



Tooth Dismay: *a NEW LOOK at the DATA on CHILDREN'S ORAL HEALTH in NORTH CAROLINA*

Executive Summary

Many families across North Carolina could tell you it's a challenge to get to a dentist. Newly available data about children & pregnant adults in the state's Medicaid program uncover the increased barriers to oral health care faced by people of color and people in rural parts of the state.

Did you Know?

Tooth decay is the leading chronic disease of childhood.

Although dental caries (also called cavities) are largely preventable, they remain the most common chronic disease of children aged 6 to 11 years and adolescents aged 12 to 19 years.

Tooth decay is four times more common than asthma among adolescents aged 14 to 17 years.

Source: US Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC)

In 2019, children enrolled in Medicaid receiving at least one preventive dental service:
 Only **25%** of infants ages 1-2
56% of children ages 3-5



Everyone should have the opportunity to lead a healthy life. Preventive health care is key – and that includes oral health. Unfortunately, for many families across North Carolina, dental health care is just fantasy.

In 2020, 98% of North Carolina counties faced a shortage of dental health professionals, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

Until now, it has been difficult to track and evaluate the specific problems that North Carolinians face with respect to their oral health, due to lack of data. However, the NC Division of Health Benefits recently made comprehensive data available for the first time.

These data cover people enrolled in Medicaid and NC Health Choice (CHIP) – representing about half of all children and pregnant people in the state.



Racial & Ethnic Disparities in Children's Care

Hispanic/Latino, white and Asian children enrolled in Medicaid more likely to receive at least one oral health or dental service compared to Black, American Indian and Hawaiian or Pacific Islander children were in 2019.





NC Child's analysis of these new data found some striking indicators for the state's oral health:

- Very few pregnant people enrolled in Medicaid are using the dental health benefit. This is troubling because oral health during and after pregnancy can have significant impacts on young children's health.
- Children in rural, eastern counties are much less likely to get the dental health care they need than children in other parts of the state.
- Among children enrolled in Medicaid, there are significant differences by race and ethnicity in who gets access to dental health care. Two-thirds of white children enrolled in Medicaid received at least one oral health service in 2019, compared to just over half of Black and American Indian children, for example.
- The increasing rate of children's hospital emergency department visits for dental health problems signals a growing gap in preventive care.

These data points underscore how many barriers are keeping children and families across the state from getting oral health care. Children with special health care needs, who often need more specialized oral health care, face even greater struggles. COVID-19 has added new challenges. And in 2021, Medicaid transformation has made navigating the system even more confusing for families.

only **7%** of
Pregnant
People
enrolled in
Medicaid used their
dental care benefit
in 2019.



Did you Know?

Preventive oral health services are included in Goal 2 of the **NC Early Childhood Action Plan**.

North Carolina is committed to ensuring access to high-quality health services for young kids. Integrating oral health screenings at well-child visits is an important step to meet this goal.

This report dives into the data and presents some solutions and policy recommendations. There is much that North Carolina's leaders can do to ensure preventive care for children and pregnant individuals in the state's Medicaid and NC Health Choice (CHIP) programs.



What does dental care look like in your county?

Readers can also explore the data through the interactive data dashboard on our website at:

www.ncchild.org/oralhealth

