

# SICK IN MASSACHUSETTS VIEWS ON HEALTH CARE COSTS AND QUALITY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Massachusetts has the highest rate of health insurance coverage in the nation—and it also has among the highest health care costs. The state is currently engaged in legislative efforts to contain further growth in health care costs and to improve the quality and coordination of care provided. Understanding the views and experiences of the people who need the health care system the most is an important aspect of developing successful public policies in this area.

This poll examines the views of sick adults in Massachusetts regarding the costs and quality of health care in the state as well as their perceptions about their own health care in the past year. “Sick” adults in Massachusetts (27% of adults) are defined as those who said they had a serious illness, medical condition, injury, or disability requiring a lot of medical care or who had been hospitalized overnight in the previous 12 months. Focusing on the experiences and opinions of those who have had significant recent medical care yields special insight into the current problems and opportunities facing Massachusetts’ health care system. This report presents highlights of the major findings from the poll. For the full results, visit [www.bluecrossmafoundation.org](http://www.bluecrossmafoundation.org).

Today most sick adults in Massachusetts see the cost of care as a serious problem for the state, and they view the problem as having gotten worse over the past five years. Sick adults are more troubled by costs than they are by quality. More sick people say the quality of care in the state has gotten better in the last five years than say it has gotten worse.

Sick adults say that the top reasons for the rising costs of health care in Massachusetts are excessive charges, people not taking care of themselves, and an aging population. They see a wide range of issues as contributing to quality problems. These include insurance plan restrictions, lack of availability of high-quality services, and certain aspects of the way care is provided. In addition, many sick adults in Massachusetts believe there is a shortage of doctors in their community.

Although Massachusetts has nearly universal health insurance coverage, the costs of health care are a serious financial problem for many sick adults and their families. Some sick adults report having been refused medical care for financial or insurance reasons. Additionally, some sick adults say they did not get needed medical care because they could not afford it. Taken together, these findings suggest that insurance coverage does not protect some Massachusetts residents against the financial hardships of illness, likely reflecting recent trends in higher deductibles and co-payments.

Corresponding to the state’s reputation for a high quality of care, about half of sick adults say they are “very satisfied” with the quality of care they have received, but the poll also found problems for some. Some sick adults in the state report quality problems, including instances in which they believe the wrong care was provided to them, or which left them concerned about aspects of the medical care provided to them. Some adults in Massachusetts who have been hospitalized overnight in the past 12 months also say they have experienced several quality of care problems, including contracting an infection while in the hospital, receiving the wrong diagnosis, treatment, or test, and not being able to see a nurse or doctor when needed. Overall, the results suggest that Massachusetts providers have opportunities to improve the management and coordination of care for sick individuals, as well as communication between health care providers and patients.

Unlike previous national studies of the general public, this poll of sick people in Massachusetts shows few differences between lower-income and middle-income people when it comes to their experience of the quality of their health care, suggesting that the state is largely successful in providing equitable access to quality care. However, in some respects, lower-income Massachusetts residents fare worse, including in their overall views of the quality of care they receive, their perceptions about how they are treated because of their insurance status, and the timeliness of access to appointments.

## METHODOLOGY

This poll was conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health, WBUR, and the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation. The questionnaire was originally developed as part of an ongoing series of surveys by NPR, the Harvard Opinion Research Program (HORP) at the Harvard School of Public Health, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The research team consists of the following members or affiliates of each institution:

Harvard School of Public Health: Robert J. Blendon, Professor of Health Policy and Political Analysis and Executive Director of HORP; John M. Benson, Research Scientist and Managing Director of HORP; Mandy Brulé, Research Specialist; and Eran Ben-Porath of SSRS/ICR, an independent research company.

WBUR: Martha Bebinger, Reporter; Deb Becker, Reporter; Rachel Zimmerman, Commonhealth Blog; Martha Little, News Director; Tom Melville, Managing Editor; and Sam Fleming, Managing Director of News & Programs.

