

South Texans hit the hardest by poverty hardships, may see changes with TCHAT program

By Felicity Guajardo

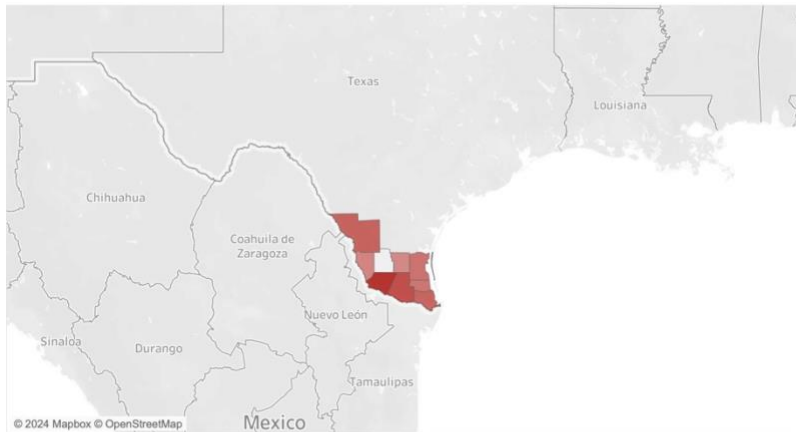
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South Texas border counties have among the highest percentages of poverty and lack of insurance impacting the majority Hispanic populations. But a tele-health program being implemented across Texas schools could be a steppingstone toward accessible healthcare.

The border counties which show high rates of uninsured populations include Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Webb and Willacy. According to [Texas Community Health News](#), Webb County is designated as a Health Resource Shortage Area and 25% of the population are enrolled in Medicaid.

Between the five counties in this research, the median household income ranges from \$30,000 to \$50,000. The average median income in Texas is \$92,000.

South Texas counties suffer the most from lack of health insurance

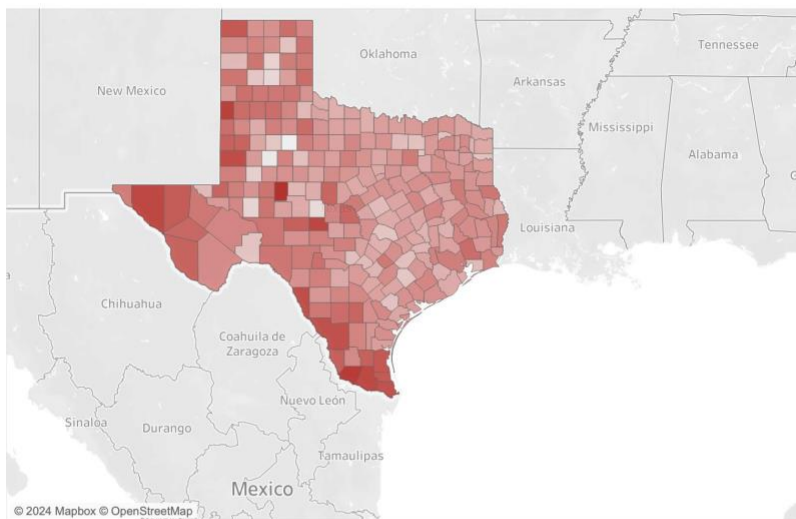


Percent of population with no health insurance suggests higher percentage of poverty. The South Texas area shows high rates of population with no health insurance.

Credit: Felicity Guajardo
Source: Texas Community Health News

Percent.No.Health.Insu..
18.47 33.45

South Texas counties suffer the most from lack of health insurance



Percent of population with no health insurance suggests higher percentage of poverty. The South Texas area shows high rates of population with no health insurance.

Credit: Felicity Guajardo
Source: Texas Community Health News

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3.97 35.19

[Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine \(TCHATT\)](#) is the tele-health program that was first introduced to Brownsville ISD through Lopez Early College High School and Besteiro Middle School in 2020 and initially started as a two-year program. [According to the UTRGV Rider newspaper](#), the

program was signed in a Memorandum of Understanding between the University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley and BISD.

Alonso Guerrero, Director of Health Services at BISD, believes that without TCHATT many students would be left behind in the pandemic age without the ability to catch up to current curriculum.

“COVID did a lot of damage to the mental health of the students. Without TCHATT and the services they offer I don't think we would've gained all that we were behind on,” Guerrero said.

