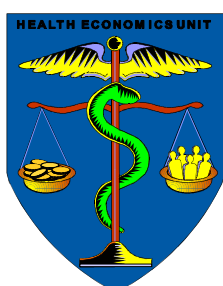


Equity Briefing



Nkosi, M., Goudge, J.
and Kahn, K. (2007)
Investigating barriers to
primary health care: A
rural household survey.
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Cost still a barrier to primary health care for rural poor in South Africa

Since 1994, South African health polices have sought to reduce inequity within the health system. User fees for primary health care services for low-income households were removed in 1994. Yet data collected during 2003 – 2004 from a rural household survey indicate that low-income households still face greater barriers to accessing health care than higher-income households.

Approach taken by the study

The site chosen was in a rural area of South Africa, with an estimated population of 70 000 people, living in 21 villages. The area had high levels of unemployment and a general lack of easy access to essential services, including health care services. The data was collected during the 2003-04 annual census, using an interviewer-administered household questionnaire.

Choice of health care services

From a variety of actions that people can take when they are sick, ranging from using a home remedy to visiting a private hospital, the study found that most people's **first choice was the public health clinic**. However, interestingly, the second most popular option was to 'do nothing', until they felt seriously ill.

The impact of health insurance

In the sample studied, only 4% of households had access to health insurance. Of these, the vast majority was from the highest income group. The study showed that people from households with health insurance were more likely to seek formal health care than people without health insurance.

Counting the cost of health care

In general, poverty increases people's vulnerability to ill health. Yet, the data showed that people from higher-income households were more likely to seek health care when ill than people from the poorest households. This suggests that people with the lowest household income prefer to wait as long as they can before incurring the costs associated with getting health care. Such costs are considered in terms of time, money and dignity. The reasons why people delay, or avoid, seeking formal health care include:

- they consider their illness is not serious enough;
- the facilities are too far away, with high transport costs – in terms of travel time and/or money;
- the low quality of care provided at health care facilities, for example health workers are rude, the queues are too long, consultation time too short, they do not receive the drugs they need.

The study also showed that for low-income households the financial costs related to accessing health care were far more, relative to household income, than for higher-income groups.

Copies of the paper are available from Maureen Mosselson at the **Centre for Health Policy** library **email:** maureen.mosselson@nhls.ac.za
Tel: 011-242-9908 (Mondays and Fridays, 9am-4pm)