

Access to Dental Care for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Individuals and Families in Canada

This research project started as a collaboration with the Strategy for Patient-Oriented Research Evidence Alliance (SPOR-EA), an organisation that works to include citizens in research. Ms. Maryline Côté, a citizen partner, came up with the idea for this project. SPOR-EA shared her idea with our research team, and we worked with Maryline to turn her idea into clear research questions: 1) In Canada, what helps or makes it harder for people and families living in a situation of socio-economic disadvantage to get dental care? and 2) What can be done to help these people and families get better access to dental care? We then began the study to find ways to make dental care easier to access for people and families facing financial challenges.

In Canada, many struggle to get dental care, especially those without dental insurance or enough money to pay for it. Even with programs like the Canadian Dental Care Plan, many people fall into what's called a "grey zone"—they earn too much to qualify for help but don't earn enough to afford dental care. This creates a gap, leading to unequal oral health across different groups. High costs, a lack of information about available programs, and limited access to dental clinics make it even harder for many people, especially those with lower incomes, to get the care they need.

To better understand these challenges, we did a scoping review. This type of research helps us find out what is already known about a topic and where there are gaps. We wanted to understand the biggest challenges people face when trying to get dental care and explore possible solutions. To help us organise the data, we used a framework called the Theoretical Domains Framework (TDF). This framework allowed us to identify and group factors such as the environment, social influences, and emotions that affect whether people seek dental care or not.

We reviewed over 700 research articles and selected 42 that were most useful to answer our research question. These articles showed that people often face challenges like financial stress, lack of time, and transportation problems. Many people also faced issues like language and cultural differences, long wait times, childcare needs, and fear or anxiety around dental visits. For dental clinics, problems like not having enough staff and limited funding for treatments were common. Many people missed their appointments, according to several articles. Some clinics dealt with this by double-booking patients, while others subtly excluded individuals they perceived as 'less reliable' such as individuals receiving financial aid.

We also found different approaches and programs that tried to make dental care more accessible. These included free local clinics, school-based programs, government initiatives, and efforts to make it easier to access government-funded care. While these programs were helpful, many still had major limitations. Some didn't cover all the costs, or they didn't deal with issues like long wait times or transportation problems. However, some programs did address these other barriers, like transportation, childcare, and the relationship between patients and care providers. For example, the location of community dental clinics was found to be important as patients preferred clinics that were easy to get to, and school-based programs were liked because they didn't require parents to take time off work.

The results of this research are an important step toward making dental care more accessible for people who need it most. By finding the main barriers and the strategies that have been tried to overcome them, we hope that this study will help guide future efforts to improve dental care access and help build a more inclusive and fair dental care system for everyone. Policymakers, researchers, and healthcare providers can use these findings to create better solutions so everyone—no matter their income—can get the dental care they need.