

# Delayed and Forgone Health Care for Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Since the pandemic began, health care providers and consumers have sought to minimize COVID-19 transmission by limiting in-person visits. Consequently, many children are missing out on or having their health care delayed.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the Urban Institute’s September 2020 Coronavirus Tracking Survey, we examine delayed and forgone health care for children during the pandemic because of parents’ concerns about exposure to the coronavirus or limits on providers’ services due to the coronavirus outbreak. We also show parent-reported impacts of delayed or forgone care for children on children’s health, schooling, and other daily activities.

## Findings

In September 2020, 28.8 percent of parents reported delaying or forgoing one or more types of health care for their children because of virus exposure concerns or provider service limits (table 1). Roughly equal shares delayed or did not get care for each reason (not shown). About 15.6 percent of parents reported delaying or forgoing multiple types of care for their children. Dental care, routine checkups and screenings, general doctor and specialist visits, and immunizations were most commonly delayed or forgone. Further, 12.2 percent of parents reported only delaying their children’s care, whereas 16.5 percent did not get care for their children (not shown).

As table 1 shows, parents with lower family incomes (below 250 percent of the federal poverty level, or FPL) were more likely than parents with higher incomes (at or above 250 percent of FPL) to report their children delayed or missed out on multiple types of health care (19.6 versus 11.4 percent). Lower-income parents were also more likely to report their children delayed or missed checkups and other preventive screenings, a general doctor or specialist visit, immunizations, and treatment or follow-up care.

**TABLE 1**

**Delayed and Forgone Health Care for Children, Overall and by Family Income, September 2020**

	All	Income < 250% of FPL	Income ≥ 250% of FPL
Delayed or did not get at least one type of care for child	28.8%	30.6%	27.0%
Delayed or did not get multiple types of care for child	15.6%	19.6%	11.4%***
<b>By type of care</b>			
Dental care	19.8%	21.1%	18.6%
Checkups, well-child visits, or other preventive health screenings	12.8%	16.3%	9.2%***
General doctor or specialist visits	9.4%	12.8%	6.0%***
Immunizations	7.1%	9.6%	4.7%**
Treatment or follow-up care	6.0%	8.4%	3.6%**
Hospital visits	5.5%	6.1%	4.9%
Mental health care or counseling	4.4%	4.6%	4.2%
Physical, occupational, or speech therapy	4.4%	4.8%	4.0%
Prescription drugs	4.3%	5.9%	2.7%
Treatment or counseling for alcohol or drug use	2.1%	2.7%	1.5%
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>1,254</b>	<b>775</b>	<b>479</b>

**Source:** Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2, conducted September 11 through 28, 2020.

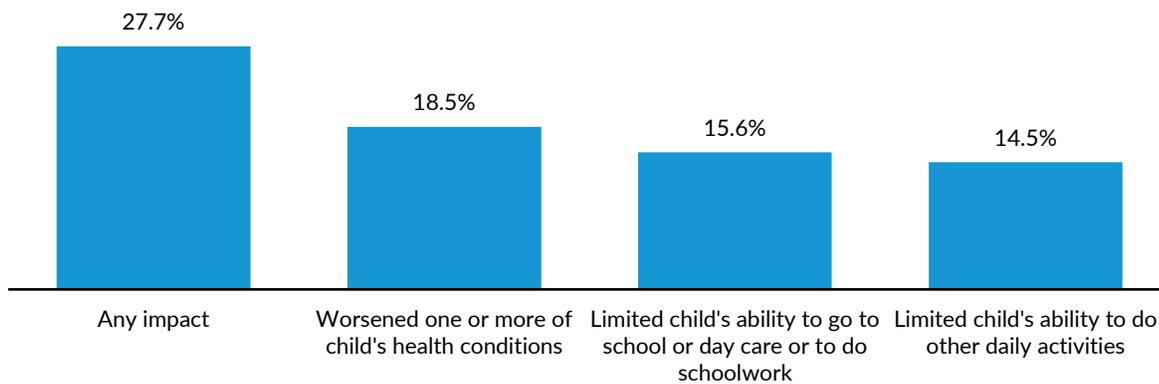
**Notes:** FPL = federal poverty level. Children are under 19. Parents are ages 18 to 64. Delayed or forgone health care is care not received because of worry about exposure to the coronavirus or because health care providers limited services because of the pandemic.

\*/\*\*/\*\*\* Estimate differs significantly from that for parents with incomes below 250% of FPL at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Many parents reported delaying and forgoing care negatively affected children’s lives. As figure 1 shows, these parents reported it worsened their children’s health conditions (18.5 percent), limited their children’s abilities to go to school or day care or do school work (15.6 percent) or do other daily activities (14.5 percent), or caused at least one of these consequences (27.7 percent). Among parents who only delayed or did not get children’s dental care, we find very few reported one or more of these adverse consequences, suggesting the type of care missed matters. However, we do not show these estimates because of sample size limitations.

FIGURE 1

Impacts of Delaying and Forgoing Children’s Health Care, as Reported by Parents, September 2020



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Source: Urban Institute Coronavirus Tracking Survey, wave 2, conducted September 11 through 28, 2020.

Notes: Children are under 19. Parents are ages 18 to 64. Delayed or forgone health care includes care not received because of worry about exposure to the coronavirus or because health care providers limited services because of the pandemic.

## Policy Implications

These estimates parallel those for nonelderly adults overall,<sup>2</sup> indicate the pandemic has caused children to miss out on a range of health care needs, and show parents in lower-income families are delaying or forgoing care for their children at higher rates than those in higher-income families. Such gaps threaten children’s health, development, and well-being and impair their abilities to participate fully in school and reach their potential. Targeted efforts to help children make up for missed checkups, immunizations, screenings, counseling, therapies, and other care could help mitigate such damage and avoid exacerbating socioeconomic inequities in children’s health and well-being.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, “CMS Issues Urgent Call to Action Following Drastic Decline in Care for Children in Medicaid and Children’s Health Insurance Program Due to COVID-19 Pandemic,” news release, September 23, 2020, <https://www.cms.gov/newsroom/press-releases/cms-issues-urgent-call-action-following-drastic-decline-care-children-medicaid-and-childrens-health>.

<sup>2</sup> Dulce Gonzalez, Michael Karpman, Genevieve M. Kenney, and Stephen Zuckerman, “Delayed and Forgone Health Care during the COVID-19 Pandemic” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Stacey McMorrow, Dulce Gonzalez, Clara Alvarez Caraveo, and Genevieve M. Kenney, “Urgent Action Needed to Address Children’s Unmet Health Care Needs during the Pandemic” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2020).