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation: Sarah Iselin, President; Anna Gosline, Director of Policy and Research.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: Fred Mann, Associate Vice President, Communications; Debra Joy Pérez, Assistant Vice President, Research and Evaluation; Kate Sullivan Hare, Director, Policy Outreach and Public Affairs; and David Colby, Vice President, Research and Evaluation.

Interviews were conducted via telephone (including both landlines and cell phones) by SSRS/ICR of Media, Pennsylvania. Interviews were conducted April 19 – May 7, 2012, with 1,001 Massachusetts residents age 18 and over. Of these, 500 respondents were identified as “sick,” defined as those who said they had a serious illness, medical condition, injury, or disability requiring a lot of medical care or who had been hospitalized overnight in the past 12 months. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-4.0 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of error for “sick” respondents is +/-5.1 percentage points. Questions specifically about experience during hospitalization were asked of 260 respondents; the margin of error for the hospitalized group is +/-7.2 percentage points.

Possible sources of non-sampling error include non-response bias and question wording and ordering effects. Non-response in telephone surveys produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population. To compensate for these known biases and for variations in probability of selection within and across households, sample data were weighted by household size, cell-phone/landline use and demographics (sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, marital status, and census region) to reflect the true population. Other techniques including random-digit dialing, replicate subsamples, and systematic respondent selection within households were used to ensure that the sample is representative.

# VIEWS OF SICK ADULTS IN MASSACHUSETTS ON COST AND QUALITY PROBLEMS IN THE STATE

## I. SICK ADULTS' ASSESSMENT OF HEALTH CARE COSTS IN MASSACHUSETTS

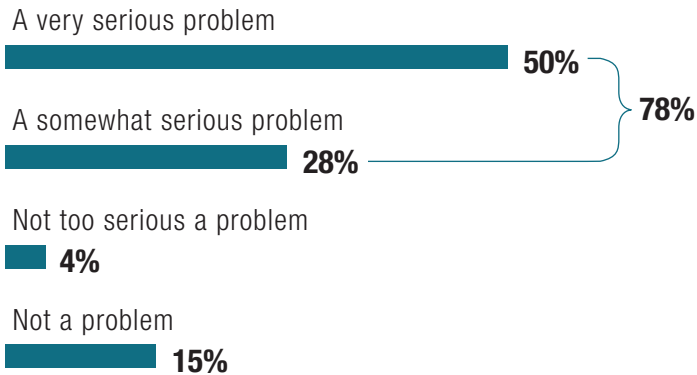
**Most sick adults in Massachusetts see the cost of care as a serious problem for the state.**

About eight in 10 sick adults (78%) see the cost of care as a “very serious” (50%) or a “somewhat serious” (28%) problem for Massachusetts. Furthermore, about six in 10 sick adults (63%) believe that the problem of health care costs in the state has gotten worse over the last five years.

Q

DO YOU THINK HEALTH CARE COSTS ARE A PROBLEM FOR MASSACHUSETTS?

A

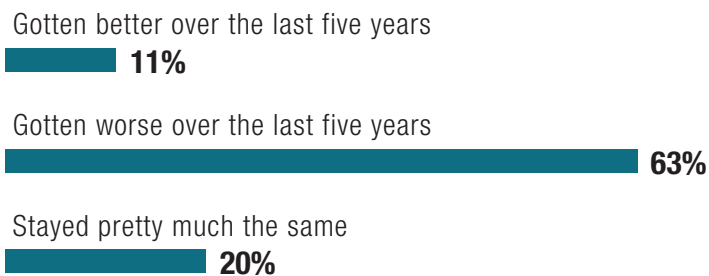


*Note: “Don’t Know/Refused” responses not shown*

Q

DO YOU THINK THE PROBLEM OF HEALTH CARE COSTS IN MASSACHUSETTS HAS GOTTEN BETTER OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS, GOTTEN WORSE OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS, OR STAYED PRETTY MUCH THE SAME?

