

Dental Health and Access to Care among Rural Children:

A National and State Portrait



 *South Carolina*
Rural Health
Research Center

At the Heart of Public Health Policy

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Executive Summary

Although children's dental health in the U.S. has improved over recent decades, a subset of children continues to suffer dental disease severe enough to constitute a public health problem. The Chartbook that follows examines dental health status, use of preventive services, and dental insurance among rural and urban children. The Chartbook provides information specific to rural children, and in particular rural minority children, not available in similar detail from other sources. This information can be used at the state level for program planning and assessment. Key findings are presented below:

Condition of Teeth:

- Overall, rural children were less likely than urban children to have excellent teeth, as described by their parents (41.0% versus 42.9%).
- Within white and black children, differences based on residence are more pronounced.
 - Among rural white children, 44.2% are reported to have excellent teeth, versus 50.8% of urban white children.
 - Similarly, only 30.4% of rural black children are reported to have excellent teeth, versus 34.9% of urban black children.
- Children with special health care needs are less likely than children without such needs to have excellent teeth (39.0% versus 43.4%). This disparity is greater among rural children. Only 35.1% of rural children with special health care needs, versus 39.8% of similar urban children, have excellent teeth.
- Low income families are more likely to report that their children have excellent teeth. Rural low income children, however, are slightly advantaged when compared to urban children. Among families at less than 200% of the Federal Poverty Level, 32.1% of rural children versus 30.2% of urban children have excellent teeth.
- The availability of primary care and dental providers is associated with better teeth. However, the effects of rurality do not play out evenly across all categories. In whole county primary care and dental Health Professions Shortage Areas (HPSAs), and for counties that do not have HPSA status, rural children are less likely than urban children to have excellent teeth. In counties that are part-county primary care or dental HPSAs, however, rural children are slightly more likely to have excellent teeth.

Children with No Dental Visits in the Preceding Year:

Across the US, 22.5% of parents reported that their children had received no dental care in the preceding year.

- A larger proportion of rural than urban children had made no dental visits in the previous year (23.4% versus 22.3%).
- Hispanic children were at greatest risk for having no dental care during the preceding year. Among rural children, 31.9% of Hispanics had no dental visit, followed by 25.8% of rural black children, 23.1% of "other" children, and 22.2% of white children.

- Children who lacked dental insurance were markedly more likely to have made no dental visits (34.6% versus 18.2%). Among children who lack dental insurance, rural and urban children did not differ statistically with 33.4% of rural uninsured children and 34.9% of urban uninsured children lacking a visit.

Preventive Dental Care:

The majority of parents in the United States reported that their child had received a preventive dental visit during the past year (72.2%).

- A smaller proportion of rural children (70.7%) than urban (72.5%) had visited a dentist for preventive care in the previous year.
- Across rural children, Hispanic children were least likely to have had a preventive dental visit (58.0%), followed by black (64.7%), other race/ethnicity (67.6%), and white (73.0%).
- Preventive visits varied sharply with insurance status, with only 58.1% of rural uninsured children receiving this service, versus 75.9% of rural insured children.

Dental Insurance:

Given the strong links between dental insurance and receipt of dental services noted previously, rural disparities in insurance are particularly relevant to children's dental health.

- Rural children were less likely than urban children to have dental insurance (74.2% versus 78.4%). Further, the likelihood that a child would be insured declined steadily as the county of residence became more rural. Thus, 75.9% of children in micropolitan counties had dental insurance, versus 72.8% of children in small rural counties, and 69.9% of children in small, remote rural counties.
- Among rural children, black children were most likely to have dental insurance (77.0%), followed by other race/ethnicity children (75.3%), white children (74.7%) and Hispanic children (64.9%).