

An Overview of the Dental Health Care Provider Shortage

Accessing dental services is particularly hard for people from low-income households. According to the Journal of the American Dental Association, only 27.8 percent of low-income Americans visit a dentist each year.ⁱ The National Rural Health Association found that residents of large metropolitan areas will likely have an easier time finding a dentist because there is a higher dentist-to-population ratio in urban areas, compared to rural counties.ⁱⁱ

The dentist-to-population ratio has been declining for decades, and, by 2020, this ratio is projected to drop to approximately one dentist for every 1,818 people.ⁱⁱⁱ While the number of dentists is expected to contract, the number of dental hygienists has been steadily increasing.^{iv} However, in underserved and rural areas, the need for both dentists and dental hygienists greatly outstrips the number of dental health professionals practicing in these regions.^v Dental hygienists may also have a harder time finding employment in underserved areas, as dentists are less likely to employ dental hygienists in practices that are smaller, have lower incomes (i.e., practices with sliding-scale fees), and have less demand for preventive care.^{vi} In addition, although many states have liberalized the scope of practice for dental hygienists in recent years, most states still do not allow dental hygienists to practice independently.^{vii} Thus dental hygienists are not able to serve as replacements for dentists in underserved areas.

The National Health Service Corps: Connecting Dental Health Professionals to Communities with Limited Access to Care

A lack of dental care can lead to tooth decay, gum disease, and other conditions. If left untreated, gum disease may contribute to more serious health problems including cardiovascular disease, bacterial pneumonia, and type 2 diabetes.^{viii}

The National Health Service Corps (NHSC) builds healthy communities by supporting qualified medical, dental, and behavioral health care providers working in areas of the United States with limited access to care. As of October 2010, there are over 1,000 dentists and dental hygienists serving in the NHSC.^{ix}

Through the NHSC Loan Repayment Program, fully trained and licensed dentists and dental hygienists may receive an initial, tax-free loan repayment award up to \$60,000 for two years of service. Continued service provides the opportunity to pay off all dental profession student loans.

In addition to the NHSC Loan Repayment Program, the NHSC Scholarship Program pays tuition and living expenses while students train to become a dentist. To receive an NHSC scholarship, students must be enrolled in an accredited dental program. Upon graduation, NHSC Scholars serve as dental practitioners in an NHSC-approved site of greatest need for two to four years, depending on their contract.



Where Dental Care is Needed Most

Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) are defined regionally by population group or medical need. They can be urban or rural and are classified by a lack of primary care practitioners, dentists, and mental health specialists. All NHSC-approved sites are located in HPSAs and currently, there are more than 12,000 sites.

- There are 4,670 dental HPSAs in the United States with an estimated underserved population of 33,933,896;
- Most of these underserved areas (65 percent) are in non-metropolitan regions;
- The total number of dentists needed to remove the HPSA designation for all underserved areas is 7,219.^x

Barriers to Entering the General Dentistry Workforce: The Lure of Specialization

As with other health professionals, dentists are also showing an increasing tendency to specialize instead of going into general practice. In 1984, about 20 percent of dental school graduates went on to become orthodontists or oral surgeons. In 2009, that number was closer to 33 percent.^{xi} As in other health care specialties, specializing yields a higher salary: in May 2009, the average salary for general salaried dentists was \$156,850 while the average salary for orthodontists was \$206,190.^{xii,xiii}

Barriers to Entering General Dentistry: Student Debt Burden

Student debt is playing a substantial role in the future employment plans of dental students. According to a 2009 American Dental Education Association (ADEA) survey, 69 percent of dental students who were planning on going into private practice immediately after graduation said that educational debt factored very much into their decision.^{xiv}

According to the 2008 American Dental Association survey of dental graduates, the average dental school student graduated with \$170,000 dollars worth of student loan debt:

- Average tuition for dental school ranges from \$26,661 to \$42,294 per year.^{xv}
- Dental students graduated from public institutions in 2009 with an average debt of approximately \$150,000 and over \$200,000 from private institutions.^{xvi}
- Tuition and fees at dental schools increased 91 percent for residents and 80 percent for non-residents from 1999 to 2008.^{xvii}

Additional Information

To learn more about the NHSC and the dedicated oral health practitioners who provide service in all 50 states and territories, visit NHSC.hrsa.gov.

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