

ABSTRACT

Research Objective: To describe consumer perspectives on factors that influenced their access to and utilization of oral health services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods: This study is based on a nationally representative survey of consumers fielded by the Association of American Medical Colleges in 2020-2021. The study sample consisted of 3,505 adults aged 18 years and older who reported a need for oral health services in the past year.

Principal Findings: Nearly half (46.6%) of respondents always received dental care as needed, while 33.5% only sometimes received oral health services and 19.9% did not receive any care. Respondents that were significantly less likely ($P<.001$) to always receive dental care when needed included underrepresented minorities, the unemployed, the uninsured or with Medicaid benefits, and respondents with lower education attainment and/or household income. Proportionally fewer respondents who reported high (21.7%) or medium (28.6%) levels of concern about the pandemic always obtained oral services when needed compared to those who had lower levels of concerns (53.5%; $P<.001$). Survey respondents who indicated that they experienced barriers to care (ie, cost) were also more likely to also indicate not getting needed dental care in the past year than those with no difficulties ($P<.001$).

Implications: The results of this research study highlight COVID-19 impacts on access to oral health care that disproportionately affect the underserved. The study findings can enable development of effective policy strategies to address key access barriers.

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INTRODUCTION

- The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted the oral health workforce, dramatically affecting their ability to deliver oral health services
- After closure in March 2020, about 99% of dental offices were re-opened by July 2020, with 90% of offices at pre-pandemic staffing levels
 - Yet, a study of patients showed that only 23% of respondents had visited a dentist during the same period
- Analysis of recent trends shows a steady decrease in utilization of oral health services among adults across all socioeconomic strata, with cost being the most reported reason for the decline
- Research objective:** To assess how the pandemic affected oral health status and utilization of oral health services and highlight unique factors that disproportionately affected vulnerable and underserved populations

METHODS

Data Source

- OHWRRC researchers developed a series of questions pertaining to need for, use of, and barriers to receiving oral health care for adults during the COVID-19 pandemic
- These questions were included in the Consumer Survey of Health Care Access, which was fielded by the Health Workforce Research Center at the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) in December 2020 and June 2021
- Online survey was conducted using a national panel of ~1.5 million adults
- Analytic study sample included 3,505 respondents who indicated a met or unmet need for dental care in the prior 12 months
- This project builds on our previous research that used consumer survey data to evaluate the facilitators and barriers to access to oral health services in 2017-2018

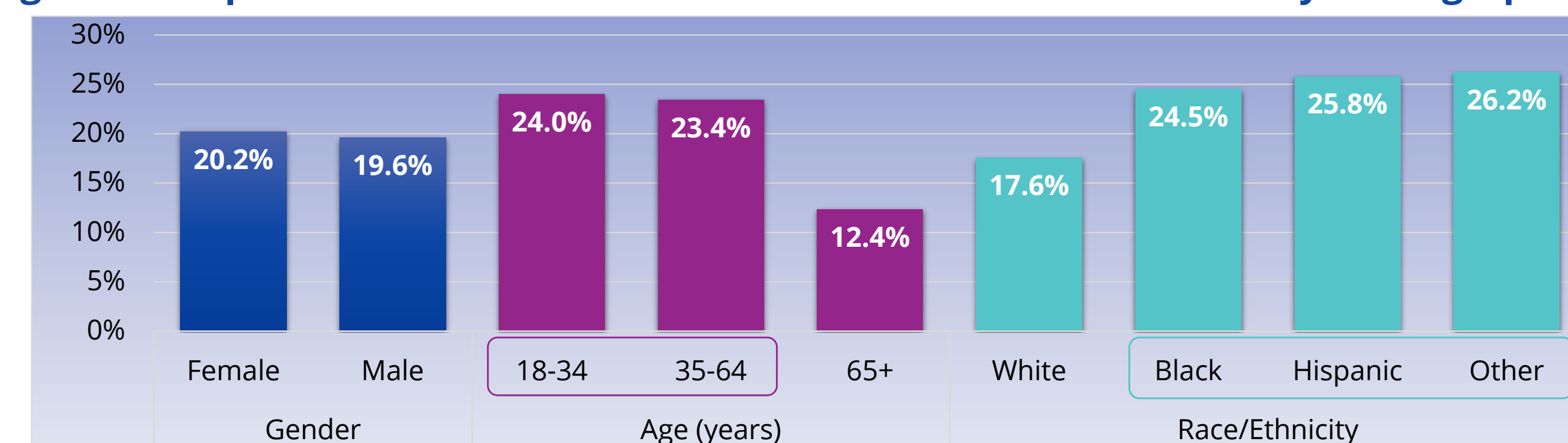
Statistical Analyses

- Descriptive statistical analyses, including frequency distribution, cross tabulation, and chi-square test were used to estimate associations between study respondents' access to oral health services and their characteristics
- Survey data were weighted by age, gender, race/ethnicity, employment status, household income, educational attainment, and geographic region to better represent the characteristics of the US adult population as measured by the US Census Bureau
- All analyses were conducted in SAS v9.4

