Parental Perceptions of Barriers to Oral Health Care for Children With Special Needs

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INTRODUCTION

About 14.6 million children in the US had a special health care need in 2012.1 Families of children with special needs have identified oral health as the most common unmet health care need for their child.2 Incorporating the consumer perspective on access to oral health services is important in the design of public policies and programs to improve the oral health status of the underserved. This study objective was to highlight unique access barriers for children, including specific barriers for children living in rural or other underserved geographic areas, underrepresented minorities, and children with special needs.

METHODS

Data Source:
- Consumer Survey of Health Care Access fielded by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) in 2019. This is an online survey conducted biannually using a national panel of about 1.2 million adults.

Populations Studied:
- The online survey sample of parents was drawn from a representative national panel of about 1.2 million adults. The analytic study sample included 1,785 parents with children under 18 years of age who were living in the household at the time of survey. Among the survey cohort of 1,785 children, 96% had a diagnosed emotional, development, or behavioral health condition.

Principal Findings:
- About 73.9% of children with special needs were reported needing dental services and the majority (87.4%) “always” obtained dental care when needed during the past 12 months. However, 12.6% received needed dental care “sometimes” (12.3%) or “never” (0.3%). While the majority (65.6%) of children with special needs had no reported difficulties in obtaining dental care as often as needed, more than 1 in 3 children had one or more access barriers. Among these children, the most commonly identified barriers were lack of dental insurance (24.5%), difficulty finding dentists who accepted their insurance (24.4%), issues related to cost (19.2%), insurance not paying for the services needed (19.2%), and issues related to transport (12.8%).

Study Sample:
- Oral health data were collected from 1,785 parent respondents with 3,070 children under 18 years of age who were living in the household.
- About 1 in 4 (children >760, 26.4%) in the survey sample had a special need as reported by their parents (Definition of a special need: a developmental, emotional, or behavioral health condition requiring treatment or counseling).

Data Analyses:
- Descriptive statistical analyses (ie, chi-square test; linear trend; relative risk, 95% CI) were used to estimate associations between children’s need for dental services and barriers to obtaining dental care.
- Survey data were weighted to better represent the characteristics of the US adult population as measured by the US Census Bureau.

RESULTS

About 73.9% of children with special needs were reported needing dental services and the majority (87.4%) “always” obtained dental care when needed during the past 12 months. However, 12.6% received needed dental care “sometimes” (12.3%) or “never” (0.3%). While the majority (65.6%) of children with special needs had no reported difficulties in obtaining dental care as often as needed, more than 1 in 3 children had one or more access barriers. Among these children, the most commonly identified barriers were lack of dental insurance (24.5%), difficulty finding dentists who accepted their insurance (24.4%), issues related to cost (19.2%), insurance not paying for the services needed (19.2%), and issues related to transport (12.8%).

The most commonly identified barriers in obtaining dental care for children with special needs were:
- Lack of dental insurance (24.5%)
- Difficulty finding dentists who accepted the child insurance (24.2%)
- Issues related to cost of dental care (19.2%)

Utilization of Oral Health Services in the Past Year
- About 73.9% of children with special needs were reported needing dental services and the majority (87.4%) “always” obtained dental care when needed during the past 12 months. However, 12.6% received needed dental care “sometimes” (12.3%) or “never” (0.3%).

Children with special needs who lived in urban or rural areas and/or did not have an established dental home were significantly less likely to receive needed dental care than other children with special needs.

CONCLUSIONS

The most prominent barriers to dental care among children with special needs are lack of insurance, although other factors included cost of dental care, timeliness of care, and transportation. The associations between financial and structural barriers to care and utilization of needed dental services among children with special health needs suggest that present efforts to link underserved populations with oral health services remain important policy initiatives.

REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS


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ABSTRACT

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• American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry. Policy on Transitioning from a Pediatric-Centered to an Adult-Centered Dental Home for Individuals with Special Health Care Needs. AAPD, Revised 2016.


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• RESULTS (cont.)

- Children with special needs who had to travel >60 minutes to a dental provider or whose parents were not able to schedule a dental visit had difficulties in seeing a dentist as often as their child needed. These children were significantly less likely to receive needed dental care than other children.

• RESULTS (cont.)

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