

# Access to Healthcare in the United States: A Fundamental Right or a Privilege?

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## ABSTRACT

This research explores the debate surrounding healthcare in the United States, examining whether it should be considered a fundamental right or a privilege. The essay argues that healthcare is an inviolable human right, essential for the preservation of life, and should transcend financial barriers. By analyzing the economic benefits of affordable healthcare, such as increased workforce productivity and reduced healthcare costs, the study illustrates that equitable access to healthcare positively impacts society as a whole. Additionally, the paper highlights the ethical obligations of states, citing international agreements and the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as legal foundations supporting universal healthcare. The research also reviews prior public health outcomes, such as those resulting from the Affordable Care Act, to demonstrate the effectiveness of expanded healthcare access in improving public health and economic stability. Ultimately, the paper argues for prioritizing affordable, high-quality healthcare for all citizens in order to promote a healthier, more prosperous society.

## Introduction

In a state praised for its ideals of freedom and equality, access to adequate healthcare remains a contentious issue, sparking debates that strike at the core of what is a human right and what is not. While some argue that healthcare should be a commodity<sup>1</sup>, accessible only to those who can afford it, the reality is far more profound: healthcare is an inviolable human right essential for the preservation of life. This essay argues that adequate healthcare must transcend financial barriers, as it embodies a fundamental section of social rights. The essay will discuss the economic benefits of adequate healthcare, the ethical obligations of states, and prior public health outcomes to make it evident that equitable access to healthcare is a necessity for a thriving society.

## Economic Benefits of Affordable Healthcare

### Increased Workforce Productivity

From an economic standpoint, affordable healthcare offers a plethora of advantages. It not only boosts workforce productivity and curbs healthcare costs in the long run, but it also acts as a catalyst for economic growth. As in regards to workforce productivity, when people have access to affordable healthcare, they are more likely to be healthy and productive members of society. This is because they are able to receive preventative care and early treatment for

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<sup>1</sup> "Health Care Is Privilege, Not a Right." *ObserveToday.com*, Observer Today, 20 Mar. 2019, [www.observeToday.com/opinion/commentary/2019/03/health-care-is-privilege-not-a-right/](http://www.observeToday.com/opinion/commentary/2019/03/health-care-is-privilege-not-a-right/). Accessed 12 May 2024.

illnesses, which reduces the likelihood of missed workdays due to sickness.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, when individuals are healthy, they are able to perform their job duties to the best of their ability, which increases output and reduces absenteeism. This is beneficial for both the individual and the economy as a whole. In fact, a study conducted by the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease found that the U.S. economy loses \$1.3 trillion annually due to lost productivity from chronic diseases.<sup>3</sup> By increasing access to affordable healthcare, people can better manage their health and reduce their risk of developing chronic illnesses, which can ultimately save the economy billions of dollars in lost productivity.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, access to affordable healthcare is not only a fundamental human right, but it is also a wise economic decision that benefits society as a whole.

## Reduced Healthcare Costs & Stimulated Economic Growth

Furthermore, earlier access to healthcare will eventually lead to lower healthcare costs in the future as preventive measures can be done to prevent chronic illnesses from developing and can receive earlier treatment for certain infectious diseases to prevent them from becoming more serious issues.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, stimulating economic growth through increased productivity and reduced absenteeism due to preventable illnesses can also be achieved with earlier access to healthcare.<sup>6</sup>

## Ethical Obligations of States

The ethical obligations of states, particularly the United States, are clear when it comes to healthcare. According to United Nations (U.N.) Resolution A/76/L.75, healthcare is a fundamental human right that must be enjoyed by everyone without discrimination.<sup>7</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights also recognizes the right to healthcare as an essential component of a dignified life, stating that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including medical care".<sup>8</sup> In the United States, the ethical obligation to provide universal healthcare is reinforced by the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees equal

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<sup>2</sup> Carey, Mary G., et al. "Sleep Problems, Depression, Substance Use, Social Bonding, and Quality of Life in Professional Firefighters." *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, vol. 53, no. 8, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Aug. 2011, pp. 928–33, <https://doi.org/10.1097/jom.0b013e318225898f>. Accessed 5 May 2024.

<sup>3</sup> "Michigan | Keeping Education ACTIVE | Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease." *Fightchronicdisease.org*, 2016, [www.fightchronicdisease.org/states/michigan](http://www.fightchronicdisease.org/states/michigan). Accessed 5 May 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Why Not the Best? Results from the National Scorecard on U.S. Health System Performance, 2008." *Commonwealthfund.org*, July 2008, [www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/scorecard/2008/jul/why-not-best-results-national-scorecard-us-health-system](http://www.commonwealthfund.org/publications/scorecard/2008/jul/why-not-best-results-national-scorecard-us-health-system). Accessed 11 May 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Fumagalli, Elena, et al. "The Impact of Health on Economic Growth: A Narrative Literature Review." *Health Policy*, Elsevier BV, Mar. 2024, pp. 105039–39, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthpol.2024.105039>. Accessed 11 May 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Andorra, Angola, and Antigua And Barbuda.

