

Oral Health Disparities: Investigating Access Challenges Among People Who Have Been Incarcerated

The Challenge

Oral health strongly influences physical and mental health, social participation, and quality of life. Oral health disparities by rurality, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity are thus particularly concerning. Incarcerated persons and others who experience criminal-legal system involvement face particular oral health risks in community settings as well as before, during, and after periods of incarceration, especially if self-medicating to pain leads to other substance-use related issues and challenges. Many people in the U.S. lack dental coverage or practical access to preventative care and treatment, and there is overwhelming and unmet demand for free or affordable dental care. When people seek care in the emergency department for dental issues this is far more costly and often comes too late for providers to offer preventative and more cost-effective treatment. Dental pain also impacts the behavior of people in incarcerated settings, heightening aggression and violence risk. Poor oral health is associated with reduced employment post-incarceration, as well. Poor oral hygiene and lack of dental care visits can be also attributed to erratic life circumstances and health behaviors driven by the cycle of imprisonment, jail entry, and discharge. The incarceration period thus presents unique opportunities to explore and address dental challenges that face a distinctively vulnerable population.

The Opportunity

Oral Health Disparities (OHD) is an 18-month pilot project that seeks to learn about incarcerated individuals' oral health needs, their access to dental care, and the barriers they face in utilizing oral health services while incarcerated. The research team is interviewing individuals currently in jail or prison, individuals with lived experience with incarceration, as well as jail staff and leadership. The study is employing mixed methods, combining qualitative interviews and short surveys to triangulate findings across multiple data sources. It also includes a scoping review to assess the breadth and depth of existing evidence and provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

Interviews are ongoing at the LaSalle County Jail. The team also partnered with Lighthouse Recovery, an outpatient substance use treatment program that serves predominately low-income clients, including many who have involvement with the criminal legal system. Participants are being recruited from both rural and non-rural areas in Illinois, with the goal of expanding the research beyond Illinois.

Project Goals

1. Document the prevalence of oral health challenges and barriers to dental care faced by incarcerated persons.
2. Understand oral health-related challenges that adults face following jail or prison release.
3. Understand how oral health issues impact people's general mental and physical health and wellbeing as well as their substance use disorder and criminal-legal trajectories.
4. Determine how these challenges differ across rural and non-rural contexts.

About the Health Lab

Health Lab partners with civic and community leaders to identify, rigorously evaluate, and help scale programs and policies that improve health outcomes and address systemic barriers to achieving health equity. Health Lab aims to identify, test, and provide strategies to implement the most promising solutions to issues facing people involved in the criminal legal system, and reduce the harms perpetuated by a system that is unsuitable for yet increasingly relied upon to manage homelessness, substance use, behavioral health crises, and other social challenges.