A



*Note: “Don’t Know/Refused” responses not shown*

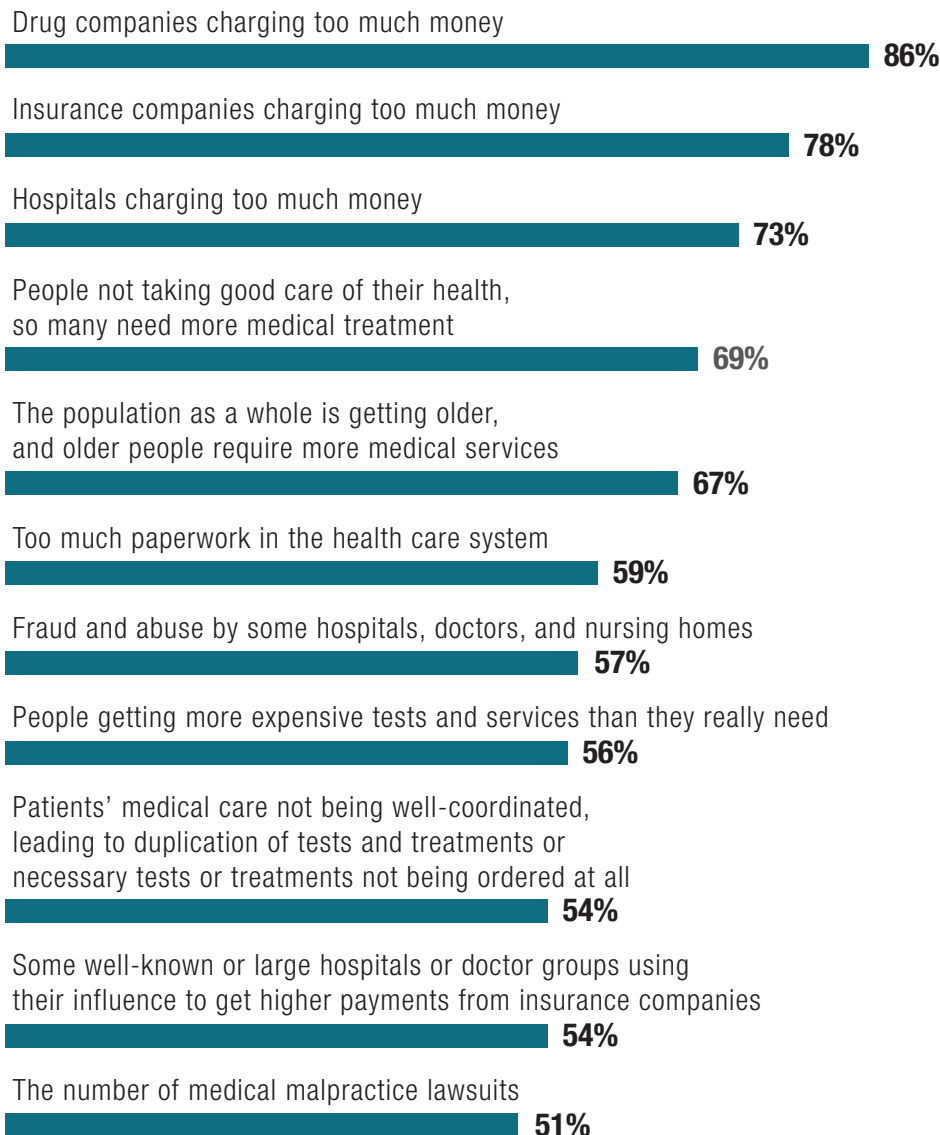
## II. SICK ADULTS' ASSESSMENT OF REASONS FOR COST OF CARE PROBLEMS IN MASSACHUSETTS

**Sick adults see these as the top reasons for rising health care costs in Massachusetts: excessive charges, people not taking care of themselves, and an aging population.** A large majority of sick adults believe that drug companies (86%), insurance companies (78%), and hospitals (73%) that charge too much money are major reasons for rising health care costs. About two-thirds of sick adults say that people not taking good care of their health (69%) and an aging population (67%) are major reasons for rising health care costs. In contrast to the perception that drug companies, insurance companies, and hospitals charge too much, less than half (49%) perceive as a major reason for rising costs that doctors charge too much money (not shown).

