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Survey reveals starkly different oral health care experiences for lower-income Northern Virginia residents compared to wealthier neighbors

Gaps in oral health access and utilization between lower-income and higher-income Northern Virginians are as profound as they were a decade ago, report cites.

Alexandria, VA - Despite increases in oral health coverage across Northern Virginia, a new report from the Northern Virginia Health Foundation (NVHF) reveals the disproportionate challenge lower-income residents face when trying to get dental care services they need. The report reiterates recommendations made in 2010 and urges policymakers and community leaders to take action to prioritize increasing access to dental care for all residents.

The report, *A Decade Later: Oral Health in Northern Virginia*, finds that only a little more than half (56%) of lower-income residents reported seeing a dentist in the past two years. Three-fourths (77%) of lower-income residents cited cost as the primary reason they could not afford to see a dentist and one-third (36%) reported deferring needed treatment due to cost.

“In nearly every way conceivable, the oral health challenges facing lower-income residents in Northern Virginia today are as profound as they were ten years ago,” said NVHF Program Officer, Tricia Rodgers.

The findings, based on a survey of 3,023 adults living in Northern Virginia, reveal how starkly different oral health care experiences are for lower-income households (defined as those with an annual income below \$50,000) compared to their wealthier neighbors. The report also contrasts the present-day findings with results from the 2010 survey.

Among the key findings:

- **Cost is a significant concern for lower-income Northern Virginians:** More than three-fourths (77%) of lower-income adults say they did not see a dentist because they could not afford it. This is up from 66% in 2010.

- **Fewer Northern Virginians saw a dentist than in 2010:** Just more than half (56%) of lower-income adults have seen a dentist or dental hygienist in the last two years compared to 83% of higher-income adults. Both groups saw declines from 2010 (lower-income residents decreased from 63% in 2010, and higher-income residents decreased from 91%).
- **Oral health care experiences vary dramatically for pregnant women depending on income:** Pregnant women in higher-income households were significantly more likely than pregnant women in lower-income households to say they saw a dentist for a regular checkup (59% compared to 28%). At the same time, 22% of lower-income pregnant women reported having problems with their teeth and gums but did not see a dentist, compared to just 8% of higher-income pregnant women.
- **Lack of coverage continues to deter many residents from seeing the dentist:** Lower-income adults were twice as likely as higher-income adults (59% compared to 26%) to cite a lack of dental coverage as the reason for not seeing a dentist. Percentages decreased slightly for both groups since 2010 (66% of lower-income adults and 30% of higher-income adults).
- **Lack of dental insurance coverage prevents many lower-income children from receiving care:** Among the respondents whose children have not seen a dentist in the last two years, 30% of lower-income parents cited lack of dental insurance coverage as the reason, compared to just 9% of higher-income parents.
- **Poor oral health affects the daily lives of lower-income adults:** Among lower-income adults, oral health problems keep 29% from sleeping and 18% from engaging in regular activities. The corresponding numbers for higher-income residents are significantly less: 12% can't sleep and 10% can't do their regular activities. The percentages for both groups increased from 2010.

Efforts to improve oral health in since 2010

The findings from the region's first oral health survey, conducted in 2010, were similar. Since then, efforts such as the Affordable Care Act, Medicaid expansion in Virginia and dental benefits for low-income pregnant women on Medicaid helped ensure that more residents could get insured.

The General Assembly is expected to revisit funding for a comprehensive adult dental benefit to Medicaid when it reconvenes in mid-August. Oral health experts note that implementing such a measure would help address racial health disparities that have been exacerbated by COVID-19. [Research](#) shows that introducing the benefit would save the Commonwealth an estimated \$14M after the third year of implementation.

Although these are critical steps along the region's journey to health equity, they are just a start, says Rodgers. "Too many Northern Virginians struggle to access needed dental care, and it's clear that a lack of action has prevented more progress. Before another decade passes, we must do more to ensure everyone can get the dental care they need to thrive and be as healthy as possible - not just those who can afford it."

Recommendations

The recommendations put forward in this report did not change from those in 2010, and there has been little action to address them, the report says. The report outlines several short- and long-term strategies for improving the state of oral health in Northern Virginia, including increasing reimbursements rates for dental services provided through Medicaid; increasing the number of providers who offer reduced-cost oral health care to lower-income adults; and ensuring that dental hygienists and other dental professionals are able to practice to the full extent of their education and training.

Survey Methodology

Polling was conducted online from October 1 through 17, 2019. Using its Bias Correct Engine to attain a sample reflective of adults, Change Research polled 3,023 Virginians living in Arlington County, Alexandria City, Fairfax County, Fairfax City, Falls Church City, Loudoun County, Manassas City, Manassas Park City and Prince William County. Additional interviews were conducted in the highest poverty census tracts. Post-stratification weights were made on age, gender, city/county, income and race to reflect the distribution of adults within the region.

When the embargo lifts, the full report will be available at: <https://novahealthfdn.org/oral-health-northern-virginia-2020/>

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About the Northern Virginia Health Foundation

The Northern Virginia Health Foundation (NVHF) is the only health philanthropy in Northern Virginia that supports programs throughout Northern Virginia. Since its inception in 2005, NVHF has been dedicated to improving the health and well-being of residents of Northern Virginia, particularly those who are uninsured. For more information, visit www.novahealthfdn.org. Follow the Foundation on Twitter at www.twitter.com/novahealthfdn.