

At-a-Glance Disparities in Access to Pediatric Dental Care

1. Use of dental services: The percentage of children who use care is unclear but is far below recommended levels. The National Health Interview Survey reports that nearly three-quarters of children have a visit while the Medical Expenditure Panel Survey shows that only about 40% do so.
2. Coverage: There are 2.6 children lacking dental coverage for every child lacking health coverage. Medicaid for children includes comprehensive dental coverage. Prior to SCHIP, children of the “working poor” (between 100-200%FPL) had the lowest rates of dental insurance. Having health insurance increases use of dental services even in absence of dental coverage.
3. Dental Access Disparities: Use is closely related to income, parental education, race/ethnicity, age and sex. Groups of children with highest levels of tooth decay have the least likelihood of having a dental visit and the fewest dental visits if care is obtained.
4. Dental Access and Income: Use increases with increasing income. Children in poverty have half the odds of a dental visit as high income children¹ (30% versus 60%). Among those who use dental services, the number of visits in a year increases with income.
5. Dental Access and Parental Education: Use of dental services increases with increasing parental education. Children of parents with some or no high school education are half as likely to have a dental visit as those whose parents are college graduates (26% versus 57%). Among those who use dental services, the number of visits in a year also increases with increasing parental education.
6. Dental Access and Race/Ethnicity: Children of color are less likely to see a dentist in a year than white children (29% versus 49%) and experience fewer dental visits when they do obtain care.
7. Dental Access and Age: Six to ten year olds have highest rates of dental visits (55%) while preschoolers have the lowest rates (21%). Use of dental services drops off somewhat in adolescents (51%).
8. Dental Access and Sex: At all ages, girls have slightly higher use of dental services than boys.
9. Children vary by extent of needed services: Even among Medicaid beneficiaries, 80% had only modest dental treatment needs, 15% had moderate needs, and 5% had catastrophic treatment needs in a given year. (Based on California Medicaid data)

¹ Children in poverty live in families with a gross annual income for a family of four of \$16,500. High income children live in families with a gross annual income of \$66,000.