

Officials Find Swine Flu Hits Minorities Harder

Heard on All Things Considered

August 19, 2009 - MELISSA BLOCK, host: From NPR News, this is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. I'm Melissa Block.

ROBERT SIEGEL, host: And I'm Robert Siegel.

Public health officials are discovering new information about the impact of swine flu. Research shows that the flu did not affect all Americans the same way. Members of minority groups and people living in poorer neighborhoods suffered more, as NPR's Richard Knox reports.

RICHARD KNOX: When the swine flu outbreak was in full swing, some of the busiest health providers were in low income areas. Jan Smith runs the urgent care clinic at Codman Square Health Center in Boston's Dorchester neighborhood.

Ms. JAN SMITH (Director Of Clinical Services, Codman Square Health Center, Boston): We were just very surprised to see that number of patients. It was packed. Our waiting room was packed. It was as great or greater than late winter.

KNOX: New numbers show twice as many Bostonians sought treatment for flu symptoms this spring than at the peak of the regular flu season. And those sneezing, coughing, aching, feverish people were far more likely to be African-American and Latino. Blacks make up a quarter of Boston's population but they were 37 percent of swine flu cases. Latinos are 14 percent of the population but more than a third of swine flu victims. And minorities were twice as likely to be hospitalized for swine flu. Dr. Anita Barry of the Boston Public Health Commission didn't expect such a disparity.

Dr. ANITA BARRY (Boston Public Health Commission): We really didn't know what the race-ethnicity breakdown would be. And so, when we saw that this illness was disproportionately affecting black and Latino residents, that really did get our attention.

KNOX: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is looking at the problem nationally. Barry says there's nothing about the new flu virus that makes minorities more likely to get sick from it, it's social factors, especially the makeup of Boston public schools. Most Boston school kids are minorities, even though the general population isn't. And the typical Boston swine flu victim was 13 years old. There's another factor, low-income parents have a harder time keeping their sick kids out of school.

Dr. BARRY: For some parents in lower-wage jobs, if they don't show up at work, they don't get paid, and people may already be on the economic margins. So parents were desperate to get some of these children back in school.

KNOX: So, there were a lot of sick, contagious kids in Boston classrooms this spring.

Dr. BARRY: It was hard on the child. It was hard on spread that could have been occurring in the school. It was hard on the school nurses, who had parents on the phone saying, I can't come get my child or, you know, I don't have anybody to take care of my child.

KNOX: Looking ahead health officials are trying to target poorer neighborhoods for swine flu vaccination later this fall. But Dr. Steve Tringale a Boston family practitioner says it's hard for low-income people to make time for flu shots, and this vaccine is expected to require two dosages.

Dr. STEVE TRINGALE (Family Practitioner, Codman Square Health Center): We know that that's always a challenge, to come back for a second time for full immunization. Yep, we know that's going to be a challenge. Taking the time off from work, or getting babysitters or whatever it takes to come in is always an effort for patients.

KNOX: Boston Mayor Tom Menino is asking all businesses to give workers time off to get flu shots. Richard Knox, NPR News, Boston.

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