



By William Considine

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Health status of children in America: We can do better

We often hear the words: “Children are the future.” Here in the United States, we currently have 74 million children, and they are essential to our country’s ability to sustain a viable, vibrant society as our population ages. Given this fact, it would make sense for Americans to place a high priority on investing in children’s health and education to ensure their well-being and our future place in the world.

An honest assessment of our current state, however, clearly demonstrates that children are not a public-policy priority. Programs to improve outcomes for children are underfunded, inconsistent and fragmented from state to state. Annual reports on the health and well-being of children in the U.S. present a disturbing picture for a nation with the world’s highest gross domestic product.

Here are a few alarming statistics*:

- **Poverty:** In 2017, 1 in 5 children lived in poverty, with 1 in 12 existing under extreme poverty conditions. Our youngest, most vulnerable children (from birth to 5 years) experienced poverty at the highest rates during this critical period in their physical and mental development.
- **Homelessness:** More than 1.2 million children under age 6 were homeless in 2015.
- **Food insecurity:** In 2015, nearly 1 in 5 children lacked access to adequate food and nutrition, including in families with an adult working a full-time job.
- **Infant mortality:** Ohio ranks 40th out of 50 states with an overall infant mortality rate of 7.2 deaths per 1,000 births, but the black infant mortality rate is two times higher at 15.2 deaths. The U.S. rate of 5.9 places us near the bottom of developed countries (32 out of 35 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries).
- **Trauma:** Nearly half of all children suffered trauma from at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) in 2016 including abuse, neglect and other stressors from divorce, incarceration, substance abuse or mental illness in the home. These events can have a lasting, negative impact on a child’s future well-being.
- **Chronic disease:** Diabetes in children aged 6-11 accounts for 11% of all inpatient stays in Ohio hospitals. Across the country, the rate of new cases of type 1 and type 2 diabetes continues to rise, along with the childhood obesity rate, and asthma remains the most common chronic condition, affecting 6.1 million children under the age of 18.
- **Mental health:** Suicide now ranks as the second-leading cause of death for youth aged 10-24, and the rate of teens aged 12-17 who experienced a major depressive episode rose to 13% in 2016.

- **Health insurance:** In 2016, the U.S. had 3.9 million children without coverage for any type of preventive, sick, dental or behavioral health care, and data from 2017 and 2018 indicate the number of uninsured children has started to rise.

Those of us who care about our country's future understand we must do better to ensure that all children have the chance to grow and develop in communities that value their lives and protect their right to thrive. The federal government is already a major funder of pediatric care, even though many Americans don't think of Medicaid as a children's program. It is, in fact, the number one payer of care for 37 million children – that's half of our nation's youth – including 3.4 million children of veterans and 200,000 children of active service members.

Unlike Medicare, which is a federal insurance program for people over 65 years regardless of income, Medicaid is a state and federal assistance program for low-income adults, children, pregnant women, elderly adults and people with disabilities. It is administered differently from state to state, with some eligibility requirements and coverage guidelines set by individual states.

When it comes to providing health care for our children, I believe we can do better. As adults who will depend on this next generation to carry our country into the future, it's time to take our responsibility seriously. We must explore ways to create a new children's health care model – one that is focused entirely on children, is adequately funded and provides consistent care to all children across the country. The program should be branded a CHILDREN'S program – Medicaid is not a children's brand.

It is time to recognize the importance of protecting our country's most valuable – and vulnerable – human resource and take appropriate action. Please share your ideas with me about how we can develop a new health care plan that provides the long-term investments needed to ensure a bright future for our children and our country.



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