[The UTRGV Department of Neuro and Behavioral Health and Department of Psychiatry](#) connects students to these clinicians via TCHATT in Texas public schools. Less than 50% of students are prescribed medication, but psychotherapy and talk therapy are the main components of the program.

Without the program, scheduling immediate counseling sessions with providers may not be available due to waitlists or insurance limitations.

Mental healthcare in Webb County

Numbers indicate the number of providers per 100k residents.

■ Texas ■ Webb County

Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselors



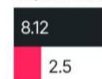
Licensed Professional Counselors



Licensed Clinical Social Workers



Psychiatrists



Data last updated in 2022.

Source: Texas Department of State Health Services

> TEXAS COMMUNITY HEALTH NEWS

“The valley's known for being under insured. There is a lot of people under TIPPS [Texas Incentives for Physicians and Professional Services] or Medicaid, but there's still a large portion of kids that don't have anything. And yes, TCHATT does at least provide mental health services that otherwise they wouldn't be receiving,” Guerrero said.

TCHATT is now offered to all Texas public schools just by signing up. School counselors, or any concerned figure of authority, may call TCHATT to voice concern of a student's mental health which leads to gaining parental consent to meet with the student through the tele-health service.

“Where they have the meetings [TCHATT consultations] is actually where my office is at, and I've seen in the afternoons people are already lining up trying to go to their appointments,” Guerrero said.

“I know they initially started with a couple rooms for the counselors and now they've expanded. So, it's actually a program that's been growing and it's been very beneficial to our students and families.”

Dr. Alcides Amador, TCHATT Medical Director at UTRGV, says that without TCHATT as a free mental health service, students may go undiagnosed and would not receive the help that they need.

“I believe that we're seeing this [rise in depression/anxiety] because, you know, unfortunately because of the lockdown and things, kids weren't able to develop like they normally would,” Dr. Amador said. “Interacting with their peers in person, using their study habits at school, their study skills, you know, like they were accustomed to.”

Dr. Amador reports that the main age groups utilizing TCHATT tends to range from adolescents to pre-teens 12-years-old and older. They have seen great results from students using TCHATT in K-12 education.

Poverty and health insurance data available from Texas Community Health News are able to pinpoint exactly which counties in Texas are in need of accessible healthcare providers and have high Medicaid usage. Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Webb

and Willacy counties all show high percentages of uninsured rates among the majority Hispanic population which stems from the social and financial pressures addressed in this report.

[The Children's Advocacy Center of Starr and Hidalgo Counties](#)

primarily provides services for victims of child abuse in the surrounding area. However, the center still provides aid to many families that may not have access to medical care due to being uninsured.

The center's clinical director of the mental health department, Roxanne Trevino, says that most families coming into the center are often enrolled in government assistance programs.

"I would say most families are on one of the managed care Medicaid organizations. We do have some that also don't have insurance and that may be because they're undocumented," Trevino said.

"I think what happens though is that sometimes families that are undocumented might be afraid to ask for help. And also, we don't have a lot of places where they can go to get other things like the medical services."

Broadband internet can also become a financial stressor which limits the accessibility of tele-health services for the population.

"What we've seen is that in our smaller communities, for example, the parents really appreciate the program 'cause they're

like, ‘Hey, you know what? I’m glad we’re getting these services at the school because the school’s internet connection is a lot better than what I have at home,’” Dr. Amador said.

Due to the convenience and rise of tele-health, many people may no longer have to worry about transportation to make their doctor appointments.

“A lot of people are struggling with the transportation to get to places. So, it may be hard for them to get to a doctor appointment or to you know, even go to work,” Trevino said. “We’ve known of people that are walking miles to get to work.”

TCHATT usage has steadily increased in numbers as now over 40 school districts have taken advantage of this resource. It has now been four years since the program was introduced and it is only going to be expanding in the future.

“In the future, TCHATT might be able to offer such things as neuropsychological assessments via digital platforms. And what that would be is where they do specific assessments, where they look at your cognition, your memory skills, the way you use language,” Dr. Amador said.

Resources alike to TCHATT can also be instrumental in helping single-parent families as some caregivers work multiple jobs and still struggle to pay for healthcare.

“Some people are in situations where they have to get multiple jobs in order to make ends meet because you know, they're raising a family of five by themselves,” Trevino said.