RESULTS

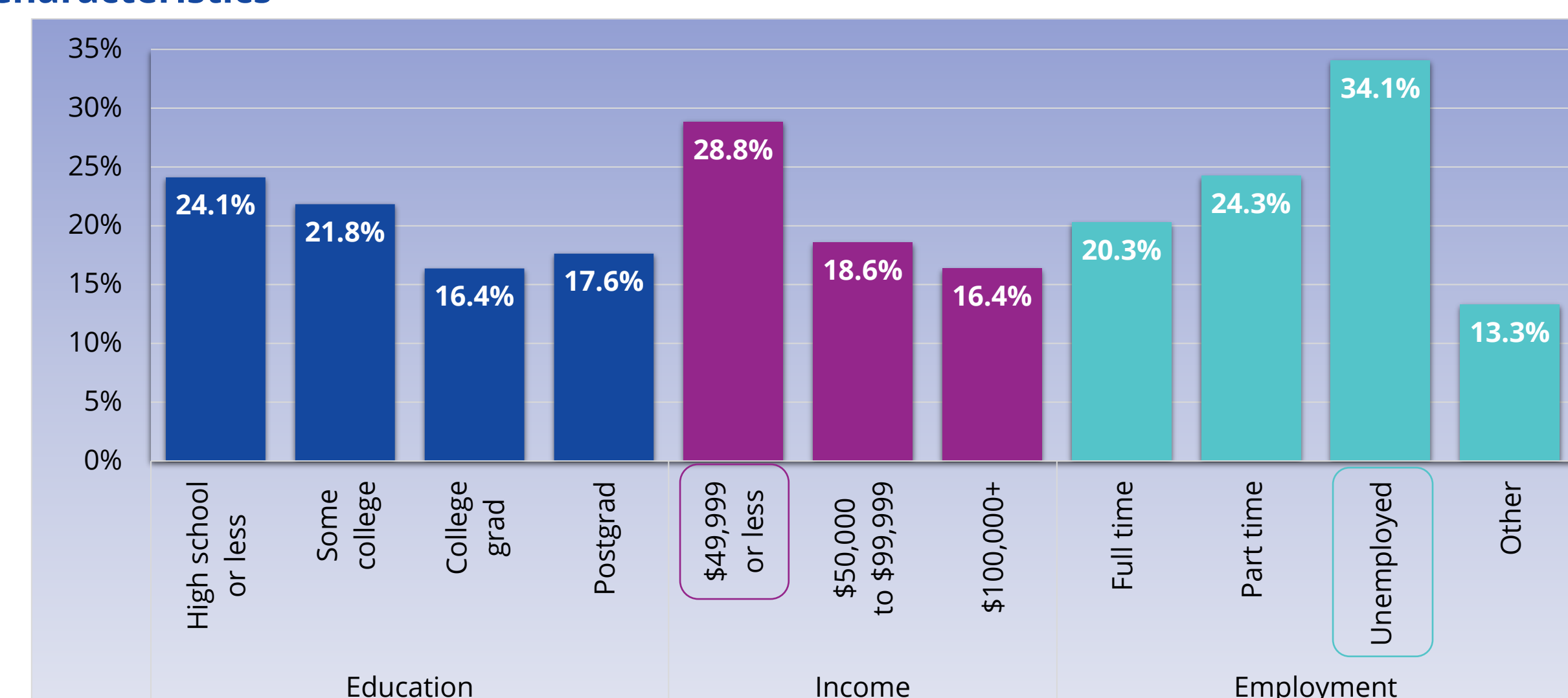
- 46.6% of respondents always received dental care as needed, while 33.5% only sometimes received care and 19.9% of did not receive any care
- Younger and underrepresented minority respondents were more likely to report not getting any needed dental care ($P<.001$)

Figure 1. Respondents Who Did Not Get Dental Care in the Last Year by Demographics



