



# Changes in Language and Removals of Descriptive Text on ASPE's Website, Reducing Emphasis on the Affordable Care Act

Access Assessment Report  
July 28, 2018

This report is accompanied by a blog post, providing context for the changes detailed [here](#).

## Sunlight Foundation's Web Integrity Project

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[See WIP's Report Production Protocol for details of our review process](#)

### Classification of Web content alterations and changes in access to Web resources:

Classification	Changed in this report?
1. Altering or removing text and non-text content	Yes
2. Altering or removing links	Yes
3. Moving an entire webpage or collection of webpages or establishing redirects	Yes
4. Altering or removing an entire pertinent section of a webpage or collection of webpages	
5. Removing an entire webpage or document	
6. Overhauling or removing an entire website	
7. Altering or removing search engines and open data platforms	
8. Altering, removing, or deleting datasets	

The Sunlight Foundation's Web Integrity Project does not intend to assess any government agency's intentions in presenting the changes to webpages or other Web content that appear in this report.

# Changes in Language and Removals of Descriptive Text on ASPE's Website, Reducing Emphasis on the Affordable Care Act

## Overview

In 2017, the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) altered and added webpages on its website about research related to the Affordable Care Act (ACA), demonstrating a shift in language, which deemphasized the stated positive impacts of the health care law. The title of its "Affordable Care Act Research" webpage was changed to "Historical Research," and the page's URL path was changed to correspond with the new title. Both versions of the page list links to the same 125 ASPE research publications about the ACA, produced between 2011 and 2017, but descriptive text that previously accompanied each publication link no longer appears on the "Historical Research" version of the page. Background text at the top of the page about the research publications was changed so that it no longer describes the positive impacts of the ACA. A new page titled "Health Coverage Research" was created, which currently lists links and related descriptive text for three publications about the ACA published since January 20, 2017.

## Background

Agency details: According to agency's [mission](#), "The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) advises the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services on policy development in health, disability, human services, data, and science; and provides advice and analysis on economic policy." It further states that, "ASPE conducts research and evaluation studies; develops policy analyses; and estimates the cost and benefits of policy alternatives under consideration by the Department or Congress."

Communications about changes: The office has not proactively communicated about or explained the changes described within this report.

Known archives: No known archives identified.

## Description of Most Notable Changes

1. The "[Affordable Care Act Research](#)" page title was changed to "[Historical Research](#)" ([Webpage 1](#)).
2. The URL for this page began redirecting from <https://aspe.hhs.gov/affordable-care-act-research> to <https://aspe.hhs.gov/historical-research> between [May 26, 2017](#) and [October 5, 2017](#).
3. Text listed under the "Topics" drop-down in the website's top menu changed from "Affordable Care Act Research" to "Historical Research," and the link URL also changed accordingly (see description of URL change above).
4. Language in the "Background" section of the page that described the positive impacts of the ACA was removed. The "Affordable Care Act Research" version of the page previously stated, "Millions of Americans have already benefitted [sic] from many of the law's provisions including coverage for preventive health services, ban on lifetime limits,

and insurance coverage for young adults.” This text no longer appears on the “Historical Research” version of the page, which now states that the conclusions and recommendations in the articles about the ACA listed on the page “may not reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services today, especially with respect to the consequences of Obamacare.”

5. Descriptive text associated with each of the 125 research publications on the “Affordable Care Act Research” version of [Webpage 1](#) is no longer included on the “Historical Research” version. The 125 links, including the publication titles and link URLs, are the same on both pages (with the exception of minor differences in link text). The descriptive text associated with some of the publications still appears on other ASPE webpages, although some descriptive text seems to have been entirely removed from the website.
6. The “[Health Coverage Research](#)” page ([Webpage 2](#)) was added, and was also added as a category under the “Topics” drop-down in the website’s top menu. It currently lists three reports published since January 20, 2017 that were produced based on research about the impacts of the ACA and alternatives to the ACA. The page notes that, “Since January 20, 2017, ASPE has been developing research that analyzes the impact of Obamacare (the Affordable Care Act) and models changes that will create a market that lowers costs, increases quality, and gives more choices than Obamacare does.”

