

# 1 in 4 Californian children have never seen a dentist, study finds

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Lack of dental care continues to be a significant problem for American children, who miss about 1.6 million school days each year due to dental disease.

A new study published in the July issue of the journal *Health Affairs* reveals that in California, nearly 25 percent of [children](#) have never seen a [dentist](#) and that disparities exist across race, ethnicity and type of insurance when it comes to the duration between dental care visits.

The study, "Racial and [Ethnic Disparities](#) in Dental Care for Publicly Insured Children," examines barriers to dental care among California children age 11 and under, using data from the 2005 California Health Interview Survey. The study contains data on nearly 11,000 children.

Researchers Nadereh Pourat, of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, and Len Finocchio, of the California HealthCare Foundation, found that Latino and African American children with all types of insurance were less likely than Asian American and white children to have visited the dentist in the previous six months — or even in their entire lifetime.

Similarly, researchers found that Latino and African American children in public insurance programs, including Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), went to the dentist less often than white and Asian American children with the same insurance coverage. Overall, children with private insurance saw a dentist more often than

those with Medicaid or CHIP.

"The findings suggest that having insurance isn't always enough," said Pourat, Ph.D., director of research planning at the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. "We need to address the other barriers that keep children from getting the help they need."

The authors note the findings raise concerns about Medicaid's ability to address disparities in dental care access. Ultimately, they observe, more strategic efforts are necessary to overcome systemic barriers to care, including raising reimbursement rates paid to dentists who serve the Medicaid population and increasing the number of participating Medicaid providers.

"These findings indicate that many poor children in California do not make routine dental visits or simply never receive any dental care," said Finocchio, Dr.P.H., senior program officer at the California HealthCare Foundation. "Even with Medicaid coverage, there are tremendous barriers to getting services."

Despite the disparities, the authors say, having any form of dental insurance significantly increases the odds of seeing a dentist on a regular basis. The study showed that 54 percent of privately insured children and 27 percent of publicly insured children had seen the dentist during the previous six months, compared with 12 percent of children without dental coverage.

"The data tell us that [Medicaid](#) and CHIP have improved children's ability to get [dental care](#)," Pourat said. "However, both programs need to do more to reduce disparities."

Provided by University of California - Los Angeles

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