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## Uninsured farm and ranch families feel health care costs pinch

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LYONS -- A new report released this week by the Access Project found that farm and ranch operators, like many self-employed Americans, cannot afford the cost of health insurance offered to small business owners. While family farmers and ranchers are insured at a rate higher than the general population, still 10 percent was uninsured or had an uninsured family member at some time during the previous year.

The report, *Who is Uninsured?*, is based on data gathered through the 2007 survey of farm and ranch operators in seven Great Plains states. The report found that uninsured farm and ranch operators were more likely to say that their principal occupation was farming or ranching than their insured counterparts. They also had lower incomes and were more likely to live alone.

"Those most reliant on income derived from the family farm or ranch are least likely to be able to afford private health insurance," said Carol Pryor, lead author of the report and policy director at The Access Project. "This threatens both their health and their livelihoods. Washington must act to develop alternatives to a private market that is unwilling or unable to provide affordable protection to the self-employed and small business owners."

The survey found that more than one-third of the uninsured farm and ranch operators spent more than 10 percent of their income on health care costs. They were also four times more likely to have incomes under \$20,000 than those with insurance.

The Access Project's report is the fifth in a series of issue briefs based on a 2007 survey of farm and ranch operators in Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The Access Project and its partners at Brandeis University and the University of North Dakota School of Medicine's Center for Rural Health contracted with the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service to survey more than 2,000 non-corporate farm and ranch operators (those operating as sole proprietors or partnerships).

The report finds that uninsured farmers and ranchers face much greater barriers to getting care and suffer higher levels of financial hardship than those with insurance. They delayed needed care more than twice as frequently as those with insurance -- more than a third of the uninsured delayed care (34 percent) versus 15 percent of the insured. Compared to the insured, the uninsured were also more likely to:

-- Draw down resources, such as withdrawing money from savings or taking out loans, to pay for health care (40 percent vs. 25 percent).

-- Spend more than 10 percent of their income on health care (34 percent vs. 29 percent).

-- Report that health care costs contributed to financial problems (32 percent vs. 22 percent).

-- Accrue medical debt (32 percent versus 16 percent).

Jon Bailey, director of rural research and analysis at the Center for Rural Affairs in Lyons, noted that plans to reform the health care system nationally must take into account the needs of rural businesses and communities.

"Health reform that continues to rely solely on the private insurance market and attempts to strengthen employer-provided insurance, no matter how regulated or reformed, will be irrelevant to a large number of rural people," Bailey said. "If you want farmers to continue growing the food for our families, and if you want rural communities to thrive, then availability of affordable and quality health insurance must be effectively addressed."

The findings from this report raise questions regarding the availability and affordability of health insurance coverage, especially for those families without access to employer-based coverage, according to Pryor. She said their lack of insurance may not only put their health at risk, but also their businesses. The Access Project urges policymakers, as they work to reform the nation's health care system, to consider options for expanding the availability of comprehensive insurance coverage and ensuring that this coverage is affordable for lower income families, Pryor said.

The full report is available online at: [www.cfra.org/files/AccessProject-2007-Health-Insurance-FarmRanchSurvey.pdf](http://www.cfra.org/files/AccessProject-2007-Health-Insurance-FarmRanchSurvey.pdf)