

The NATION'S HEALTH

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Working to improve children's health

Movement to reconnect kids with nature growing nationwide

THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN healthy people and a healthy environment is becoming clearer every day, with public health advocates emerging as crucial defenders of sustaining clean water and skies far into the future.

That future, however, is in the hands of today's children, many of whom are more likely to view nature through the screen of a television rather than the netted screen of a camping tent.

The retreat indoors for many American children has environmental advocates worried that children who grow up without memories of fishing in a local stream or hiking

through idyllic woods might become adults for whom conserving the environment isn't a priority. For public health workers, the effects of sedentary indoor lifestyles are already evident among children: startling rates of obesity, the onset of one-time adult conditions such as diabetes and a shortened life expectancy. Thankfully, though, the movement to reconnect kids with nature has seen a rejuvenation in the last few years, and experts predict that good health will be a major motivator in bringing families back to nature.

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Photo courtesy Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection

Two boys look for fish during the 2007 Great Park Pursuit in Connecticut, part of the state's No Child Left Inside movement.



Photo by Suzy Allman, courtesy Getty Images

A woman receives care in a medical tent during a three-day health clinic held in Wise, W. Va., in July that attracted more than 7,000 people, most with little or no insurance.

Almost 5 percent increase since 2005 Census Bureau: Number of U.S. uninsured rises to 47 million

FOR THE sixth consecutive year, the number of Americans living without health insurance has risen, according to new U.S. Census Bureau data. Approximately 2.2 million people were added to the uninsured rolls in 2006 — the largest one-year increase in the number of uninsured Americans since 2002.

Annual Census Bureau estimates released in August show 47 million people, or 15.8 percent of the U.S. population, were without health insurance during 2006 — a 4.9 percent increase. In 2005, census figures showed that 44.8 million people, or about 15.3 percent of the population, lacked health

insurance coverage.

The number of uninsured Americans has increased 22 percent since 2000, at which time 38.4 million people lacked health insurance.

Fewer Americans had employer-based coverage in 2006, the new data show. The percentage of people covered by employer plans fell from 60.2 percent in 2005 to 59.7 percent in 2006, according to the report, "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States."

Also of note, more children were without health insurance in 2006, the census data showed. The percentage of uninsured children younger than 18 rose from 10.9 percent in 2005 to 11.7 percent in 2006. According to the data, children ages 12–17 were more likely to be uninsured than children younger than age 12.

In response to the new data, dozens of health care organizations, including

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Five services vital Greater use of preventive strategies key to saving lives

EMPHASIZING prevention has long been touted as key to avoiding many life-threatening illnesses and curbing out-of-control health care costs, and now a new report has found that just five underused preventive services could, indeed, save thousands of U.S. lives every year.

The lives of more than 100,000 U.S. residents could be saved annually if services such as flu immunizations and cancer screenings were used more often and more effectively, according to "Preventive Care: A National Profile on Use, Disparities and Health Benefits," which was released in August by the Partnership for Prevention. Funded in part by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the report particularly highlighted five underutilized services and interventions: taking a daily aspirin to avoid heart disease; increasing smoking cessation assistance; receiving immunizations against influenza; raising screening rates for colorectal, breast and cervical cancers; and testing more women for chlamydia infection to prevent pelvic inflammatory disease. While such services are being underused across the general population, the report noted even sharper shortfalls among blacks, Hispanics and Asians.

"The cost of keeping the population healthy will continue to rise by rates higher than it needs to be if we're unable to use health promotion, screen-

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Efforts getting kids out of the house and back to nature

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One man who bears a large responsibility for breathing new life into back-to-nature efforts is Richard Louv, author of 2005's "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder." The book, which describes a generation so plugged into electronic diversions that it has lost its connection to the natural world, is helping drive a movement quickly flourishing across the nation. With initiatives sprouting up from coast to coast, organizers — like Louv did in his book — are referencing the many scientific studies exploring the healthy outcomes of unstructured play in nature.

"If kids aren't bonding now with nature, then who in the world is going to care about the spotted owl in 10 or 15 years?" Louv told *The Nation's Health*. "The way we've been talking about (environmental conservation) is through things like global warming and recycling — which we need to talk about — but the truth is that to many parents, those are very abstract ideas. Their child's health, though, is the most important thing in the world to them and the knowledge that (connecting to nature) can help their child's health is very good news to a parent."

While data are still emerging on nature and health, numerous researchers are finding positive outcomes for children. In a September 2004 study published in *APHA's American Journal of Public Health*, researchers found that exposure to natural settings helped reduce the symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in children. An August 2006 study in *Psychological Science* found that greater access to parks was associated with more physical activity among youth and less sedentary behavior. On the negative side, an April 2003 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that severely obese children have a health-related quality of life similar to children diagnosed with

cancer. And according to the TV Turnoff Network, U.S. children watch about three hours of television per day and adults watch even more.