## Table of Contents

Report Section	Webpage Title	URL
<a href="#">Webpage 1</a>	Affordable Care Act Research <i>Currently: Historical Research</i>	<a href="https://aspe.hhs.gov/affordable-care-act-research">https://aspe.hhs.gov/affordable-care-act-research</a> <i>Currently:</i> <a href="https://aspe.hhs.gov/historical-research">https://aspe.hhs.gov/historical-research</a>
<a href="#">Webpage 2</a>	Health Coverage Research	<a href="https://aspe.hhs.gov/health-coverage-research">https://aspe.hhs.gov/health-coverage-research</a>

## Detailed Description of Changes in Access and Content

*Note: Throughout the entire report, links to the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine's (IAWM) versions of corresponding pages are provided for reference. IAWM displays time in GMT.*

### Webpage 1: Affordable Care Act Research (Currently: Historical Research)

- URL: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/affordable-care-act-research>
  - Redirects to URL: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/historical-research>
- Redirect began between [May 26, 2017](#) and [October 5, 2017](#). (*Note: The large date range is due to sporadic captures by the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine.*)
  - First snapshot of the "Historical Research" version of page on [July 10, 2017](#).
  - Link to page listed under "Topics" in website's top menu changed between [June 30, 2017](#) and [July 6, 2017](#).
- No ASPE Web archives identified.

#### **Webpage 1 Details:**

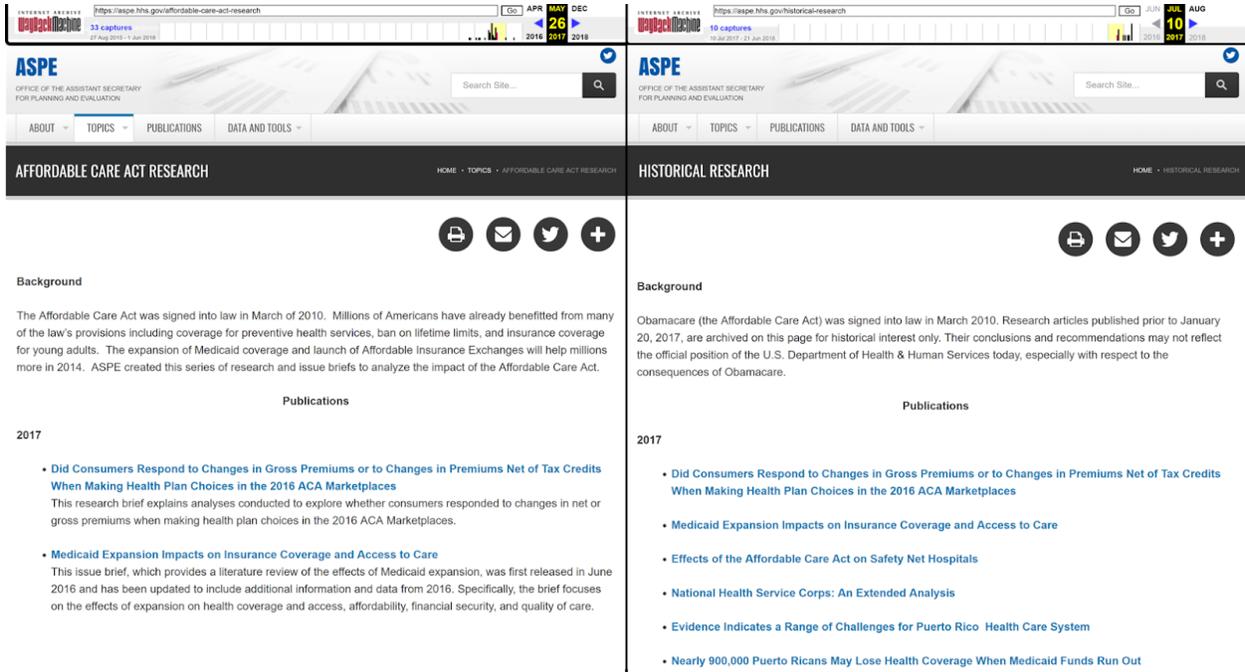
1. The title of the page was **changed from** "Affordable Care Act Research" **to** "Historical Research." The "Historical Research" version of page was live as early as [July 10, 2017](#).
2. The page's URL **changed from** <https://aspe.hhs.gov/affordable-care-act-research> **to** <https://aspe.hhs.gov/historical-research> between [May 26, 2017](#) and [October 5, 2017](#). The previous URL currently redirects to the new URL.
3. **Changed** the link text under the "Topics" section of the top menu **from** "Affordable Care Act Research" **to** "Historical Research," and also changed the link URL to the new URL (see description of URL path change above) between [June 30, 2017](#) and [July 6, 2017](#).
4. **Changed** the "Background" section **from:**  
"The Affordable Care Act was signed into law in March of 2010. Millions of Americans have already benefitted [sic] from many of the law's provisions including coverage for preventive health services, ban on lifetime limits, and insurance coverage for young adults. The expansion of Medicaid coverage and launch of Affordable Insurance Exchanges will help millions more in 2014. ASPE created this series of research and issue briefs to analyze the impact of the Affordable Care Act."  
**To:**  
"Obamacare (the Affordable Care Act) was signed into law in March 2010. Research articles published prior to January 20, 2017, are archived on this page for historical interest only. Their conclusions and recommendations may not reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services today, especially with respect to the consequences of Obamacare."
5. The titles and link URLs for 125 articles listed under the "Publications" section remain **unchanged** across the two versions of the page. Minor differences to link text are not accounted for in this report.

