

## Navigating the Marketplace: How Uninsured Adults Have Been Looking for Coverage

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### At A Glance

- As of June 2014, almost 6 in 10 adults who were uninsured for some or all of the previous 12 months but are now insured looked for health plan information through Marketplaces, compared with just over 3 in 10 of those who remain uninsured.
- Uninsured adults who gained coverage, but not necessarily through Marketplaces, were less likely to use a website as an information source and more likely to use direct assistance than adults who sought information but remain uninsured.
- Even after looking for information, 7 in 10 adults who remain uninsured cited financial barriers as a reason for not signing up for coverage.

A growing body of evidence shows that the number of uninsured adults declined significantly since the Affordable Care Act's (ACA's) open enrollment period started in October 2013 (Long et al. 2014; Blumenthal and Collins 2014; Carman and Eibner 2014).<sup>1</sup> This decline was achieved despite many widely publicized early problems with health insurance Marketplace websites. Although the vast majority of people turned to websites for information on the federal or state Marketplaces (Blavin et al. 2014a), many consumers used, and will likely continue to use, other sources for health insurance plan information (Blavin et al. 2014b). With the second open enrollment period on the horizon, new research is beginning to examine the paths people followed to (1) get information on Medicaid eligibility or Marketplace health plans and subsidies and (2) ultimately gain insurance coverage (PerryUndem 2014). These new findings provide guidance for refining outreach and education strategies.

In this brief, we focus on adults who were uninsured for some or all of the 12 months before June 2014. We consider the share who looked for information on health plans in the Marketplaces, comparing the approaches used by those who obtained coverage with those who remained uninsured as of June 2014. Our objective is to identify which approaches to obtaining Marketplace information are more likely to be associated with gaining insurance coverage. We also report on why the remaining uninsured who had looked for Marketplace information said they remained uninsured.

### What We Did

This brief draws on data collected from the Health Reform Monitoring Survey (HRMS) in June 2014, well after the completion of the ACA's first open enrollment period. We define our sample of uninsured adults as nonelderly adults (ages 18–64) who were uninsured for

some or all of the 12 months prior to the June 2014 survey. At the time of the survey, 57 percent of these adults remained uninsured and 43 percent had insurance coverage. The insured adults include (1) adults who used the Marketplaces to obtain coverage through Medicaid or a qualified health plan and (2) adults who had been uninsured during the year but obtained coverage outside the Marketplaces (for example, from their employer, Medicaid, or directly from an insurer). Thus, not all the insured necessarily sought information on health plans through the Marketplaces, and many may not be enrolled in a Marketplace plan.

We examine how the insured and uninsured adults in the sample differed in their awareness of the Marketplaces and in their efforts to seek information on health plans. We also identify differences between insured and uninsured adults in the sources used to obtain information on, or assistance enrolling in, health insurance plans through the Marketplaces. For this analysis, we group nine sources of Marketplace information used into the following three categories:

- websites, including online chat options
- direct assistance (from call centers; navigators, application assisters, certified application counselors or community health workers; Medicaid or other program agencies; or insurance agents and brokers)
- indirect or informal assistance (from family or friends; employers; tax preparers; or hospitals, doctors' offices, and clinics)

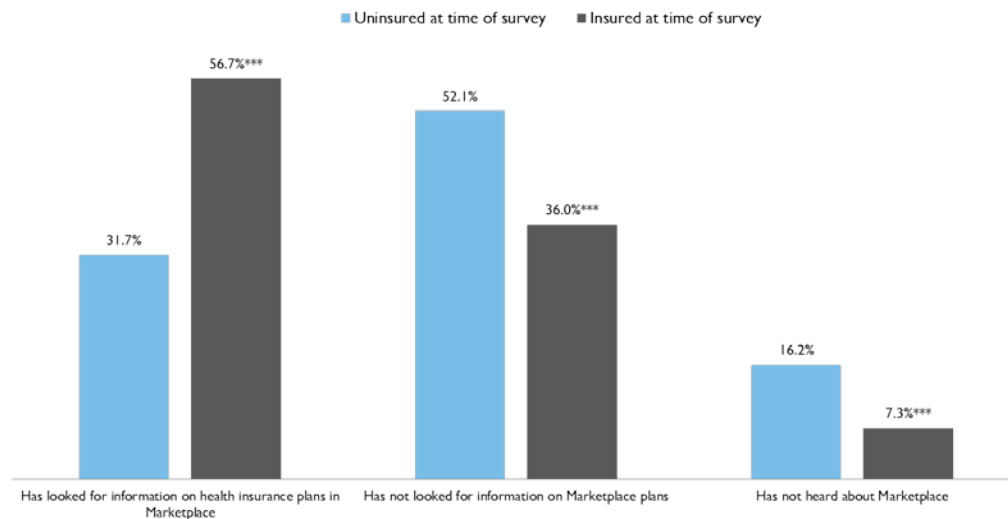
Because some people used multiple sources of information, we also create a measure that captures the source of information used into four mutually exclusive categories: (1) website only; (2) website and other sources; (3) other sources only; and (4) none of the above or not reported.