<https://documents.un.org/Doc/Undoc/Ltd/N22/436/72/Pdf/N2243672.Pdf?Token=Yp90vTKIa3VOnPYL2A&Fe=True>. Vol. I, 1972, pp. 5–16, [documents.un.org/doc/undoc/ltd/n22/436/72/pdf/n2243672.pdf?token=yp90vTKIa3VOnPYL2A&fe=true](https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/ltd/n22/436/72/pdf/n2243672.pdf?token=yp90vTKIa3VOnPYL2A&fe=true). Accessed 12 May 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Nations, United. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights | United Nations." *United Nations*, United Nations, 2023, [www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights](http://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights). Accessed 11 May 2024.

protection under the law and prohibits states from denying any person "the equal protection of the laws."<sup>9</sup> This amendment has been used in legal battles to argue that access to healthcare is a fundamental right that cannot be denied to anyone, regardless of their financial or social status.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it is the ethical duty of the state to ensure that healthcare is accessible to all citizens, regardless of their income or social status. The state must prioritize the provision of healthcare services and ensure that they are affordable, adequate, and of high quality. The state must also ensure that healthcare providers are properly trained, licensed, and regulated to ensure that patients receive safe and effective care.

## Prior Public Health Outcomes within the U.S.A.

Prior public health outcomes within the United States have shown the vital importance of accessible healthcare for all citizens. The Affordable Care Act (ACA), signed into law in 2010, has expanded access to healthcare for millions of Americans, resulting in improved public health outcomes.<sup>11</sup> According to a report by the Department of Health and Human Services, the ACA has led to a reduction in the number of uninsured Americans by 20 million people, resulting in an increase in preventive healthcare services, such as cancer screenings and vaccinations.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the ACA has helped to reduce healthcare costs and prevent medical bankruptcies, which are often caused by high medical bills.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the expansion of Medicaid under the ACA has been a crucial step toward improving public health outcomes for low-income Americans.<sup>14</sup> Medicaid provides healthcare coverage to low-income individuals and families, including children, pregnant women, and people with disabilities.<sup>15</sup> According to a report by the Kaiser Family Foundation, Medicaid expansion has led to a reduction in uninsured rates and an increase in access to primary care services.<sup>16</sup> This has resulted in improved health outcomes and reduced healthcare costs for both individuals and the government.<sup>17</sup> Public health programs have also been instrumental in improving public health outcomes within the United States. Programs such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have played a critical role in preventing and controlling infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.<sup>18</sup> The CDC has also worked to improve

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<sup>9</sup> "The 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution." *National Constitution Center – Constitutioncenter.org*, 2024, constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/amendments/amendment-xiv. Accessed 11 May 2024.

<sup>10</sup> "U.S. Senate: Landmark Legislation: The Fourteenth Amendment." *Senate.gov*, 7 Aug. 2023, www.senate.gov/about/origins-foundations/senate-and-constitution/14th-amendment.htm#:~:text=Passed%20by%20the%20Senate%20on,laws%2C%E2%80%9D%20extending%20the%20provisions%20of. Accessed 12 May 2024.

<sup>11</sup> *PLAW 111publ148*. 2010, www.congress.gov/111/plaws/publ148/PLAW-111publ148.pdf.

<sup>12</sup> for, Secretary. "About the ACA." *HHS.gov*, 10 June 2013, www.hhs.gov/healthcare/about-the-aca/index.html. Accessed 11 May 2024.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> "Status of State Medicaid Expansion Decisions: Interactive Map | KFF." *KFF*, 8 May 2024, www.kff.org/affordable-care-act/issue-brief/status-of-state-medicaid-expansion-decisions-interactive-map/#:~:text=The%20Affordable%20Care%20Act's%20(ACA,FMAP)%20for%20their%20expansion%20populations. Accessed 11 May 2024.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>16</sup> "The Effects of Medicaid Expansion under the ACA: Updated Findings from a Literature Review - Report - 8891-06 | KFF." *KFF*, 17 Feb. 2023, www.kff.org/report-section/the-effects-of-medicaid-expansion-under-the-aca-updated-findings-from-a-literature-review-report/. Accessed 11 May 2024.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> *HIV*. 2024, www.cdc.gov/hiv/default.html. Accessed 11 May 2024.

vaccination rates, reduce tobacco use, and promote healthy lifestyle behaviors, consequently eliminating sedentary lifestyles, resulting in improved public health outcomes.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, healthcare is a fundamental human right that must be given to everyone without discrimination. Access to affordable healthcare is not only a proper economic decision that benefits society as a whole, but it is also the ethical obligation of the state to ensure that its citizens receive the care they need. The economic benefits of affordable healthcare, the ethical obligations of states, and prior public health outcomes in the United States all exemplify that equal access to healthcare is necessary for a thriving and economically prospering society. Therefore, it is time for the United States to prioritize the provision of healthcare services and ensure that they are affordable, adequate, and of high quality to ensure that all citizens have access to the care they need for a healthy and prosperous life.

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<sup>19</sup> CDC. "Smoking and Tobacco Use." *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, 16 Apr. 2024, [www.cdc.gov/tobacco/index.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/index.htm). Accessed 11 May 2024.

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