**Q**  
**A**

PLEASE TELL ME WHETHER YOU FEEL IT IS A MAJOR REASON, MINOR REASON, OR NOT A REASON FOR RISING HEALTH CARE COSTS IN MASSACHUSETTS TODAY.

OUT OF 22 LISTED ITEMS, THOSE CITED BY A MAJORITY AS "MAJOR REASONS" FOR RISING COST OF HEALTH CARE



**A majority of sick people in Massachusetts do not perceive some possible causes that have been discussed in the debate over health care costs as major reasons for rising costs.** Less than half of sick people in Massachusetts see either too much government regulation of prices charged in health care (49%) or too little government regulation (42%) as major reasons for rising health care costs.

**Most sick people in Massachusetts do not believe that a major reason for high health care costs is that the medical care market is not working properly.** Less than half of sick people (37%) said they consider a major reason for rising costs to be that most people with health insurance have little incentive to look for lower-priced doctors and services. Less than half also said that major reasons include that it's hard for patients to find out the cost of a recommended treatment (44%) and that doctors do not share cost information when outlining treatment options (41%).

**Most sick adults in Massachusetts do not see poor quality of care as a major reason for rising health care costs.** Only 36% of sick people said “people not getting the right diagnosis or treatment” is a major reason for rising health care costs in the state.



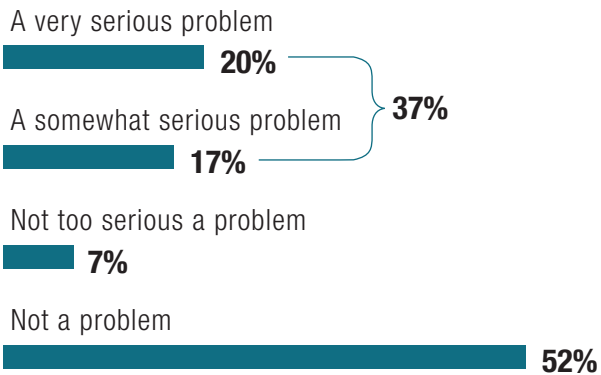
### III. SICK ADULTS' ASSESSMENT OF HEALTH CARE QUALITY IN MASSACHUSETTS

**Nearly four in 10 sick adults think there is a serious problem with the quality of health care in Massachusetts. However, their level of concern about the quality of care is lower than their concern about the cost of care.** Thirty-seven percent of sick adults see the quality of care as a “very serious” (20%) or “somewhat serious” (17%) problem for Massachusetts. And sick adults are divided over whether the quality of care in Massachusetts has gotten better or worse over the past five years. About a fifth of sick adults (21%) believe the quality of care has gotten worse. About four in 10 sick adults (44%) think the quality of health care has stayed the same, while 31% of sick adults believe it has gotten better.

Q

DO YOU THINK THE QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE IS A PROBLEM FOR MASSACHUSETTS?

A

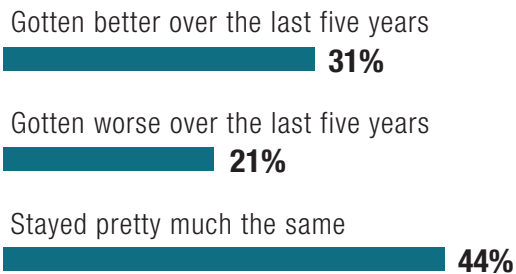


Note: “Don’t Know/Refused” responses not shown

Q

DO YOU THINK THE QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE IN MASSACHUSETTS HAS GOTTEN BETTER OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS, GOTTEN WORSE OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS, OR STAYED PRETTY MUCH THE SAME?