**Note:** A cross-reference of all titles was completed to show that they were unchanged between the two versions, but link URLs were spot-checked for consistency. No changes were found between link URLs that were compared.

6. The “Affordable Care Act Research” version of the page included text that described each of the 125 research articles listed on the page, while the “Historical Research” version contains no descriptive text ([Screenshot 1.1](#)).
  - a. Below are four representative examples of articles listed under the “Publications” section of the “Affordable Care Act Research” version of the page, including any associated links and text:
    - [“Did Consumers Respond to Changes in Gross Premiums or to Changes in Premiums Net of Tax Credits When Making Health Plan Choices in the 2016 ACA Marketplaces](#)  
This research brief explains analyses conducted to explore whether consumers responded to changes in net or gross premiums when making health plan choices in the 2016 ACA Marketplaces.
    - [Medicaid Expansion Impacts on Insurance Coverage and Access to Care](#)  
This issue brief, which provides a literature review of the effects of Medicaid expansion, was first released in June 2016 and has been updated to include additional information and data from 2016. Specifically, the brief focuses on the effects of expansion on health coverage and access, affordability, financial security, and quality of care.
    - [Effects of the Affordable Care Act on Safety Net Hospitals](#)  
This study examines the early effects of the ACA on 10 safety net hospitals, both in states that expanded income eligibility for Medicaid under the ACA and those that did not. This primarily qualitative research study, was conducted between September 2013 and March 2016.
    - [National Health Service Corps: An Extended Analysis](#)  
This study continues the analysis of the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) begun in “Provider Retention in High Need Areas. Its objectives are to examine recent retention trends of NHSC program alumni in HPSAs (more frequent moves from “same HPSA” to any HPSA” than previous study); analyze the retention patterns of those NHSC participants who serve in Indian Health Service sites and compare them with that of all NHSC participants (retention in “same HPSA” and “any HPSA” similar to overall NHSC, and third examine the recruiting and retention effects of the program. Estimates of recruiting and retention effects indicate substantial increases in the number of FTE-years generated by NHSC in HPSAs.”

- b. Below are four representative articles listed under the “Publications” section of the “Historical Research” version of the page, including any associated links and text:
- [“Did Consumers Respond to Changes in Gross Premiums or to Changes in Premiums Net of Tax Credits When Making Health Plan Choices in the 2016 ACA Marketplaces](#)
  - [Medicaid Expansion Impacts on Insurance Coverage and Access to Care](#)
  - [Effects of the Affordable Care Act on Safety Net Hospitals](#)
  - [National Health Service Corps: An Extended Analysis”](#)
7. Many of the publications appear on other pages in the ASPE domain and some, but not all, appear with the descriptive text that was associated with them on the “Affordable Care Act Research” version of the page.
- a. As an example, several publications listed on the “Historical Research” page also appear on the “Content by keyword: Healthcare marketplace” page, some, but not all, with descriptive text:
- i. Descriptive text listed for the “Health Plan Choice and Premiums in the 2017 Health Insurance Marketplace” publication was also associated with this publication on the “Affordable Care Act Research” version of the page.
  - ii. Descriptive text associated with the “Health Insurance Marketplace Enrollment Projections for 2017” publication is not listed, but text was previously associated with this publication on the “Affordable Care Act Research” page. Text is also not listed on the [page](#) for the publication itself, where a PDF can be downloaded.
- b. **Note:** *A comprehensive analysis of the 125 publications has not been conducted to determine whether or not each appears on other webpages, and if so, whether or not each appears associated with descriptive text.*