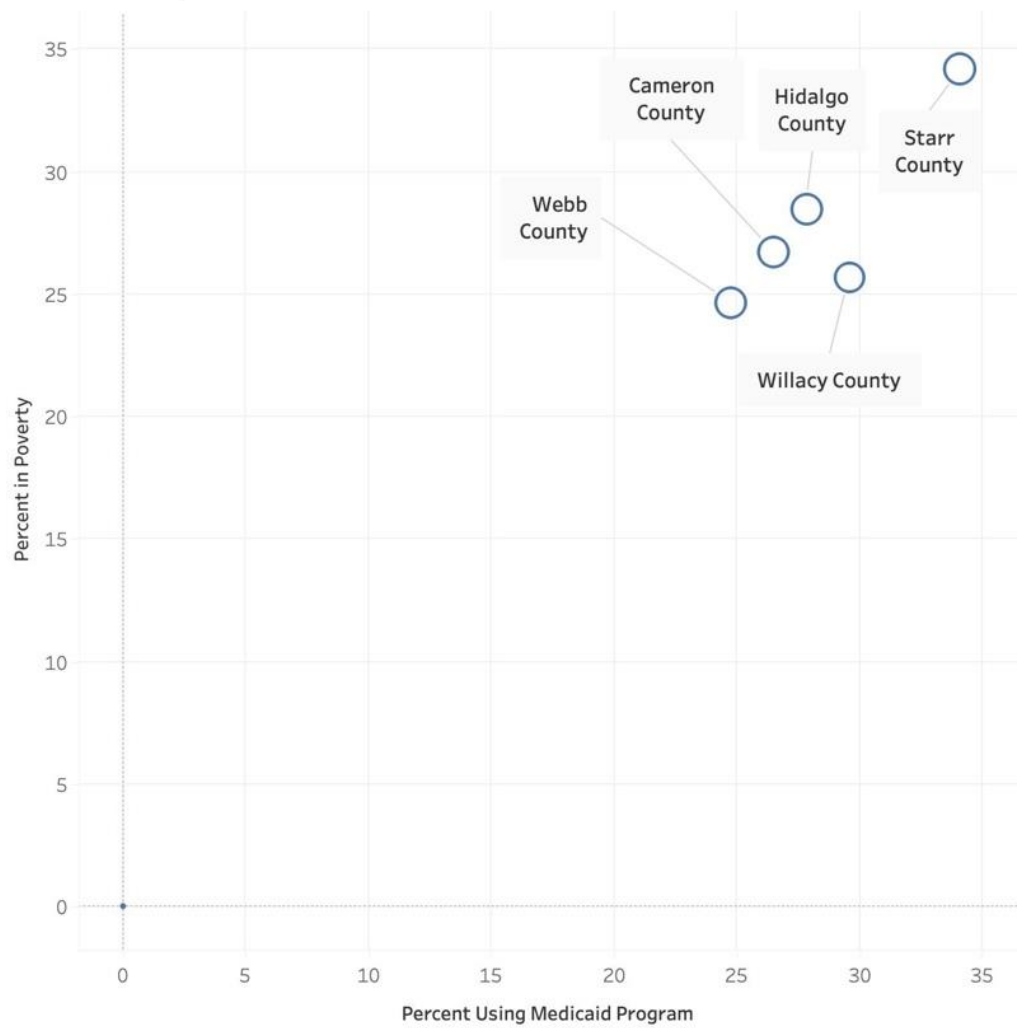
Dr. Ny’Nika McFadden, assistant professor in TXST Department of Health and Human Performance, says that it is unfortunate that a part-time job will not always offer health insurance coverage or will hinder the benefits.

“It’s a basic human service or right that we should all have,” McFadden said through a group Zoom interview.

McFadden also believes that public policy has power to impact the accessibility of medical insurance and medications for chronic disease.

“This all goes into voting because we have more rights than we think we do,” McFadden said. “Anything under the sun is related to public health. Any and everything is a public health issue.”

South Texas counties with high Hispanic populations are most economically vulnerable



Texas counties are compared by percent in poverty and percent in Medicaid. The higher percentage of poverty suggests higher rates of population using Medicaid. The size of the dot depends on the percentage of Hispanic population. For reference, the border counties focused on are marked in the scatter plot.

Credit: Felicity Guajardo
Source: Texas Community Health News

