

ORAL HEALTH AND LATINOS IN THE U.S.

The Issue

Oral health typically refers to the health of teeth, gums, and other areas of the mouth and throat. Oral diseases can range from cavities and mouth sores to oral cancers. However, oral health affects more than the teeth and mouth; it can impact an individual's mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Oral pain can negatively affect nutritional intake and sleep, contribute to missed days of school and work, and lead to additional health complications. Oral health has been linked to diabetes, heart disease, and adverse pregnancy outcomes including pre-term birth, low birth weight, and general infection during pregnancy.¹

Parallel to overall health disparities in the United States, people from racial or ethnic minority groups and those of lower socioeconomic status experience the greatest oral disease burden. Children from racial or ethnic minorities have significantly high levels of dental disease. Latinos, in particular, suffer disproportionately; migrant and agricultural workers and their children, typically from Mexico or Central America, bear the greatest burden.

Oral Health Disparities in the United States

- Adults aged 35 to 44 who do not have high school education experience untreated tooth decay and destructive periodontal (gum) disease nearly three times the rate of adults with at least some college education.²
- Children and adolescents living in poverty suffer twice as much tooth decay as their more affluent peers, and their disease is more likely to go untreated.³
- Children from families without medical insurance are 2.5 times less likely than insured children to receive dental care.³
- Children from families without dental insurance are 3 times more likely than insured children to have unmet dental needs.³

Latinos and Oral Health

- Latinos of all ages have the lowest dental utilization rate of all ethnic or racial groups; Mexican Americans have the lowest utilization rate and poorest oral health status of all Latino groups.⁴
- Mexican Americans aged 35 to 44 experience untreated tooth decay nearly twice as much as their white, non-Latino counterparts.²

- The oral health problems low-income Latinos experience, including mouth sores and abscessed teeth, are the results of poor preventative care and treatment.⁵

Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Workers

- In the U.S. 78% of agricultural workers are foreign-born: 75% are from Mexico, 2% are from Central America, and 1% are born elsewhere.⁶
- An agricultural worker's income ranges from \$10,000 to \$12,499 and the average total family income ranges from \$15,000 to \$17,499. 30% of all families have total incomes below the U.S. government's poverty guidelines.⁶
- Of all population groups in the U.S., migrant and agricultural workers have the greatest difficulty accessing health care, especially oral health care.⁴
- Migrant and seasonal agricultural workers in the U.S. of all ages have a level of oral health far worse than what is found in the general population. According to an analysis of migrant health center encounter data in 2007, dental care was one of the top three health problems migrant farmworkers were treated for.⁶
- A large percentage of migrant farmworkers and their children do not seek regular dental care and suffer from complications linked to dental caries or gum disease.⁶
- A 2007 study found that 80% of farmworkers had not received dental services within the past year. Of those who did, almost all were served in Mexico.⁷

Latino Children and Oral Health

- Currently, dental caries are the most prevalent childhood disease in the U.S.; Latino children—Mexican children in particular—have higher rates of early childhood caries (ECC) than any other ethnic or racial group.⁴
- Latino children are the most likely to report having experienced toothache and the least likely to have ever seen a dentist or to have had a dental visit in the previous year. Among children aged 12 to 17, 25.1% of Latinos had not seen a dentist within the previous 12 months, compared to 9.1% of non-Latino whites.⁷
- Among the children of farmworkers in the U.S., dental caries is the most common untreated health problem; at least 50% of farmworkers' children have at least one and an average of three carious teeth.⁸

Barriers to Dental Care among Latinos in the United States

Similar to barriers of other health services, there are a number of barriers to dental care among Latinos. Latinos have high uninsurance rates, face cultural and linguistic barriers to care, lack providers where they reside, and lack knowledge about preventive services. The high cost of dental services and the lack of insurance, coupled with low incomes among Latinos, constitute major barriers to dental care access.²

- **Income:** Approximately 22% of Latinos live below the federal poverty line; those from Mexico and Central America have the lowest incomes.⁹
- **Lack of Insurance:** Latinos have the lowest rates of health insurance of all ethnic groups; 40% of Mexicans and Mexican Americans lacked health insurance in 2006.⁹ Lacking dental insurance is more common than lacking medical insurance; over 108 million Americans (the majority of them Latinos) are without dental coverage.⁹
- **Lack of Providers:** In a 2004 survey, the American Dental Association estimated that while Latinos comprise 15% of the U.S. population, only 3.4% of professional and active dentists were Latino. In California, one out of every three Californians is Latino, but only one out of every twenty California dentists is Latino.¹⁰

Conclusion

Latinos in the U.S. constitute an underserved population with many unmet health needs and numerous barriers to care. The poor oral health status of Latinos demands attention and quick action; the link between oral and general health raises concerns for the overall health of the Latino population. Latino children in particular have the worst oral health of all children in the United States. As the fastest growing young population in the U.S., their health, especially oral health, will undoubtedly impact the health of the entire nation.

Public Policy Recommendations

- Emphasize the importance of preventive care through outreach, media, and oral health education among Latino populations in culturally and linguistically appropriate manners.
- Increase awareness of the importance of oral health throughout the lifecycle, beginning with prenatal care.
- Increase dental coverage and address barriers to health services, with special attention to migrant and seasonal agricultural workers and their children.
- Inform Medi-Cal, Healthy Families and Children's Health Initiative enrollees about their dental benefits.

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