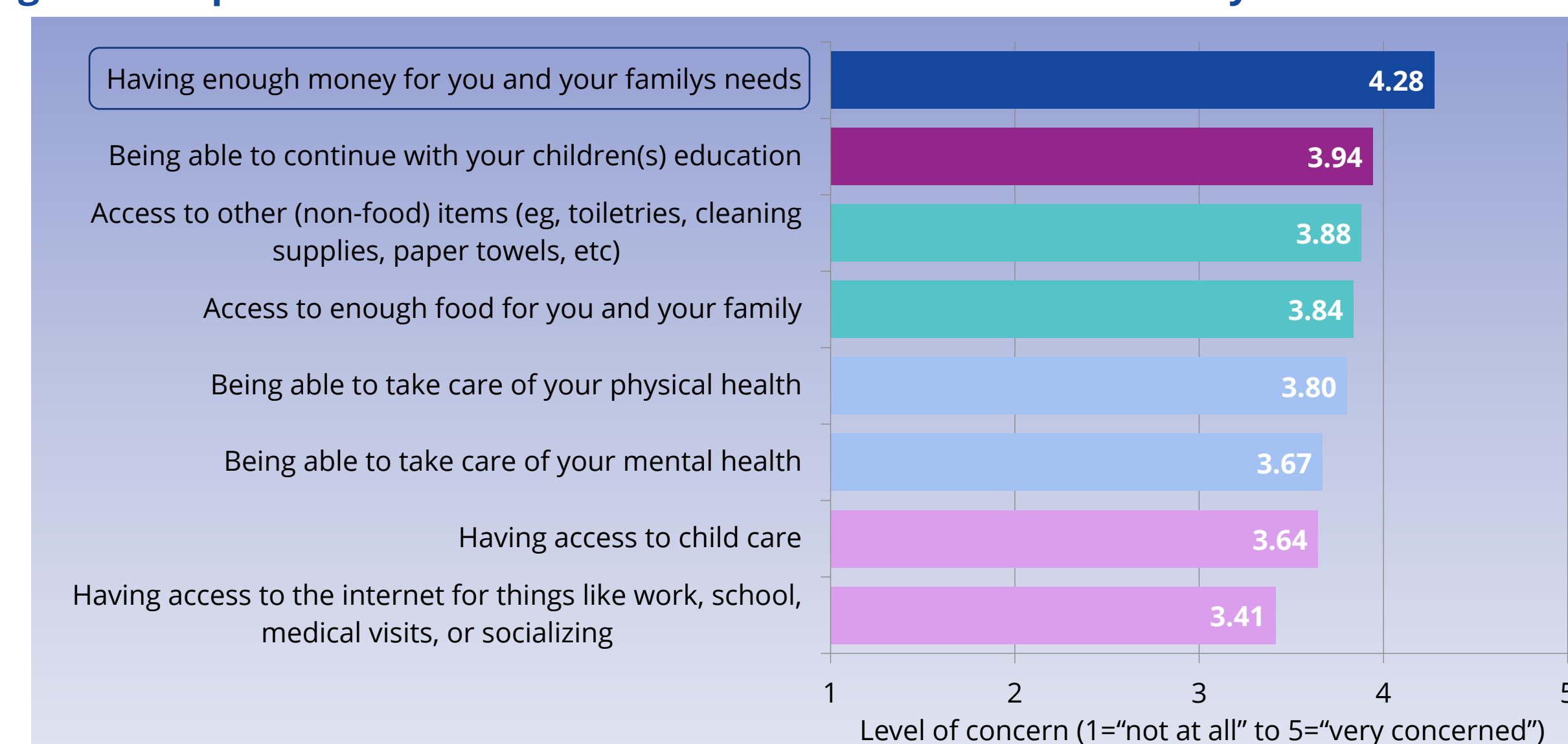
- Respondents with a lower education attainment, lower incomes, and those who were unemployed were more likely to not get care ($P<.001$)

Figure 2. Respondents Who Did Not Get Dental Care in the Last Year by Socioeconomic Characteristics



- Respondents who had medium or high pandemic concerns were more likely to report not getting care than those with lower concerns ($P<.001$)

