

**Click/Hear Quick Take:**

# **Access to Dental Care Among Food Bank Clients**

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**Daily Bread**  
Food Bank

## Background

Oral health is an essential part of an individual's overall health, yet dental care is not covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP). Ontarians pay for dentistry out of pocket or with private insurance.

Publicly funded dental care is a new possibility in Canada as the federal government rolls out the first phase of the [Canada Dental Benefit](#), which provides financial support for the dental costs of children under 12 to families earning less than \$90,000.

But until more publicly funded options become available, people with low incomes will continue to have limited or no access to dental care, especially given that [dental costs rose 81%](#) from 2001-2020, nearly double the rise in inflation over that same time period (41%).

After paying for housing, Toronto food bank clients only have a median of \$8.01 left per person per day to spend on all other essentials, including medical care ([Who's Hungry 2022](#)). So how much dentistry can food bank clients access? This *Click/Hear* report investigates.

## Methodology

Through the *Click/Hear* program, Daily Bread maintains a client panel to stay connected with people who access food banks and to engage around the daily challenges they face. The *Click/Hear* panel is built from food bank clients who indicated they wished to participate in Daily Bread's research and advocacy activities. Regular short surveys are sent out, gathering responses by multiple methods: email, phone, and in-person.

96 food bank clients participated in this survey round. Respondents were asked six brief questions about their access to dental care.

## Key findings

The research shows that food bank clients have disproportionately lower access to dental care than the overall population:

- One-quarter of food bank clients reported they have not been to a dentist in three or more years.
- 77% of food bank clients said they could avoid going to the dentist because of the cost.
- 63% of food bank clients reported they don't have dental insurance, nearly an inverse proportion to the number of Canadians *with* dental coverage (65%).
- 55% said there was a time in the past year when they or someone in their household needed to see a dentist but could not. Of those who did not go, 83% cited cost as the barrier.

## Dental care access

### Most recent visit to a dentist

About three-quarters of Canadians reported [they have seen a dentist in the past year](#), according to the Canadian Dental Association.

Food bank clients were asked when they last had a dental check-up:

- 46% of our clients had visited the dentist in the past year
- 25% reported they had gone within the past 1-2 years
- 26% reported they had not been to a dentist in three or more years

### How clients cope

Asked “If you had dental pain, what would you do?” clients provided a number of responses, some worrisome as they avoided seeing a dental professional. (They were allowed to select more than one option.)

- Less than half of food bank clients (47%) said they would go to a dentist in that case.
- 20% said they would go to the ER or a physician; this reflects Ontario Health Alliance statistic that [every nine minutes someone goes to an Ontario ER because of dental pain](#).
- The majority of respondents (56%) said they would use over-the-counter medications or home remedies.

### Impact of limited care

Clients expressed fear and repeated frustration about their dental care and their ability to access it. One respondent reported their fears of losing teeth because of uncontrolled diabetes. Another described how they were deemed eligible for upper dentures but not lower ones.

Several described how they have dealt with dental emergencies, using over-the-counter pain relievers or visiting emergency rooms in vain. This account was typical of respondents:

*I have had two broken teeth in the past two years, I take the pain when the root gets infected, which is inhuman. On my last visit in an emergency, they wouldn't even give me Tylenol after they told me there is nothing they can do for me. I wonder why they exist. It is brutal not being able to chew food plus the damaging effects on the health as a result of that. How is that not a medical prevention issue?*

Poor and missing teeth were also identified as barriers to employment.

### Dental coverage

Lack of insurance coverage is seen as a major barrier to dental care. The Canadian Dental Association reports that those most likely not to have dental coverage are senior citizens and those with low incomes.

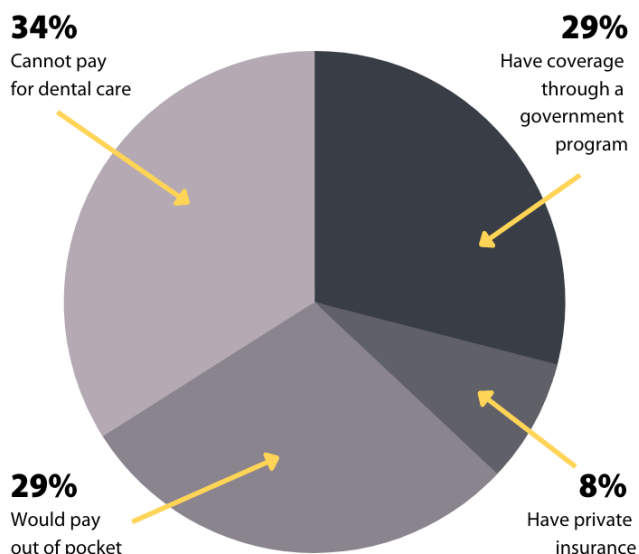
To learn about their coverage situations, food bank clients were asked “If you or someone in your household needed to see a dentist, how would you pay for it?”

Twenty-nine percent of respondents indicated that their dental care coverage was through the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) or some other type of government program, aligning with *Who’s Hungry* findings. Many mentioned the limits of this coverage and/or the challenge of finding a dentist.

Seven percent of respondents reported having private insurance, often through a student plan.

Sixty-three percent of respondents didn’t have any type of dental coverage, and the majority of them reported that they would not be able to pay for needed dental care. This is almost a perfect inverse of the proportion of [Canadians who have dental insurance](#): 64.6%.

**If you or someone in your household needed to see a dentist, how would you pay for it?**



### Dental insurance coverage amid Canadians in general vs. Toronto food bank clients

Sources: Statistics Canada's Dental Care 2018 report; Daily Bread Food Bank's Click/Hear Program

**64.6%**  
Canadians who have dental insurance

**63.4%**  
Toronto food bank clients who don't have dental insurance

The proportion of Canadians that have dental insurance is almost a perfect inverse of the proportion of Toronto food bank clients who don't.

Twenty-nine percent of respondents said they would pay out of pocket. For those food bank clients, budget trade-offs were inevitable.

## **Dental care deferred**

The final question asked clients about their dental care experience in the past year.

More than half of respondents (55%) said they or someone in their household had needed to see the dentist in the last 12 months but were unable to do so.

Of those respondents, 83% said they did not access dental care because of the cost. Other explanations were that insurance would not cover the procedure or that they had other health-related barriers (including wheelchair accessibility).

Amid the general Canadian population, [22% avoided seeing a dental professional because of cost](#).

## **Policy Recommendation**

At Daily Bread Food Bank, we recommend including dental care within the universal health care system to ensure that no one is left behind.

While we commend the federal government for moving forward with the creation of national dental care, starting with the rollout of the Canada Dental Benefit to children under 12, we urge the expedited expansion of coverage to include all children, seniors, low-income single adults, and people living with a disability.

## **References**

Canadian Dental Association, [The State of Oral Health in Canada: A Snapshot](#), March 2017.  
Statistics Canada, Health Fact Sheets: [Dental Care, 2018](#), released September 16, 2019.