

# AppalReD Legal Aid

Providing free legal services to the poor and vulnerable in eastern and south central Kentucky

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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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