



# Ohioans' Experiences with *Going into Debt to Pay for Healthcare*

October 2009



Results From The Health Foundation of Greater Cincinnati



The cost of getting medical care and health insurance has increased annually for many years. These increases have meant that some people have to go without care because they can't afford it or they go into debt to get the care they need. In fact, 24% of Ohio adults reported that they had to change their life significantly in the last 12 months to pay medical bills, according to the 2009 *Ohio Health Issues Poll*.

What about Ohioans who are burdened by medical bills? To get a picture of how Ohioans are faring with medical debt, the 2009 *Ohio Health Issues Poll* asked Ohio adults about their unpaid medical and healthcare bills. The majority of Ohio adults (54%) do not have any unpaid medical debt. For those with debt, the largest percentage owe less than \$2,000 (26%).

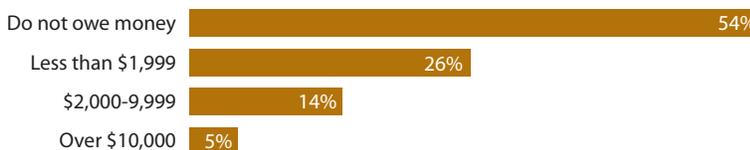
## Unpaid Medical Debt Is High Among some Groups

The total amount of medical debt varies among demographic groups, with some reporting higher levels of medical debt than others:

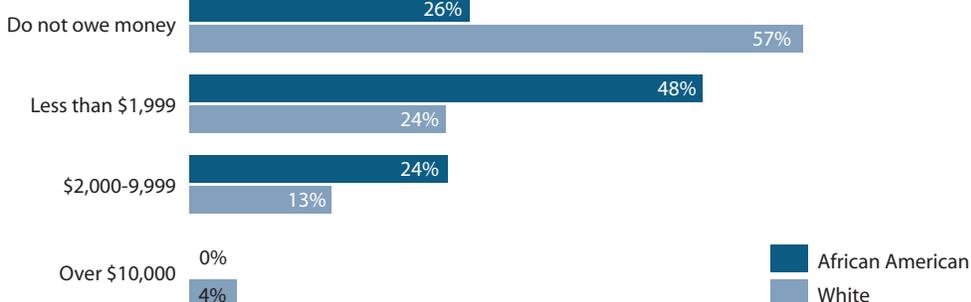
- **African Americans.** Ohio's African American adults reported a very high percentage of medical debt, with 72% of respondents stating that they have some

### How much would you say you currently owe on unpaid medical or healthcare bills? (Percentages will not add to 100% because the percent who said "don't know" are not included.)

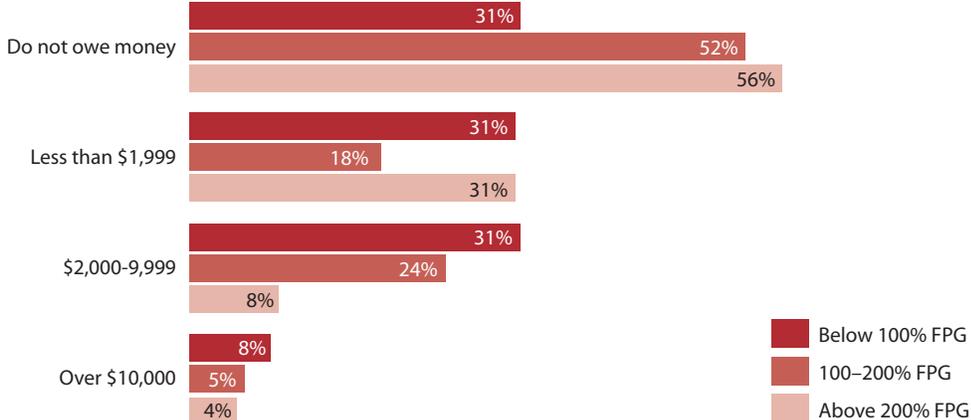
#### Ohio



#### Ethnicity



#### Household Income<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> 100% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG) in 2008 was \$21,200 for a family of 4.

medical debt compared to 43% of White respondents. In addition, they reported higher percentages of debt under \$2,000 and between \$2,000 and \$9,999.

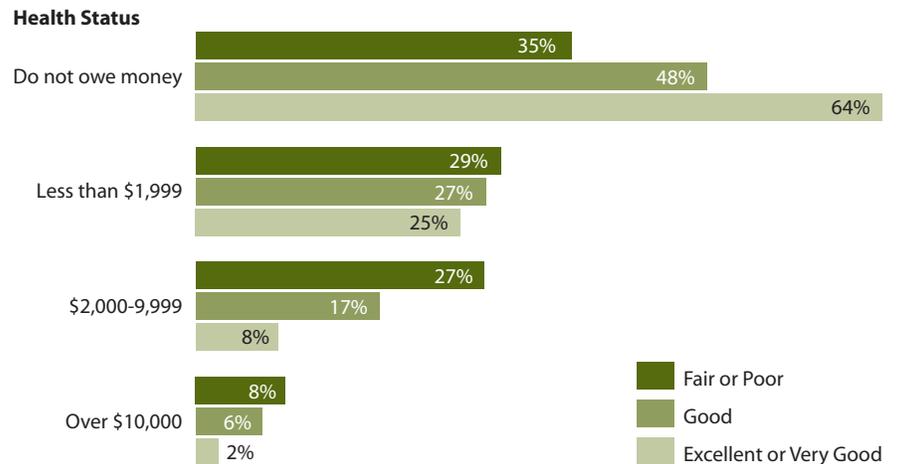
- **People living below 100% FPG.** Almost 7 in 10 Ohio adults (69%) living below 100% of the federal poverty

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guidelines (FPG)<sup>1</sup> reported having some medical debt, while only 43% of Ohio adults living above 200% of FPG reported having some medical debt. The rate of unpaid debt between \$2,000–9,999 was almost 4 times as high for Ohioans living under 100% of FPG as it was for Ohioans living above 200% of FPG.

- **Ohioans with fair or poor health status.** Ohio adults who reported worse health status also reported more medical debt. The rate of unpaid debt between \$2,000–9,999 was over 3 times higher for Ohioans reporting fair or poor health status as it was for Ohioans reporting excellent or very good health status.

**How much would you say you currently owe on unpaid medical or healthcare bills?** (Percentages will not add to 100% because the percent who said “don’t know” are not included.)



**What Do Ohioans Owe the Money for?**

Ohioans reported their largest percentage of unpaid medical debt was for tests and diagnostic procedures (25%), emergency room visits (21%), and outpatient treatment and procedures (14%).

**Medical Debt for Emergency Room Visits**

African-Americans (46%), young adults (40%), and the uninsured (39%) had significantly higher rates of medical debt for emergency room visits as compared to all Ohioans (21%). These three groups are less likely than other demographic groups to have an appropriate medical home—or a doctor’s office, health center, or other place they go when they are sick or need medical advice. They are also more likely to use an inappropriate medical home, such as an emergency room or urgent care center, as their usual source of care. Inappropriate medical homes do not provide the kind of consistent care and follow-up that helps people stay healthy.

<sup>1</sup> 100% of the federal poverty guidelines (FPG) in 2008 was an annual income of \$21,200 for a family of 4.