



Poor oral health is one of the leading causes of school absenteeism in Georgia.¹



20% of children in Georgia did not have a dental check-up in the last 12 months.²

That's more than **480,000** children.

Who is at risk of poor oral health?

• Untreated tooth decay is **50% more common** in children in families with low-incomes compared to children in families with higher incomes.³

• Hispanic children have a **higher prevalence** of tooth decay compared to non-Hispanic children.⁴



Hispanic: 64%



Non-hispanic: 50%

• Children in rural communities have a **higher prevalence** of tooth decay compared to children in urban communities.⁵



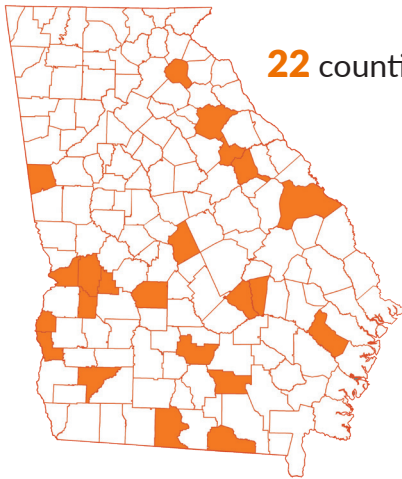
Rural: 60%



Urban: 48%

Challenges Facing Children and Dentists

Availability of Care



22 counties in Georgia have no dentists.⁶

Dentists: 1 per 2,053 Georgians⁷

Hygienists: 1 per 2,227 Georgians⁸

Georgia has **190** dental care shortage areas.⁹

Federal regulations stipulate that in order to be considered as having a shortage of providers, a designation must have a population-to-provider ratio that meets or exceeds 5,000 to 1 or 4,000 to 1 for areas with unusually high needs.

Public Insurance Challenges

On average, Medicaid and PeachCare for Kids® beneficiaries had to travel **20 more miles** for dental care than their non-Medicaid peers.¹⁰

25% of Georgia dentists accepted public insurance (Medicaid or PeachCare for Kids®) in 2020.¹¹

Children with fee-for-service Medicaid* are **33% less likely** to receive dental care compared to children in managed care.¹²

Medicaid reimburses **43.8%** of fees charged.¹³ Private insurance reimburses about **80%** of fees charged.

Language Barriers

Medicaid patients are required by federal law to have access to translation services arranged and paid for by the provider.^{14 15 16}

38% of dental schools in the United States report that students were not adequately prepared to manage Limited English-proficient patients.¹⁷

*Fee-for-service covers children who are legally blind or have a disability. Managed care covers children who are in foster care, some juvenile justice programs, or whose family's income does not exceed program limits.

Benefits of Improved Dental Health

Health Outcomes

- Improved eating and speaking¹⁸
- Improved diabetes outcomes¹⁹
- Reduced dental pain²⁰
- Improved pregnancy outcomes, including fewer low birthweight babies²¹

Cost Savings for Kids, Families, and the State

- Reduction of future dental visits and related costs²²
- Reduction in emergency department visits for non-traumatic dental problems²³

Education and Life Outcomes^{24 25}

- Improved school attendance
- Improved academic performance
- Improved self-esteem and employability
- Reduced pain and suffering

The Importance of Fluoride

Fluoride is a naturally occurring mineral that is proven to protect teeth from decay. Fluoride helps rebuilding tooth enamel and strengthen the tooth's surface.²⁶

Benefits of Fluoride²⁷

Untreated tooth decay can cause **pain, school absences, difficulty concentrating, and poor appearance.**²⁸ Utilizing fluoride can lead to:



Fewer cavities



Less severe cavities



Less need for fillings and tooth extraction



Less pain and suffering due to tooth decay

Tooth decay and its complications are preventable and early treatment options such as community water fluoridation are safe, effective, and economical.²⁹

Risks of Fluoride

Risks are limited to dental fluorosis, a change in the appearance of tooth enamel.

Multiple studies have consistently found **no scientific evidence** linking community water fluoridation with any potential adverse health outcomes.³⁰

Fluoridation **does not** cause:³¹

- An increased risk for cancer
- Down syndrome
- Heart disease
- Osteoporosis and bone fracture
- Immune disorders
- Low intelligence
- Renal disorders
- Alzheimer's disease
- Allergic reactions

Water fluoridation is safe, healthy, and effective.^{32, 33}

Community Water Fluoridation

According to the Georgia Dental Hygienists Association, community water fluoridation is “the controlled addition of a fluoride compound to a public water supply to achieve a concentration optimal for dental caries prevention.”³⁴ Research supports that water fluoridation prevents tooth decay by providing frequent and consistent contact with low levels of fluoride.³⁵



In 2018, due to the decline in tooth decay, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) named Community Water Fluoridation as one of the 10 greatest public health achievements of the 20th Century as identified in the public statement, “The Evidence Supporting the Safety and Effectiveness of Community Water Fluoridation.”³⁶



Teledentistry

Teledentistry utilizes communications technology to deliver oral care, consultations, and education, as well as the remote provision of dental treatment (screening, diagnosis, consultation, and treatment planning).³⁷



Benefits of Teledentistry from the American Dental Association (ADA)

The ADA recognizes teledentistry as an effective way to:

- Extend the reach of dental professionals
- Expand the reach of a dental home
- Increase access to care by reducing distance barriers

Teledentistry allows for a shorter period to obtain specialty consultations and improves workflow efficiencies for patients, providers, and support staff.

Teledentistry has gained popularity in recent years. According to a 2023 report published in The Journal of the American Dental Association:³⁸



30% of dentists use teledentistry in their practices



63% of teledentistry patients are **within 20 miles** of their dentist

Benefits Experienced by Dentists Using Teledentistry³⁹

- **63%** reduced number of in-person patient visits
- **31%** lower costs for patients
- **57%** increased access and quality care
- **31%** patients more receptive to care
- **38%** reduced patient anxiety
- **28%** better care for marginalized communities

Current Policies Affecting Teledentistry in Georgia

- The Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) established a telemedicine network, available in all 159 counties, which is recognized as a “best practices model of care” to bring specialized care to the underserved and rural areas of Georgia.
- Georgia allows dentists to provide general supervision of dental hygienists in safety net settings such as Title 1 Schools, preschools, and other settings, which increases access to dental care for Georgia’s underserved residents.



Policy Recommendations

Increase access in shortage areas

- Leverage the telemedicine network to increase utilization of teledentistry.
- Educate and raise awareness about the ability of dental hygienists to practice in settings such as schools and nursing homes.
- Encourage local public health clinics to provide dental services.

Increase access to dentists

- Increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental services like exams, cleanings, fluoride, sealants, and treatments of caries (cavities).
- Reduce administrative barriers that hinder dentists from accepting Medicaid.
- Establish goals to increase dental access for Fee-for-Service member children (i.e., a minimum percent of children receiving services annually).
- Monitor the number of dental providers that are accepting new patients and actively participate in Medicaid Fee-for-Service and CMO dental networks.
- Increase Medicaid reimbursement rates for dental services like exams, cleaning, fluoride, sealants, and treatments of tooth decay inclusive of services delivered via teledentistry.

Increase access to dental services in schools

- Leverage comprehensive school-based health services as a venue for providing dental care.

Maintain community water fluoridation supplies

- Continue to fluoridate water in accordance with the standards established by the appropriate authority to help prevent tooth decay and promote oral health.



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