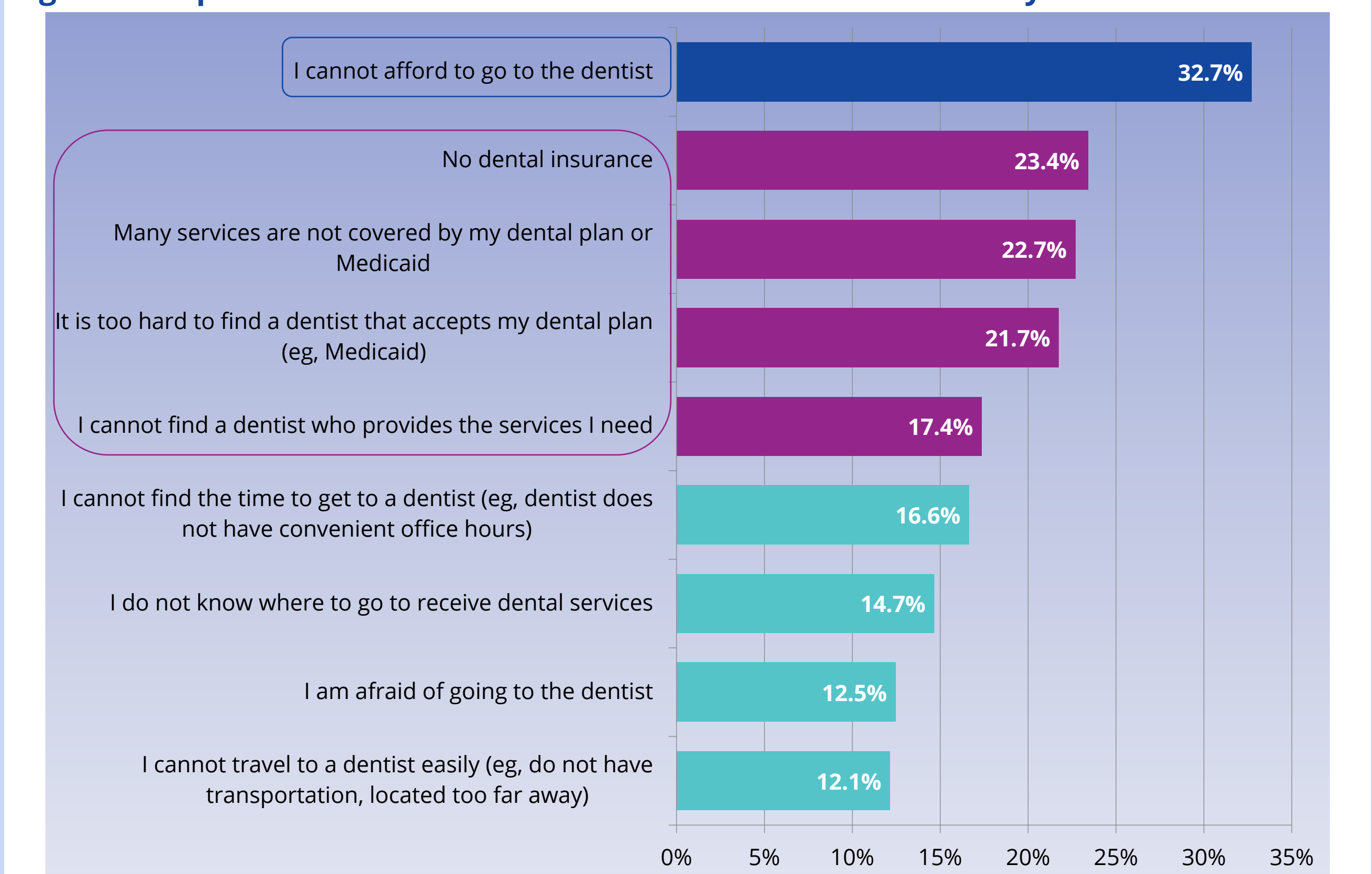
Figure 3. Respondents Who Did Not Get Dental Care in the Last Year by Pandemic Concerns



RESULTS (cont.)

- Respondents who identified access difficulties (ie, dental cost, insurance status, provider availability) were more likely to report not getting any needed dental care ($P<.001$)

Figure 4. Respondents Who Did Not Get Dental Care in the Last Year by Barriers to Care



IMPLICATIONS

- Associations of sociodemographic factors with access to dental care suggest that efforts to link underserved populations to oral health services remain important policy initiatives to reduce oral health disparities during the pandemic
- Identification of concerns about financial implications of the pandemic as well as difficulties related to dental cost, insurance status, and provider availability suggest that COVID-19 disproportionately affected the most vulnerable populations groups
- Current efforts to mediate financial and structural barriers should be amplified in order to improve access to dental care and overall health

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