



Oral Health Care Experiences during Pregnancy

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ABOUT THE STUDY

Oral health has a huge impact on overall health and quality of life. Indeed, poor dental health raises the risk of a variety of negative consequences, including stroke, heart attack, diabetes, and coronary artery disease. People who have had contact with the criminal justice system, particularly those who have been jailed, face a wide range of health inequities in physical and mental health, as well as barriers to healthcare consumption, when compared to those who have never been incarcerated. Furthermore, compared to those who are currently incarcerated, formerly incarcerated people may be especially prone to poor oral health, because incarcerated people are guaranteed access to oral healthcare services throughout their time behind bars.

Recent research has identified poor dental health as a serious health issue faced by incarcerated populations. Overlapping risk factors among people who have been incarcerated, as well as those who have similar oral health status, are mostly to blame for the negative health outcomes in this population. For example, a significant proportion of the jailed population has low educational attainment and tends to live in low socioeconomic status locations, both of which are major predictors of ill health and criminal justice system engagement. Incarceration also hastens poor oral health, increasing results in already marginalized populations in a variety of ways. The "pull and pay" strategy, for example, is commonly utilized for incarcerated people with dental issues. Individuals in prison pay a modest co-payment to have their troublesome teeth extracted, rather than institutional dentists treating them with the necessary-but most expensive- treatments to manage their oral health concerns.

Furthermore, the built environment, as well as the lack of freedom within prisons, raises the risk of ill mental health, which may lead to incarcerated people forgetting to care for their general or dental health because mental health issues are more pressing. In addition, the built environment and the lack of freedom inside jails raise the risk of poor mental health, which may cause prisoners to overlook their general or oral health because mental health problems are more serious. According to estimates, more than half of prisoners report having poor dental

health and needing immediate care, and more than 90% report having untreated cavities or lost teeth as a result of cavities. Their oral and dental healthcare situation has mostly remained the same even after release from prison. Inadequate understanding combined with logistical obstacles faced post-incarceration, such as having reliable access to transportation, securing secure housing, or dealing with a substance use issue, results in unmet and ignored oral healthcare needs. For example, using nationally representative data of 2020 discover that formerly incarcerated people are more likely than non-incarcerated people to have periodontal disease and not have seen an oral healthcare professional in the previous year.

Similarly, evidence indicates that the effects of jail on oral health extend to family members. In addition to the re-entry issues that jailed people confront, their families incur collateral repercussions of imprisonment, such as a loss of household income. Thus, during incarceration, the non-incarcerated partner bears the burden of child care and financial responsibilities, making oral healthcare a low priority, especially if they are currently pregnant. These unintended outcomes may have a direct impact on the health of other family members. Children with an incarcerated parent have higher oral health problems (e.g., toothaches, bleeding gums, cavities/tooth decay) and are more likely to have unmet dental care needs in 2021. However, no research has been conducted to determine the extent to which incarceration exposure of a romantic partner is associated with poor oral health.

This is a significant gap, given that a growing body of evidence demonstrates that women with a jailed male spouse suffer a variety of health repercussions, and these health consequences may be especially severe when encountered during pregnancy. A partner's incarceration, in particular, may be linked to women's oral health condition in relation to the great stress felt by their daily absence, which may enable negative coping techniques, leading to a lack of care for one's own health status. This extra collateral effect of incarceration has far-reaching repercussions for the non-incarcerated partner's general health status, particularly among Black and Hispanic women, of which dental health is an integral component.

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Pregnant women have an increased risk of unmet oral health needs. A surge of hormones, as well as changes in normal hygiene and nutrition patterns, might cause dental health issues during pregnancy. Specifically, oestrogen and progesterone levels impact the pregnant body's immunological response, limiting its ability to heal gingival (gum) tissue, which can cause gingivitis and periodontal disease. In turn, the increase in inflammatory markers in both mother and fetus can raise the risk of a variety of unfavorable pregnancy outcomes, including preterm birth, pre-eclampsia and low birth weight. Thus, consistent, preventative dental treatment is essential throughout pregnancy to counteract periodontal disease. However, only around 30% of women record dental appointments during their most recent pregnancy, despite the fact that approximately 10% encountered oral difficulties.

Previous study indicates that pregnant women not only underutilize oral health care, but disadvantaged pregnant women rarely, if ever, do so. Given that incarcerated people are already at a disadvantage in terms of health care, knowledge, and access, it is expected that incarcerated pregnant women will be especially vulnerable to poor oral health experiences. Due to their dual disadvantage, healthcare practitioners may neglect this group of women. Nonetheless, they may have worse dental health than their only pregnant or only incarcerated colleagues. More study into this susceptible group of people is required due to the potential for poor dental health to exacerbate pregnancy difficulties harming both mother and newborn health. As a result, the current study investigates the link between incarceration exposure during pregnancy and several oral health experiences.