A



Note: “Don’t Know/Refused” responses not shown

#### IV. SICK ADULTS' ASSESSMENT OF REASONS FOR QUALITY PROBLEMS IN MASSACHUSETTS

**Sick adults see a wide range of issues as contributing to quality of care problems in Massachusetts. These include insurance plan restrictions, lack of availability of high-quality services, and certain aspects of the way care is provided.** A majority of sick adults believe that the following issues are major reasons for problems with quality of care in Massachusetts: people not being able to afford to get the tests or drugs they need (66%), the influence of health insurance plans on treatment decisions (62%), overwork, stress, or fatigue of health professionals (53%), and people not being able to get access to the high-quality doctors and hospitals that exist (51%).

**Q**

FOR EACH THING I MENTION, PLEASE TELL ME WHETHER YOU FEEL IT IS A MAJOR REASON, MINOR REASON, OR NOT A REASON FOR PROBLEMS WITH THE QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE IN MASSACHUSETTS TODAY.

**A**

OUT OF 18 LISTED ITEMS, THOSE MOST OFTEN CITED AS "MAJOR REASONS" FOR PROBLEMS WITH QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE

Some people not being able to afford to get the tests or drugs they need  
 **66%**

The influence of health insurance plans on treatment decisions  
 **62%**

Overwork, stress, or fatigue of health professionals  
 **53%**

Many people not being able to get access to the high-quality doctors and hospitals that exist  
 **51%**

People not following through on the advice or treatment recommendations of their doctors  
 **50%**

Doctors or nurses not spending enough time with patients  
 **48%**

People not getting the tests or drugs they need  
 **48%**

Health professionals not working together or not communicating as a team  
 **47%**

Excessive government regulation of doctors and hospitals  
 **45%**

People getting too many tests or drugs they don't need  
 **43%**

Not enough doctors or nurses in hospitals or medical offices  
 **42%**

## V. SICK ADULTS' VIEWS ON PHYSICIANS

**A majority of sick adults in Massachusetts want their encounters with their physicians to involve broader health issues.** About two-thirds of sick adults (68%) want their doctor to spend time with them discussing broader health issues that might affect their long-term health. Less than one-third (28%) want the doctor to talk only about their specific medical problem.

**Many sick adults in Massachusetts believe there is a shortage of doctors where they live.** Forty-four percent of sick adults believe there are too few doctors in their community.

# COSTS AND QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE EXPERIENCES OF SICK ADULTS IN MASSACHUSETTS

## I. SICK ADULTS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH HEALTH CARE COSTS

**Even in a state with nearly universal coverage, some sick adults face financial problems arising from their health care. Health care costs are a serious financial problem for many sick adults and their families.** About one-third of sick adults in Massachusetts reported that the cost of their medical care over the last 12 months has caused a “very serious” (16%) or “somewhat serious” (20%) problem for their or their family’s overall financial situation. Forty percent of sick adults in the state said the out-of-pocket costs of medical care are a “very serious” (16%) or a “somewhat serious” (24%) problem for them. About three in 10 sick adults who are currently insured said the cost of their health insurance premiums are a “very serious” (9%) or a “somewhat serious” (20%) problem. About a quarter of sick adults (24%) who have been insured at any time during the past year say they have had a problem with their insurance paying a hospital, doctor, or other health care provider in the past 12 months (not shown).

Q

PLEASE TELL ME IF IT IS A VERY SERIOUS PROBLEM, A SOMEWHAT SERIOUS PROBLEM, NOT TOO SERIOUS A PROBLEM, OR NOT AT ALL A PROBLEM.

A

■ VERY SERIOUS PROBLEM      ■ SOMEWHAT SERIOUS PROBLEM

Out-of-pocket costs as a problem for you



Costs of care as a problem for your or your family’s overall financial situation



Costs of health insurance premiums as a problem for you (among sick who have insurance)



**Some sick adults in Massachusetts have problems getting medical care for financial reasons.**

One in seven sick adults (14%) said that there was a time in the past 12 months when they could not get the medical care they needed. Among the sick adults who could not receive care, 51% reported that the main reason was their inability to afford the needed care, and 21% said the main reason was that their insurer would not pay for it. About one in 12 sick adults (8%) reported being refused care by a doctor or hospital for financial or insurance reasons at some time during the past 12 months.