## **What We Found**

*As of June 2014, 56.7 percent of insured adults who had been uninsured for some or all of the previous 12 months had looked for information on Marketplace health plans, compared with only 31.7 percent of those who remained uninsured (figure 1). Just over half (52.1 percent) of those remaining uninsured had not looked for information, and the remainder (16.2 percent) still had not heard about the Marketplaces. In contrast, only 36.0 percent of insured adults who had been uninsured for some or all of the previous 12 months but had gained coverage as of June 2014 had not looked for information, and only 7.3 percent had not heard about the Marketplaces.*

Neither those adults who remained uninsured nor those who gained coverage were just window-shopping when they looked for information in the Marketplaces. For both groups, over 85 percent of those who looked for information indicated that they were seeking to purchase health insurance or find out if they were eligible for subsidies or Medicaid (data not shown).

**Figure 1. Use of Marketplaces among Adults Ages 18–64 Who Were Uninsured for Some or All of the Prior 12 Months, by Insurance Status at the Time of the Survey**



Source: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, quarter 2 2014.

Notes: The category "has looked for information on health insurance plans in Marketplace" includes insured respondents who reported enrolling or being in the process of enrolling in a health insurance plan through the Marketplace. Estimates do not include 0.3 percent of adults who were uninsured for some or all of the past 12 months who refused to answer whether they looked for information on health plans in the Marketplace.

\*\*\* Estimate differs significantly from those who were uninsured at the time of the survey, denoted by \*, at the 0.01 level, using two-tailed tests. No estimates differed at the .10/.05 (\*) level.

*Adults who had been uninsured for some or all of the previous 12 months and had gained coverage as of June 2014 were less likely to use a website as a source of information and more likely to use direct assistance than adults who remained uninsured (table 1). About half of the insured subgroup (51.1 percent) used a website (including an online chat option) compared with 60.3 percent of the uninsured. However, the insured were more likely to use direct assistance than the uninsured (45.9 percent versus 32.1 percent). These differences in the use of direct assistance were the result of greater use of navigators and application assisters by the insured than the uninsured subgroup (11.2 percent versus 6.4 percent) as well as greater use of insurance agents and brokers (12.4 percent versus 5.1 percent).*

*Using a mutually exclusive classification of information sources, we find that adults who had been uninsured for some or all of the previous 12 months and had gained coverage as of June 2014 were less likely to use websites exclusively and more likely to use only other sources than those who remained uninsured (figure 2). Over one-third (35.5 percent) of adults who gained coverage looked for information without using a website compared with only 22.2 percent of those who remained uninsured. Those who remained uninsured were also significantly more likely to use a website exclusively (40.1 percent) than adults who had gained coverage (29.3 percent). About the same proportions of the two groups were unable to identify their source of information from the choices provided in the survey.*

**Table 1. Sources Used to Obtain Information on or Assistance Enrolling in Health Plans in the Marketplaces among Adults Ages 18–64 Who Were Uninsured for Some or All of the Prior 12 Months, Overall and by Insurance Status at the Time of the Survey**

	All adults who were uninsured for part or all of the prior 12 months	By Insurance Status at the Time of the Survey		
		Uninsured	Insured	
Website, including online chat option	55.0%	60.3%	51.1%	**
Direct assistance (all aggregated)	40.0%	32.1%	45.9%	***
Call center	22.5%	20.7%	23.9%	
Navigators, application assisters, certified application counselors, or community health workers	9.1%	6.4%	11.2%	**
Medicaid or another program agency such as TANF, SNAP, or WIC	7.7%	7.8%	7.6%	
Insurance agent, broker, or company	9.3%	5.1%	12.4%	***
Indirect or informal assistance	16.1%	16.2%	16.1%	
Other, none of the above, or not reported	16.7%	18.6%	15.4%	
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>723</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>435</b>	

