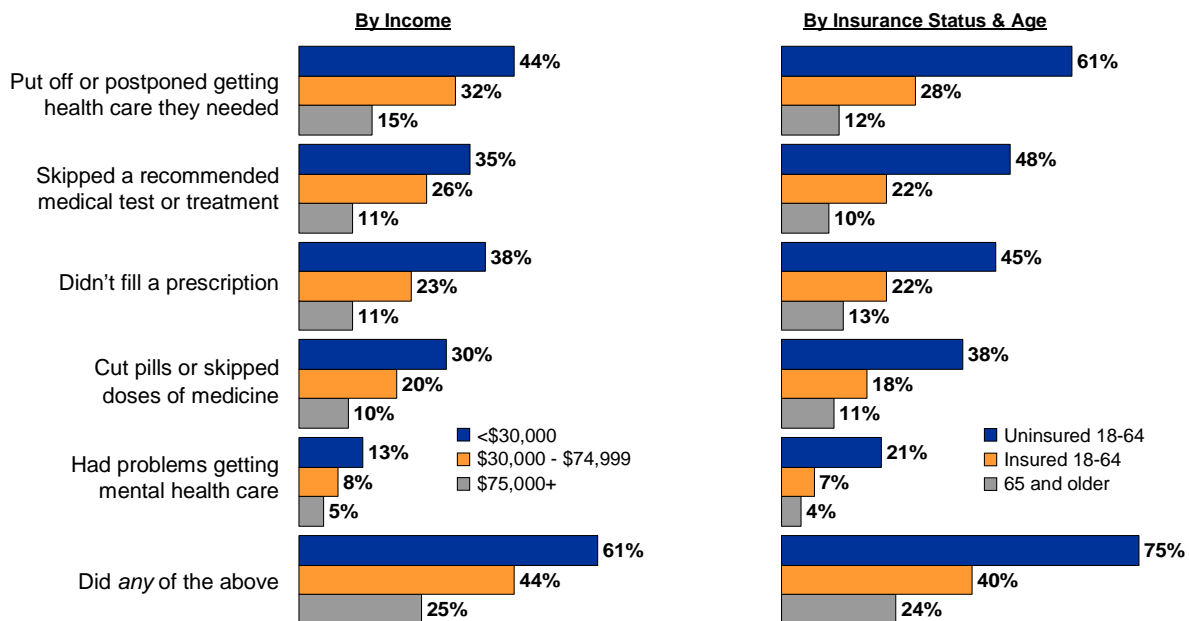
Trend in Problems Accessing Health Care Due to Cost

Percent who say they or a family member have done each of the following in the past year because of cost...



Problems Accessing Care Due to Cost, by Income and Insurance

Percent saying they or a family member have done the following in the past year because of cost...



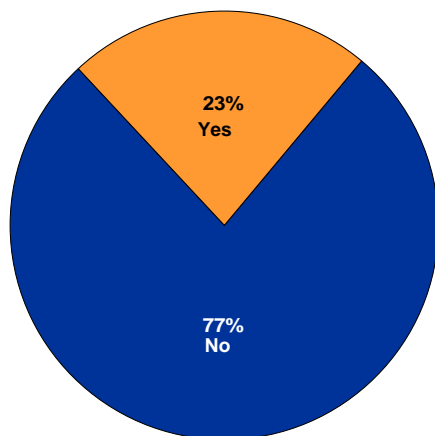
² Source for 2005: USA Today/Kaiser Family Foundation/ Harvard School of Public Health Health Care Costs Survey (April 25 – June 9, 2005).

In the current economic climate, the desire to obtain or maintain health insurance benefits is cited by many Americans as impacting their life decisions. Nearly a quarter (23 percent) report that in the past year, they or someone in their household has either decided to stay in one job rather than take another job, or decided to take a different job rather than stay at a job mainly because of better health benefits. A small, but still important, share (7 percent) also reports that they or someone in their household decided to get married mainly so one spouse could have access to the other's health benefits.

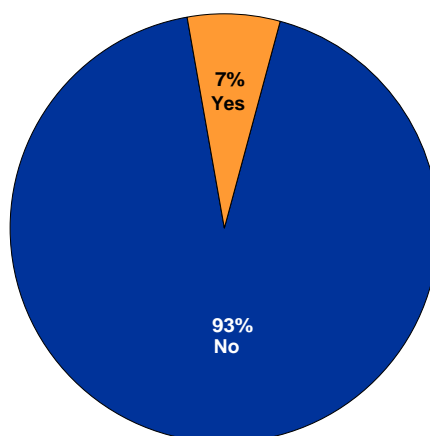
Influence of Health Benefits on Life Decisions

Percent who say they or someone in their household have done each of the following in the past year...

Took a new job or stayed at a job (rather than take a new one) mainly because of better health benefits:



Decided to get married mainly so one spouse could have access to the other's health care benefits:



Methodology

The *Kaiser Health Tracking Survey: Election 2008* was designed and analyzed by public opinion researchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation led by Mollyann Brodie, Ph.D., including Elizabeth Hamel and Carolina Gutiérrez. The survey was conducted from April 3 – 13, 2008, among a nationally representative random sample of 2,003 adults ages 18 and older. Telephone interviews were carried out in English and Spanish by Princeton Survey Research Associates.

The margin of sampling error for the total sample is plus or minus 3 percentage points; for results based on subgroups, the sampling error is higher. Note that sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in this or any other public opinion poll. Due to rounding, percentages may not add to 100.

Full survey question wording and results are available at www.kff.org.

Additional copies of this publication (#7773) are available on the Kaiser Family Foundation's website at www.kff.org.

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