**Screenshot 1.1:** A portion of the “Affordable Care Act Research” version of [Webpage 1](#) from the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine on [May 26, 2017](#), compared to a portion of the “Historical Research” version of the page on [July 10, 2017](#).



## Webpage 2: Health Coverage Research

- URL: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/health-coverage-research>
- First snapshot of page on Internet Archive's Wayback Machine on [July 10, 2017](#).
  - Link to page listed under "Topics" in website's top menu added between [June 30, 2017](#) and [July 6, 2017](#).
- Changes occurred between [July 10, 2017](#) and [December 7, 2017](#).
- No ASPE Web archives identified.

### **Webpage 2 Details:**

#### **Changes to content on the "Health Coverage Research" page:**

1. The "Health Coverage Research" page was live as early as July 10, 2017.
2. **Added** link "Health Coverage Research" with link URL <https://aspe.hhs.gov/health-coverage-research> under the "Topics" section of the top menu between [June 30, 2017](#) and [July 6, 2017](#).
3. On [July 10, 2017](#), when the first snapshot of the page was stored in the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, the page contained the following text:

#### **"Background**

Since January 20, 2017, ASPE has been developing research that analyzes the impact of Obamacare (the Affordable Care Act) and models changes that will create a market that lowers costs, increases quality, and gives more choices than Obamacare does.

- [Individual Market Premium Changes](#) This ASPE Data Point analyzes premium increases from two data series, comparing premium costs in individual market plans purchased by consumers in 2013 to exchange plans purchased in 2017 in order to better determine how much premiums have increased since the ACA's key provisions have taken effect."
4. Between [July 10, 2017](#) and [July 31, 2017](#), the following link and corresponding text were added to the page as the first bullet, above the content previously on the page:
    - ["Draft ASPE Analysis of the Consumer Freedom Amendment](#)  
The Department of Health and Human Services provides technical assistance on an ongoing basis to members of Congress during the legislative development process. This analysis, marked as "preliminary draft" was provided as technical assistance in response to an inquiry specifically related to the Consumer Freedom Amendment. The purpose of this analysis was to examine the potential impact of ACA and non-ACA plans, and a single or dual risk pool structure, as described by the Consumer Freedom Amendment on consumer behavior. It was performed by an HHS contractor on an accelerated timeline, and, given the narrow scope of the analysis, made a number of simplifying assumptions in the interest of time.

An unchanged ACA baseline is included for comparison purposes. It assumes a static individual market population, adequate issuer and consumer participation in a competitive insurance market, and assumes all states permit the sale of non-ACA plans alongside ACA plans (without state-specific requirements of issuers to make non-ACA plans more like ACA plans). The model assumes one plan design, though a number of benefit designs and actuarial values would likely be offered by issuers under the amendment.

For the sake of transparency and due to the interest in this proposal, HHS is publicly releasing this preliminary draft and the underlying assumptions contained therein.”

3. Between [July 31, 2017](#) and [December 7, 2017](#), the following link and corresponding text were added to the page as the first bullet, above the content previously on the page (as shown in [Screenshot 2.1](#)):

- [“Health Plan Choice and Premiums in the 2018 Federal Health Insurance Exchange](#)

This issue brief presents analysis of Qualified Health Plan (QHP) data in the individual market Exchanges for plan year 2018 for states that use the HealthCare.gov platform. It examines issuer participation, plan options and premiums for individuals enrolling in coverage through the Exchanges.”

**Screenshot 2.1:** The “Health Coverage Research” page from the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine on [May 31, 2018](#).



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