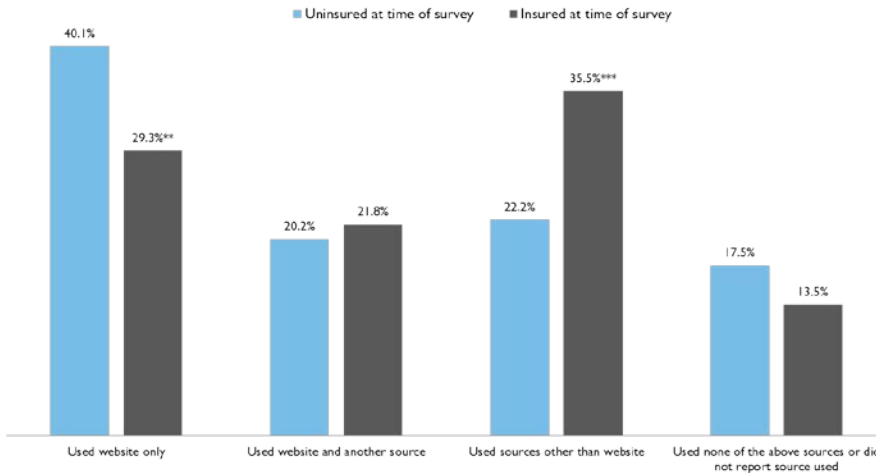
Source: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, quarter 2 2014.

Notes: Estimates do not total 100 percent because respondents could identify multiple sources used to obtain information on health plans in the Marketplace. The category for indirect or informal assistance includes respondents who reported obtaining information or assistance from family or friends; an employer; a tax preparer; or a hospital, doctor's office, or clinic.

\*\*/\*\* Estimate differs significantly from those who were uninsured at the time of the survey at the 0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests. No estimates differed at the .10 (\*) level.

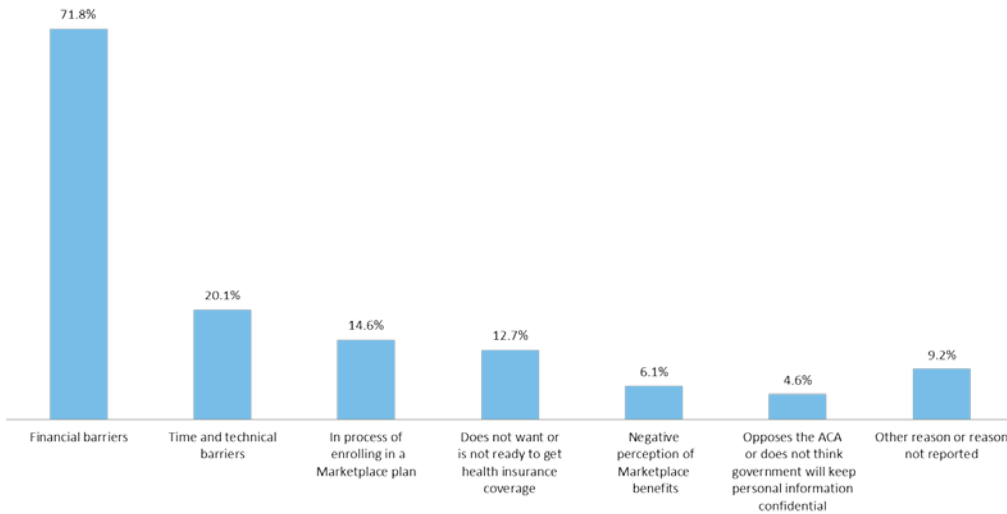
*Even after looking for information, 71.8 percent of the adults who remained uninsured cited financial barriers as a reason for not signing up for coverage (figure 3). Other barriers to enrollment were cited much less frequently. Although the websites had well-documented problems, only 1 in 5 cited time and technical barriers as a reason for remaining uninsured. Some (14.6 percent) of the adults who remained uninsured as of June 2014 indicated that they had enrolled and their application was still being processed. Federal policymakers clearly recognize such processing delays as a real problem, because the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has issued a letter to six states, including California, requiring them to come up with a plan to ease their Medicaid enrollment backlogs.<sup>2</sup>*

**Figure 2. Sources Used to Obtain Information on or Assistance Enrolling in Health Plans in the Marketplace, among Adults Age 18–64 Who Were Uninsured for Some or All of the Prior 12 Months, by Insurance Status at the Time of the Survey**



Source: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, quarter 2 2014.  
 \*\*/\*\*\* Estimate differs significantly from those who were uninsured at the time of the survey, at the 0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.  
 No estimates differed significantly at the .10 (\*) level.

