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ER waiting rooms defy stereotypes

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By Julie Appleby, USA TODAY

Countering a popular belief, researchers say that communities with higher numbers of uninsured, Hispanics or non-citizens have a lower use of hospital emergency departments.

Instead, places with the highest levels of emergency department use are those with more elderly residents, communities where people have to wait a long time for appointments with their own doctors and places where a smaller percentage of the population is enrolled in HMOs vs. other kinds of insurance.

"Emergency room use is up across the population, including more middle-class folks with private insurance," says study author Peter Cunningham, a senior fellow at the Center for Studying Health System Change.

The findings from a review of 60 communities come amid increasing concern about crowding that has led to ambulances being diverted and long waits in the nation's emergency departments. Last month, the prestigious Institute of Medicine said the U.S. emergency system is at the breaking point, with ER visits up 26% from 1993 to 2003. Ambulances were diverted from full emergency departments more than half a million times in 2003, the IOM said.

A growing number of hospitals are also reporting increases in bad debt from treating uninsured or under-insured patients. The American Hospital Association says that while the uninsured may not use emergency departments more than other groups, they are putting a financial strain on some facilities.

"The sad fact is that people without health insurance do seek less health care, but when they do they tend to be sicker because they put off care," says Caroline Steinberg, a vice president at the hospital group.

Around the country, the use of emergency rooms varies, with an average of 32 visits per 100 residents, say researchers in today's report, published in the journal *Health Affairs*.

The area with the fewest visits — 21 per 100 people in 2003 — was Orange County, Calif. The highest was Cleveland, with 40 visits per 100 residents, according to the study, which looked at 12 cities in depth, along with 48 other communities.

Yet, Cleveland has low rates of uninsured and non-citizens, while Orange County has high rates of both. Similar findings were seen nationwide.

"While there are individual hospitals along the border or in some inner-city areas that may be experiencing a large increase, the larger perspective is that uninsured Hispanic immigrants generally are not heavy users of emergency departments," Cunningham says.

That's because the uninsured avoid medical care as much as possible because of the cost. In addition, non-citizens who are in the country illegally may fear deportation if they seek medical care.

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The researchers also found that patients are more inclined to use emergency departments in some parts of the country, possibly reflecting how medicine is practiced in those areas, he says.

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