

Oral Health

The New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) reports that dental caries is the most common chronic childhood disease. It impacts children's functions including eating, growth, speaking, and learning. Oral diseases in adults negatively impact their employability and systemic health. Although dental caries is preventable, almost 80% of children will have experienced tooth decay by the time they finish high school.

Community priority

In Tompkins County, dental health and insufficient access to dental health care has long been identified as a priority health issue. (The 1998 Community Health Assessment listed it as such based on community input.) School nurses, teachers, principals continually report that certain children in their schools are in need of dental care. Community health nurses at TCHD have identified clients similarly. And various community health and human service agencies respond to regular inquiries from people in need of emergency dental care. In most cases the callers have not been able to afford preventative care and are compelled to seek care when the condition is acute. People unfamiliar with the services that TCHD provides call the health department in the hope or expectation of a no-cost public dental clinic.

In 2001, the Tompkins County Department of Social Services (DSS) convened a task force of interested and concerned community members, dental health providers and health and human service agency and school representatives to address the problem. After seven months of study and discussion the task force agreed on several recommendations that were presented to the Tompkins County Legislature for decision and action.

Data Analysis

NYSDOH /CDC Survey

The NYSDOH collaborated with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to establish a surveillance system for monitoring oral health status, risk factors, workforce and the use of dental services.

To collect data on tooth decay or dental caries in children, NYSDOH conducted surveys in 2003 of 3rd grade children in counties in New York State. A sample of schools was selected in each county; parental permission was required for participation. The 3rd graders were categorized into two socioeconomic strata based on participation in the free or reduced cost school lunch program. A dental hygienist or dentist conducted the oral screening.

Limitations in the survey

There are several limitations in the NYSDOH surveys.

- First, the screenings were conducted without the benefit of radiographs. Therefore the findings may differ from those observed by clinicians.
- Second, the possibility of bias from selective participation should be considered in applying the results to all children.

Survey results

- Third, direct comparisons with other areas should be avoided because of the differences in the underlying samples and populations and data collection methods.
- Finally, smaller numbers of schools and children in some areas may have resulted in unstable rates and invalid standard areas.

Results of the oral health survey of grade 3 students in Tompkins County are shown in *Figure 165, page 173*. The indicators are defined as follows:

- *Caries experience (history of tooth decay)* reflects the presence of a cavity or a filling, or a history of extraction of a permanent tooth. It indicates that opportunities for primary prevention may have been missed.
- *Untreated caries* reflects the presence of a cavity. It indicates that treatment has not been obtained in a timely manner.
- *Dental Sealants* is reflection of use of preventive services.

The data suggests that access to dental care in Tompkins County does vary based on the economic status of the child.

HP 2010

Additional data also shows the spread between the oral health of Tompkins County children and the Healthy People 2010 (HP2010) targets for caries and sealants. The caries experience data for Tompkins County is about 34 percent above the HP2010 target, untreated caries is 60 percent higher than the HP2010 target, and use of sealants about 29 percent below the target rate for children. (*See Figure 166, page 174.*)

Community Resources**Dental Case Manager**

The Tompkins County Legislature responded to the Dental Care Task Force mentioned above by permitting a grant application for the funding of a dental case manager program. Funding was awarded to TCHD and the case manager is based at DSS. The program is designed to enhance access to dental care for people who qualify for Medicaid and for a small number of senior citizens.

Along with case management, the program provides appointment reminders and transportation as needed. Participants receive dental exams, cleanings, x-rays, fillings, sealants, and emergency care. Dentures are also provided if necessary.

Figures and Tables

Figure 165 — Oral health status of 3rd grade students, Tompkins County

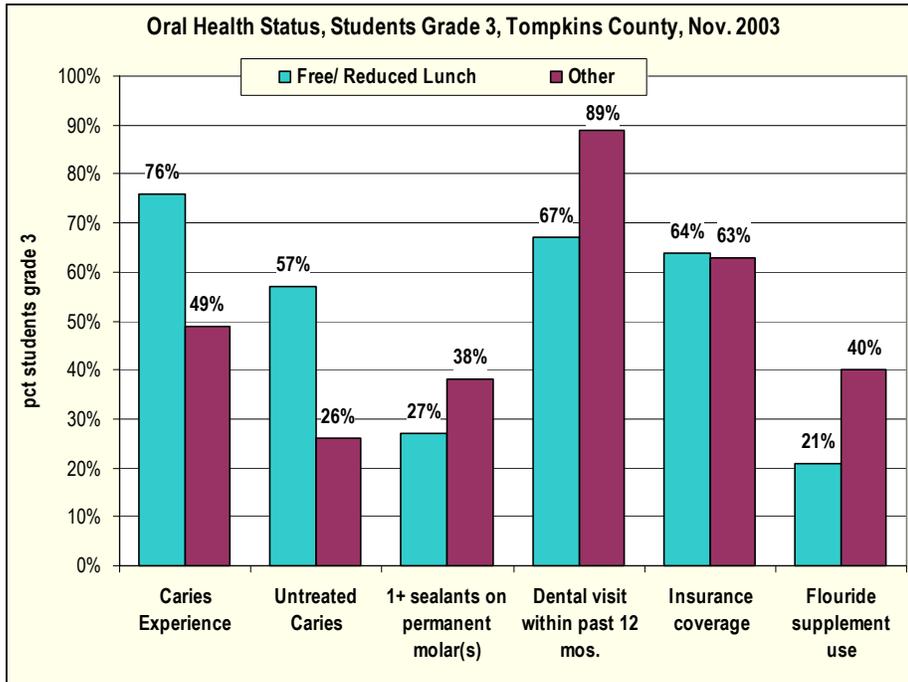


Figure 166 — Oral health status, Tompkins County children and HP 2010

