

ADEA Policy Brief

Examining America's Dental Safety Net

ADEA | THE VOICE OF
DENTAL EDUCATION

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

Over 108 million American children, adults and seniors lack dental insurance and thus access to dental care. The need for dental care in the United States is not debatable. It is well-documented that 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 (26%) and for non-Hispanic black adolescents ages 13-15 (25%) compared with non-Hispanic white children and adolescents respectively.
- **Adults:** Adults with incomes below 100% of the federal poverty level are three times more likely to have untreated dental problems.
- **Seniors:** Of seniors aged 65–74, 23% have severe periodontal (gum) disease, and of those age 65 years and older, nearly 30% do not have any teeth.

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.

It includes Medicaid, the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), federally qualified health centers, 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 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).

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 SCHIP 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 insurance or residence in a health professional shortage area (HPSA).
- **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

In academic dental institutions, dental and allied dental students provide direct services to patients under the close supervision of faculty and residents.

- In 2010–2011, predoctoral dental students provided care during more than 3,000,000 dental visits.
- Of the 3,065,499 dental visits, 2,591,211 were provided in dental school clinics and 474,288 in extramural dental school facilities.
- Dental institutions provide more than \$74 million each year in uncompensated dental care and procedures.

Download the full ADEA report, "Examining America's Dental Safety Net," at adea.org/WhitePapers/DentalSafetyNet.



Are We Ready to Do More?

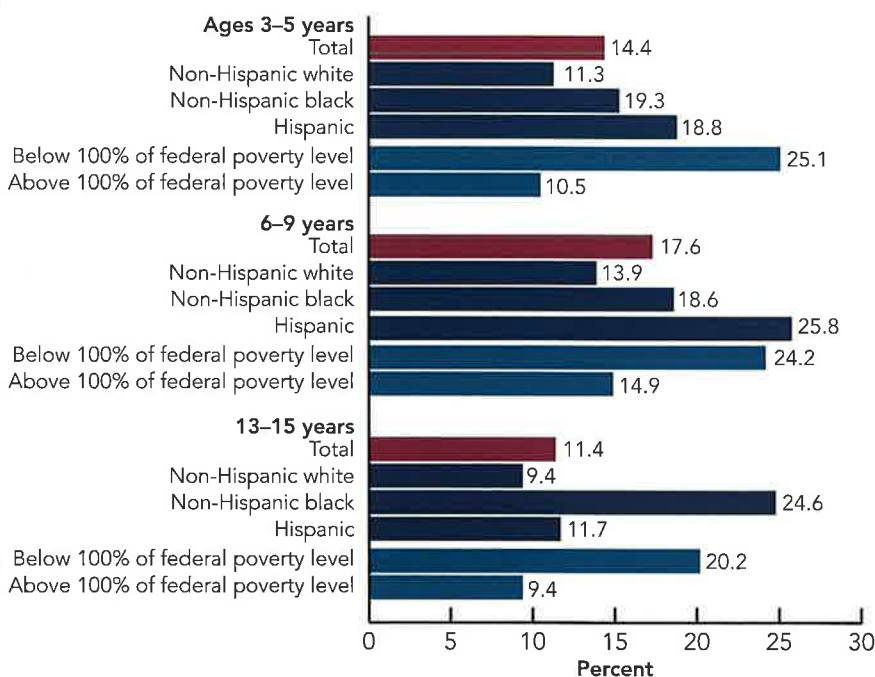
The needs of the dental safety net are multi-faceted: to provide adequate resources to support the dental safety net providers, develop policies that will facilitate access and delivery of dental care, and educate the next generation of dental providers to meet the growing demand. Access to dental care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

As a nation, we must ask ourselves: Are we ready to do more?

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Prevalence of Untreated Dental Caries

Cavities among children and adolescents, by age, race and ethnicity, and poverty level: United States, 2009–2010.

The adage regarding oral health is that the mouth reflects overall health and well-being and is inextricably linked to the rest of the human body. Oral diseases are progressive and can be fatal.