**Figure 3. Reasons for not Enrolling in the Marketplace among Uninsured Adults Ages 18–64 who Looked for Information on Health Plans in the Marketplace**



Source: Health Reform Monitoring Survey, quarter 2 2014.  
 Notes: Estimates do not total 100 percent because respondents could identify multiple reasons for not enrolling through the Marketplace. ACA is Affordable Care Act. The "financial barriers" category includes those who reported the cost is too high or they cannot afford the insurance, did not qualify for subsidized coverage, or enrolled but lost coverage because of not paying the premium. "Time and technical barriers" includes those who tried to enroll but the website was not working; found the enrollment process too complicated or difficult; or did not have time, missed the open enrollment period, or recently lost coverage. "Negative perception of Marketplace benefits" includes those who did not find plans that covered desired benefits or reported that the choice of doctors, hospitals and other providers in the plans' networks was too limited.

## What It Means

Even among adults who had been uninsured for some or all of the previous 12 months—a group with strong incentives to understand and act on the ACA’s coverage expansion provisions—only about 40 percent had looked for coverage through the Marketplaces as of June 2014. The remainder had either not heard about the Marketplaces, had decided not to seek information, or had simply let the opportunity pass. Compared with adults who were still uninsured at the time of the survey, previously uninsured adults who had gained coverage as of June 2014 were more likely to have sought information from the Marketplaces, even though the coverage they gained may not have been from a Marketplace qualified health plan.

Among those who remain uninsured, some may have had the information they needed on health plan options available through the Marketplaces but do not yet have coverage because they (1) live in a Medicaid nonexpansion state and therefore are ineligible for Medicaid, (2) are not eligible for subsidies because of their immigration status or other reasons, or (3) consider the costs of coverage too high. For many who remain uninsured, however, our findings suggest that more effective motivation to seek information from the Marketplaces may be a necessary first step toward increasing enrollment in a Marketplace plan or Medicaid. Given all the publicity around the ACA, it is somewhat surprising that 1 in 6 adults who were uninsured for some or all of the 12 months before the survey and remain uninsured had not heard about the Marketplaces even at this late date.

Even motivating more uninsured adults to visit the Marketplace is unlikely to be enough, however. Some who remained uninsured and sought information on Marketplace health plans may have been much harder to reach with information they understood during the initial open enrollment period. For both the uninsured who did not visit the Marketplace and for those who visited but may not have understood the information available, a different and more aggressive outreach and education plan is clearly necessary.

The findings reported here suggest that a nonwebsite approach may work better for many people. Adults who got beyond websites and received help from navigators, application assisters, and insurance agents, for example, were more prevalent among those who gained coverage than among those who remained uninsured. A particularly dramatic finding is that adults who said they never used a website—working solely through other sources of information—represented the largest share of adults who had been uninsured for some or all of the 12 months before the survey but had gained insurance as of June 2014. This strongly suggests that next year’s open enrollment period should recognize the important role played by direct assistance and include enough resources of this type in the application process, as opposed to simply making sure the websites are functioning.

It is also noteworthy that a large share of those who remain uninsured still perceives the costs of coverage as a major barrier. For many, this perception may be correct. For example, they may live in a state that has not chosen to expand Medicaid and therefore does not offer a no-cost option to poor uninsured adults. Alternatively, they may be in a family in which there is an employer offer that is affordable for the covered worker but precludes other family members from seeking subsidies, even if they have low incomes.

But two other reasons must also be considered: (1) information about Medicaid eligibility or Marketplace subsidies may be hard to communicate and is still not getting

through to some; and (2) even the subsidies available in the Marketplaces may not make health insurance affordable for everyone.

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## About the Series

This brief is part of a series drawing on the Health Reform Monitoring Survey (HRMS), a quarterly survey of the nonelderly population that is exploring the value of cutting-edge Internet-based survey methods to monitor the Affordable Care Act (ACA) before data from federal government surveys are available. The briefs provide information on health insurance coverage, access to and use of health care, health care affordability, and self-reported health status, as well as timely data on important implementation issues under the ACA. Funding for the core HRMS is provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Urban Institute.

For more information on the HRMS and for other briefs in this series, visit [www.urban.org/hrms](http://www.urban.org/hrms).

## About the Authors

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## Notes

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1. Jenna Levy, "[U.S. Uninsured Rate Holds Steady at 13.4%](#)," *Gallup*, June 5, 2014.
2. Associated Press, "[States Told to Find Way to Clear Medicaid Backlog](#)," *Washington Post*, July 14, 2014.