



POLICY BRIEF

Medi-Cal Enrollees and Emergency Department Utilization: Encounters as a Rate Remains Flat

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Despite [recent media coverage](#) about increased emergency department (ED) use among Medi-Cal enrollees since expanding coverage in 2014, the data tell a much different story when put into context. [Emergency department encounters for Medi-Cal](#) enrollees grew from 800,000 in 2013 to 1.4 million in 2016, and Medi-Cal enrollment [grew from 9.9 million to 13.5 million enrollees](#) over that timeframe.

When taken as a *rate* of ED encounters per 1,000 enrollees, the data show that ED use has remained relatively flat since the beginning of expansion:

	Jan-14	Nov-14	Jul-15	May-16	Jan-17
Certified Medi-Cal Eligibles ¹ :	9,907,757	11,900,473	12,834,234	13,622,939	13,490,409
ED encounters ² :	1,025,000	1,175,000	1,305,000	1,405,000	1,400,000
Rate:	103.45	98.74	101.68	103.13	103.78

Health care utilization is typically viewed as a rate in order to account for significant increases or decreases in the size of the underlying population. For example, in the same ED encounter data showing growth of Medi-Cal enrollees, the number of ED encounters by uninsured individuals decreased by almost half. That does not mean that half of uninsured Californians stopped accessing EDs; rather the decrease in encounters merely reflects the fact that the *number of uninsured individuals* has decreased by nearly half.

Analyzing the connections between individuals' source of coverage and ED utilization is a worthy area of exploration. Researchers could focus on Californians who were uninsured and then gained Medi-Cal coverage in order to better understand the relationship between coverage status and accessing emergency departments.

There is value to ED encounter data by payer, but the encounter rate per 1,000 individuals is an important metric that allows for better comparisons over time.

¹ California Department of Health Care Services, Medi-Cal Monthly Enrollment Fast Facts January 2017.
http://www.dhcs.ca.gov/dataandstats/statistics/Documents/Fast_Facts_January_2017_ADA.pdf

² Values estimated from California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, Emergency Department Encounters by Expected Payer.
<http://www.oshpd.ca.gov/documents/PressReleases/2017/ED-Encounters-by-Expected-Payer-2012-2016.pdf>