

ADEA Data Brief

Examining America's Dental Safety Net

ADEA Office of Policy, Research and Diversity

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DENTAL EDUCATION

"A Silent Epidemic" of Oral Diseases Is Affecting Our Most Vulnerable Citizens

At least 74 million Americans had no form of dental coverage in 2016.¹ Adults continue to face financial barriers to dental care. For children, the financial barriers are fewer. As a result of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) and its impact on the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), dental insurance among low-income children has been expanding steadily.² Many vulnerable and underserved populations, including low-income individuals, the elderly, racial and ethnic minorities and medically compromised persons, face substantial barriers to accessing dental care. Examples of oral health disparities include:

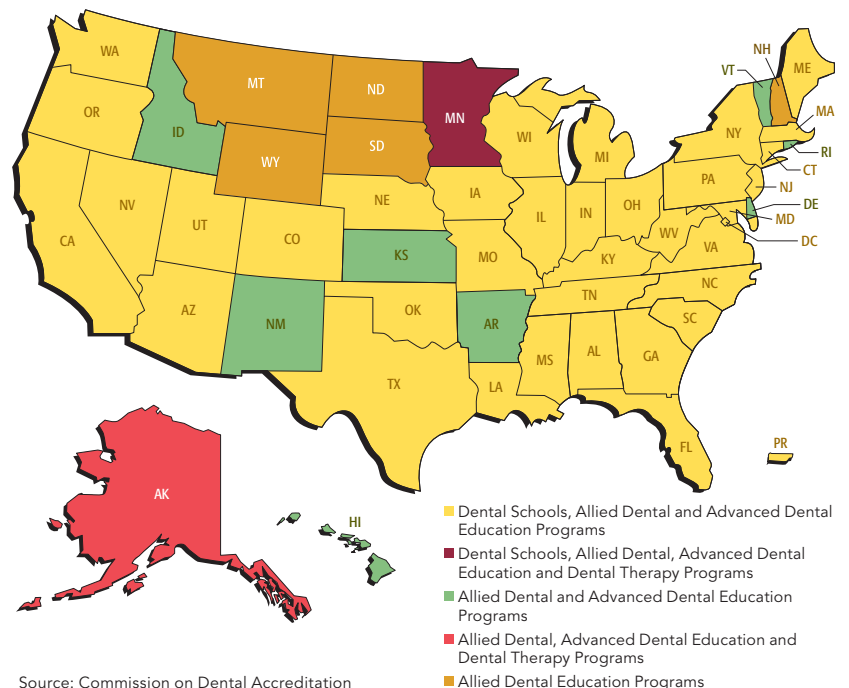
- **Children:** Untreated dental caries (cavities) was more than twice as high for Hispanic children (8.8%) compared with non-Hispanic white children.³
- **Adolescents:** Approximately, 21% of non-Hispanic black adolescents ages 13–15 have untreated caries compared with non-Hispanic white adolescents (13.4%).³
- **Adults:** Adults with incomes less than 100% of the federal poverty level (FPL) are three times more likely to have untreated caries.⁴
- **Seniors:** Of seniors age 65 and older with incomes below 100% FPL, 37% do not have any teeth compared with 16% of those with incomes at or above 200% FPL.^{2,3}

The Dental Safety Net—Addressing the Epidemic

The dental safety net refers to the structures supporting populations facing considerable barriers to accessing dental care. This typically involves individuals without private insurance and/or those who are unable to pay for services out of pocket. The dental safety net is comprised of practitioners, payment programs and facilities that provide clinical, nonclinical and support services.

Figure 1: U.S. Dental Safety Net

In addition to dental schools, allied dental education, dental therapy and advanced dental education programs are part of the dental safety net in the United States. Each state has its own network of academic institutions.



It includes Medicaid, CHIP, federally qualified health centers (FQHCs), school-based health centers and academic dental institutions, among other entities. If not for dental safety net providers, millions more Americans would be without access to dental care.

Academic Dental Institutions as Dental Safety Net Providers

Academic dental institutions are dental safety net providers in the United States for various populations. Additionally, many academic dental institutions serve as one of the larger Medicaid and CHIP providers within their respective states.

- **Service:** Academic dental institutions provide services to people who lack access to dental care, whether due to economics, lack of dental

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insurance or residence in a health professional shortage area (HPSA) (visit datawarehouse.hrsa.gov/ExportedMaps/HPSAs/HGDWMapGallery_BHPR_HPSAs_DC.pdf for a map, or datawarehouse.hrsa.gov for more reports).

- **Community Involvement:** In communities across the country, academic dental institutions are at the center of the delivery of dental care to the economically disadvantaged, the elderly, the uninsured, under-insured and those residing in rural or urban oral health deserts.

Services Provided by Academic Dental Institutions

Dental and allied dental students provide direct services to patients under the close supervision of faculty and residents, nationwide (Figure 1).

- In 2016–2017, predoctoral dental students provided care during more than 3,100,000 dental visits.⁵
- Of the 3,124,500 dental visits, 2,656,542 were provided in dental school clinics and 467,958 in extramural dental school facilities.⁵
- Academic dental institutions are a resource to specialty dental services that are not generally accessible to Medicaid and low-income uninsured patients.⁶
- Partnerships between dental institutions and FQHCs are pivotal in building the pipeline of new dentists practicing in underserved areas through externships and dental residency rotations.⁷

Are We Ready to Do More?

The needs of the dental safety net are multifaceted: to provide adequate resources to support the dental safety net providers, develop policies that will facilitate access and delivery of dental care, and educate the next generation of dental providers to meet the growing demand. Access to dental care is equally important to the young, the old, the medically compromised and citizens who reside in dental HPSAs.



Academic dental institutions provide services to people who lack access to dental care, whether due to economics, lack of dental insurance or residence in a health professional shortage area (HPSA).

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