"Studies have shown that people who love the environment said they had great outdoor experiences as kids," Louv said. "If that ends, where will our future environmental stewards come from?"

To keep the momentum from his book going, Louv founded the Children and Nature Network as a venue for organizers and advocates to share information and best practices, and as a vehicle for driving a burgeoning "No Child Left Inside" movement, which originally began as a project of the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection in 2006. Even though Connecticut is home to 105 state parks and 32 state forests, the natural landscapes were "vacant way too much of the time" and attendance was on the decline, said Connecticut Environmental Commissioner Gina McCarthy. Combined with a stream of alarming news on children's health, McCarthy and her colleagues felt something was "radically wrong," she said.

"Reconnecting children to the outside world just made sense from so many perspectives," McCarthy told *The Nation's Health*.

The jewel of No Child Left Inside is the Great Park Pursuit, which has run from early May to late June for the past two years and invites families to discover the state's natural parks through decoding a set of clues. Both years, hundreds of Connecticut families signed up to follow clues from week to week and from park to park, taking part in activities such as hiking, fishing and arts and crafts, and interacting with environmental educators. Families who completed the entire pursuit were eligible for prizes. The environmental agency also offered free state park passes to 1,300 foster families as well as provided state park passes to libraries in every Connecticut town that people could check out with their library cards. Cyndy

Chanaca, coordinator for Connecticut's Leave No Child Inside, said the initiative is receiving attention and the department has heard from a number of states interested in replicating the program. Chanaca said Connecticut invited all of the New England states to take part and in 2007, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont chose to do so.

"We're not saying that playing video games is a bad thing," Chanaca said. "But we want to help (children) balance their lives...We have so much to offer outside."

Message spreading across the nation

Families and advocates in the Midwest are also heeding the No Child Left Inside message. In Illinois, Chicago Wilderness, a consortium of 214 organizations from zoos to schools to state agencies, launched its No Child Left Inside initiative in June. Consortium members are now branding their child-friendly activities with the Leave No Child Inside label and collaborating with partners on innovative ways to bring children back to the woods, said Melinda Pruitt-Jones, director of Chicago Wilderness. Pruitt-Jones said the initiative has galvanized members "like nothing before" and is

"likely to be the most important thing Chicago Wilderness will ever do."

"We will be successful in raising this flag at the highest levels of decision-makers throughout the nation," she said. "Nature and kids just go together."

A few states to the east, nature advocates were so inspired by a speech Louv gave in February 2006 that Leave No Child Inside of Greater Cincinnati, Ohio, was officially launched just a few months later, said Bill Hopple, executive director of the Cincinnati Nature Center and a member of the newly formed group's board of directors. In June, as part of its efforts to bring children's health and nature conservation together, the Cincinnati group published the "Grow Outside" handbook for parents, teachers and adults who mentor children. The handbook touches on topics such as how to create kid-friendly back yards and the importance of facilitating unstructured playtime in nature.

"This is a hopeful message," Hopple said. "It's going to take a long time though and we're in this for the long haul."

Federal advocates are also getting in on the action. At a May ceremony, at which Louv was the keynote speaker, the U.S. Forest Service awarded \$500,000 in

matching funds to 24 programs around the nation as part of its More Kids in the Woods program. Including matching funds from agency partners, the 2007 funding round of More Kids in the Woods totaled \$1.5 million, said Kristen Nelson, national program manager for interpretive

services at the U.S. Forest Service.

"We've been (working with kids) for a long time, but now we have the science to support getting kids out into nature," Nelson said. "I'm really hoping we can participate in the turnaround of children's overall health."

Similar to Louv's research — which found that parents' fears about safety were among the top reasons their children don't play freely outdoors — Nelson noted that promoters of outdoor recreation need to recognize and address safety concerns. While there's "probably more predators online than there are outside," Nelson encouraged organizers to help parents feel comfortable by making sure kids play in groups, ensuring there's enough lighting and signage in a play area and even including a law enforcement presence, if possible.

"We need to help parents understand that the risk is minimal," she said.

Howard Frumkin, MD, DrPH, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health, agreed, adding that while there's an "unfortunate sense of menace out there...there's also danger to depriving kids of outdoor contact." And even though the scientific base on nature and good health is still emerging — and public health is far from making definitive policy recommendations on how much time people should spend in natural places — there are many avenues in which public health and conservation goals mingle.

"Who will be around in 50 years that will be seriously concerned about environmental conservation?" said Frumkin, an APHA member. "Having resilient ecosystems is a necessity for human health and we as a society need to protect our ecosystems in ways that are sustainable and durable."

For more information on the movement to reconnect kids and nature, visit www.cnaturenet.org or www.nochildleftinside.org. ■

— Kim Krisberg



Photo courtesy Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection

A child enjoys nature and the outdoors during an activity held as part of Connecticut's Great Park Pursuit earlier this year.