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# How Dental Inequality Hurts Americans

Lack of dental care through Medicaid not only harms people's health, but has negative economic implications as well.

By [Austin Frakt](#)

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A free dental clinic in Seattle's Key Arena in 2016. Many Americans lack basic access to dental care. Credit David Ryder/Reuters

Even before any [proposed](#) cuts take effect, Medicaid is already lean in one key area: Many state programs lack coverage for dental care.

That can be bad news not only for people's overall well-being, but also for their ability to find and keep a job.

Not being able to see a dentist is related to a range of health problems. Periodontal disease (gum infection) is associated with an [increased risk of cancer](#) and cardiovascular diseases. In part, this reflects how people with oral health problems tend to be less healthy in other ways; diabetes and smoking, [for instance](#), increase the chances of cardiovascular problems and endanger mouth health.

There is also a causal explanation for how oral health issues can lead to or worsen other illnesses. Bacteria originating in oral infections can circulate elsewhere, [contributing to heart disease and strokes](#). A similar phenomenon may be at the root of the finding that pregnant women lacking dental care or teeth cleaning are [more likely to experience a preterm delivery](#). (Medicaid covers care related to [almost half of births](#) in the United States.) [READ MORE](#)

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