

## Dental Health in Wisconsin: Crisis in Unmet Needs

### Wisconsin Statistics

5,472,299 - State Population

999,680 - School-aged children  
(grades K-12, 5-17 years)

376,851- Children enrolled in  
Medicaid, enrolled at least 1 month  
of the year

### Wisconsin – Oral Health Profile

3,873,568 - Population served by  
public water system

3,475 - Number of dentists in state

36 - Number of community-based  
low-income dental clinics

2 - Number of agencies with a  
dental program

89.4% of people on public water  
systems that receive fluoridated  
water

74.5% of the population visited the  
dentist or dental clinic within the  
past year

56% - Percentage of dentists  
enrolled in Medicaid

47.0% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students have  
one or more sealants on their  
permanent first molar teeth

30.8% of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students with  
untreated tooth decay

*Center for Disease Control, National  
Oral Health Surveillance System, Oral  
Health Information [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)*

Good oral health care should begin at birth as part of overall health care. Unfortunately, for far too many Americans, oral health care is a luxury.

For children, cavities are a common problem that begins at an early age. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry recommends that all children visit the dentist within six months of the eruption of the first primary tooth and no later than after the first birthday.

Tooth decay affects nearly a fifth of 2-4-year-olds, more than half of 8-year olds, and more than three-fourths of 17-year olds. Hardest hit are low-income children. **About half of all cavities among low-income children go untreated.** Untreated cavities may cause pain, dysfunction, absence from school, underweight, and poor appearance-problems that can greatly reduce a child's capacity to succeed in life.

In 2002, 15 percent of children without health insurance needed dental care but did not receive it for financial reasons, compared with 4 percent of children covered by private insurance and 8 percent of those covered by public insurance (mostly Medicaid).

In 2002, 37 percent of children from poor families and 33 percent of children from near-poor families had not been to the dentist within the past year, compared with 20 percent from non-poor families. This same pattern is also true for children with unmet dental needs.

Tooth decay is also a problem for adults, especially for the increasing number of older adults who have retained most of their teeth. Despite this increase in tooth retention, tooth loss remains a problem among older adults.

- ◆ Almost 3 of every 10 adults over age 65 have lost all of their teeth, primarily because of tooth decay and gum disease, which affects about 25% of U.S. adults.
- ◆ Less than 2 out of every 10 older adults are covered by private dental insurance. Poor elderly have a higher percentage of untreated decayed teeth.
- ◆ Twenty-three percent of 65 to 74-year olds have severe periodontal disease. People at the lowest socioeconomic levels have more severe periodontal disease.

Tooth loss has more than cosmetic effects – it may contribute to nutrition problems by limiting the types of food that a person can eat. Being disabled, medically compromised, homebound, or institutionalized increases the likelihood of serious dental problems and limited access to dental care.

Many children and adults go without measures that have been proven effective in preventing oral diseases and reducing costs. For example, more than 100 million Americans still do not have access to water that contains enough fluoride to protect their teeth. Adequate fluoridation of public water supplies, the most cost-effective disease prevention strategy, is needed in the four counties served by Couleecap: Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon. According to the Center for Disease Control, *\*Oral Health Data Systems, My Water's Fluoride*, there are 12 water systems listed as supplying fluoridated water in these four counties. (\*Information has been compiled from various sources. Verify information with local utility or health department before making any health based decisions.)

A CDC study found that, in communities with more than 20,000 residents, every \$1 invested in community water fluoridation yields \$38 in savings each year from fewer cavities treated. The Task Force on Community Prevention Services, which strongly recommends community water fluoridation, concluded that tooth decay in American children has decreased by 30%-50% because of fluoridation.

Another way for children to reduce the risk for having cavities is by dental sealants – a plastic coating applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth – a safe, effective way to prevent cavities. In some cases, sealants can even stop tooth decay that has already started.

The *Coulee Outlook 2004, The Coulee Region Needs Assessment Report of Couleecap, Inc.* was conducted to determine needs of low-income people in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties. The largest number of surveys went to low-income households throughout our four-county service area; of the 546 surveys returned, 440 of them were from low-income households, which included 1,106 people (children and adults). Demographic information from these households includes:

- ◆ Of the 440 households, 300 have income levels below the 2003 federal poverty line; 240 have income from wage and/or self-employment; 216 are renters; and 122 are single-parent households.
- ◆ Of the 1,106 people, 443 are under age 18; 92 are over age 65; 192 work full-time; 201 have a disability; and 382 don't have medical insurance.

Households were asked to rate problem areas and most significant concerns in their household. Of the 440 low-income household surveys returned, Health Concerns ranked number 1.

- ◆ 48% listed cost of health insurance as the top concern within the Health Concerns problem area.
- ◆ 43% listed cost of health care as the second top concern within the Health Concerns problem area.

Within the Health Concerns area cost and availability of dental care was listed as a problem.

- ◆ 186 listed cost of dental care as a serious to very serious problem.
- ◆ 132 listed availability of dental care as a serious to very serious problem.

According to the Wisconsin Dental Association, **Wisconsin ranks in the lowest five states in the nation with regard to the percentage of Medicaid funds that are spent on dental care for adults and children.** The state and federal governments spend about \$35 million annually on dental programs – less than one percent of the \$4.4 billion spent each year on all of the state MA programs.

Governor Jim Doyle recently announced his Task Force to Improve Access to Oral Health. **“Tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease - five times more prevalent than asthma - and is largely common among low-income children. Through my KidsFirst Initiative, we’re not only working to improve prevention and education efforts, we’re increasing coverage of dental care and access to dental services.”**

What can we do?

- ◆ Promote oral health in communities, schools, and health care settings.
- ◆ Support research to strengthen prevention efforts in communities.
- ◆ Encourage your local dentists to accept Medicaid patients.
- ◆ Encourage effective use of fluoride.
- ◆ Promote the use of dental sealants.

The Wisconsin Medical Society has resources available for physicians and the public on free clinics and charity care in the State of Wisconsin. They recommend that patients call their city, county, or tribal social service agency to find out specific information about dental and medical care available for free or at a reduced rate in their area. [www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org](http://www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org)

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c) 3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our four-county service area includes Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties in Wisconsin. For more than 38 years, we have been helping low-income people build on their strengths and become more self-sufficient. We operate over 50 programs in the areas of housing, family and youth services, and emergency services.

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References:

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