Q

WAS THERE ANY TIME DURING THE PAST 12 MONTHS WHEN YOU NEEDED MEDICAL CARE, BUT DID NOT GET IT?

A

Needed care, but I did not get it

14%

Got care every time I needed it

85%

*Note: "Don't Know/Refused" responses not shown*

## II. SICK ADULTS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH QUALITY OF CARE ISSUES

**Even in a state known for its high quality of care, many sick adults report problems with the quality of their own care. Many have received care they believe was not appropriate.** About one in seven sick adults (15%) said they were given the wrong diagnosis, treatment, or test. About one in six (16%) said they did not get the tests they thought they should, while 10% of sick adults received tests or treatments they believed to be unnecessary.

**Many sick adults in Massachusetts report problems with some aspects of the medical care provided to them.** Some of the problems involve a lack of communication and coordination. About one in five sick adults (22%) reported that a doctor, nurse, or other health professional did not provide all the information they needed about their treatment or prescriptions. The same proportion (22%) reported that they had to see multiple medical professionals, and no one doctor understood or kept track of all the different aspects of their medical issues and treatments. A quarter of sick adults (25%) said they felt their condition was not well managed. And about a quarter (26%) said that a doctor, nurse, or other health professional did not spend enough time with them. In addition, 12% of sick adults in Massachusetts said they could not get an appointment or a referral to see a specialist they thought they needed.

**Unlike earlier national studies of the general public, this poll of sick people shows relatively few differences between lower-income and middle-income sick people when it comes to their experience of the quality of their health care.** Nonetheless, lower-income sick people in Massachusetts (those with household incomes below \$25,000) are more likely than middle-income ones (\$25,000–\$74,999) to report quality issues in two areas. Lower-income sick people (27%) were twice as likely as the middle-income sick (13%) to say they were not treated as well as others because of their insurance status. And half of lower-income sick people (50%) reported having to wait longer for

an appointment with a doctor than they thought reasonable, compared with one-third (32%) of middle-income sick.

**About half of sick adults in Massachusetts are highly satisfied with the quality of the medical care they have received.** Forty-eight percent of sick adults are “very satisfied” with their medical care. And 36% of sick adults are “somewhat satisfied,” though they think “some things could have been better” with the medical care they received in the past 12 months. Nine percent of sick adults are “somewhat dissatisfied” with their care and believe that “a lot of things could have been better.” Five percent of sick adults are “very dissatisfied” with their medical care. Lower-income sick people in Massachusetts (34%) were significantly less likely than middle-income (49%) and higher-income (56%) sick to say they are very satisfied with the quality of health care they received.

### **III. SICK ADULTS’ PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH HOSPITALIZATION**

**In line with perceptions of the quality of care in general, about half of sick adults in Massachusetts who have been hospitalized in the past 12 months are very satisfied with the quality of care they received in the hospital.** Fifty-three percent of hospitalized adults are “very satisfied” with the quality of medical care they received while they were in the hospital. And 34% of sick adults are “somewhat satisfied” but they think “some things could have been better” with their hospital care. Seven percent of hospitalized adults are “somewhat dissatisfied” with their care and believe that “a lot of things could have been better.” Four percent of hospitalized adults are “very dissatisfied” with their hospital care.

**Some hospitalized adults have experienced quality of care problems while in the hospital.** About one in eight hospitalized adults (13%) reported believing they received the wrong diagnosis, treatment, or test. Six percent of hospitalized adults reported contracting an infection in the hospital. About a quarter of sick adults who were hospitalized in the past 12 months said doctors (26%) or nurses (24%) were not available when they needed them, or did not respond quickly to their requests for assistance. In addition, a quarter of hospitalized adults (24%) said there was poor communication among the doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals involved in their care.