The Vaccine for Children program was established in 1994 in response to the measles outbreak of 1989, when uninsured children were unable to receive appropriate vaccinations at the recommended age of 12 to 15 months. The program has had major financial and social benefits. According to the Centers for Disease Control Director, Dr. Tom Frieden, the immunization program has saved $295 billion in direct medical costs and $1.38 trillion in total societal costs. The program is an essential mechanism in our health system that serves to prevent 322 million illnesses, 21 million hospital admissions, and 730,000 early deaths, he added.

These estimates were derived from an analysis of the National Immunization Survey, and also a cost-benefit model to enumerate preventable illnesses, hospitalizations, premature deaths, and financial incentives as a result of regular childhood vaccinations. Researchers reported results ranging from 3,000 cases of tetanus prevented to more than 70 million cases of measles prevented.

Recently, however, there has been an increase in measles outbreaks: the April 25 issue of Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report details 129 measles cases in 13 states so far this year. Dr. Anne Schuchat, director of the CDC’s National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, explains, today’s measles outbreaks are too often the result of people opting out [of vaccination] unlike the 1989 outbreaks. Schuchat draws attention to the cause of many of the recent cases as importation into areas of low vaccination. She goes on to emphasize hot spots and breeding grounds for these cases of measles, especially health care settings.

Schuchat and Frieden both urge routine childhood vaccination and alert parents traveling outside the US to seek vaccination for their children if the recommended schedule has not been completed. Within the United States, measles has been eliminated, that is, it is no longer circulating and endemic, though a combination of, importation and lower vaccination rates, are contributing to a resurgence of disease. Dr. Frieden says, [The program] has benefited everyone, because when vaccination rates go up we are all safer ‚we can't let our successes result in complacency." This is one area where we at ACSH are 100 percent behind Dr. Frieden.