

Oral Health in Black Children: Does Anybody Care?

A Systematic Review

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Introduction

Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease among children in the United States. More than 40% of children have tooth decay by the time they reach kindergarten. Many children, especially children of color living in urban areas, suffer from poor oral health because of lack of finances and limited availability of quality care.² It is important for children to get the proper dental cleaning, cavity filling, and any other necessary oral formalities because their teeth and mouth are preparing for many changes. Children's natal teeth are falling out and the adult teeth are coming in. During this time, they are extremely susceptible to tooth decay and cavities, especially if they are not properly cleaning and brushing. Further, children who experience dental pain or infections left untreated are more likely to perform poorly in school. African American children had higher levels of dental caries in 2009-2010, and the prevalence of untreated caries for African American children ages 3-5 was 19% vs 11%.¹ The importance of this topic is to not only make the public aware of the difference in oral health between African Americans and other races but to show the lack of research, and articles on oral health in African American children.

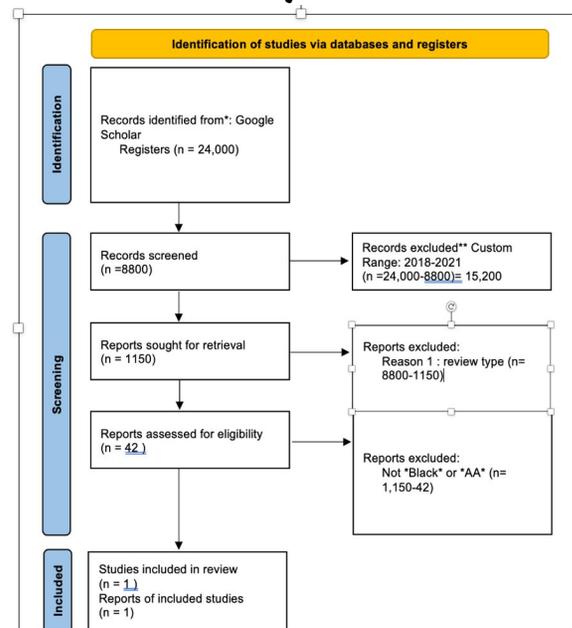
Methods

A Prisma flow chart was used for this study and maps out the number of records identified, excluded, and included, and the reasons for the exclusion (see Figure 1). The first box labeled as "Identification" includes the search engine that was used (Google Scholar), along with the initial number of articles that were found which was 24,000. The second section is the screening section broken down into several boxes. The records screened box refers to the custom range that was used which was a study done between the years 2016 and 2021 which resulted in 8800 articles with a range of 15,200. The key words used in the search were oral health and black children. The records sought for retrieval box refers only to the reviewed articles which changed the number from 8800 to 1,150, with a range of 7,650. The records assessed for eligibility refers to the years in which the studies were completed. It was originally 2016-2021, but it was changed to 2018-2021, which resulted in 42 articles, with a range of 1108. The included tab shows the number of studies and reports that will be included in the project, which was one.

Results

The one article that was relevant to the review's inclusion criteria was entitled, "The Persistence of Oral Health Disparities for African American Children: A Scoping Review." The purpose of this study was to examine the possible factors that promote oral healthcare disparities in African American children in the United States. The data in this article is secondary, meaning that data was pulled from several articles that are included in this study. The purpose of this study was to examine the potential factors that perpetuate oral health care disparities in African American children in the United States. Data was collected using a systematic search of 3 literature databases, which produced 793 articles, but only 23 articles were included in the study. This article highlights many disparities that can become barriers to oral health in the African American community such as access to specialty services, strained patient-provider relationships, parental education, and other factors.

Figure 1. Prisma Flow Chart of Article Exclusion for systematic review



Discussion & Conclusions

It is astonishing that there is only one article regarding oral health in black children between the years of 2018-2021. The limitation is that you cannot find primary data for peer reviewed articles for specific black children. This research process has taught me a great deal about the lack of research and concern for black children and oral health. It is not only astonishing, but it is grueling to find that the only reviewed article that was found on black children and oral health wasn't even primary research. This proves the extent of the minimal amount of literature there is regarding black children and oral health especially with the copious number of disparities black people face every day. There are few black dentists (3.8%) in the field of dentistry to begin with, and there are even fewer black dentists to perform research.¹ There are many influences that contribute to the disparities such as the strained patient-provider relationship and the mistrust that black people have within the medical community, familial factors, social and cultural factors and the value placed on oral healthcare due to societal norms. The opportunities and programs that need to exist to help with these barriers are educational programs that can help children learn about oral health and opportunities like free dental cleanings for parents who may not have the time or the money. The African American Health program raises awareness about key health disparities. If they created a program specifically for oral health in children that would be very beneficial. Without any improvements, these disparities will continue to exist for African American children. Certain studies that can be conducted by dental professionals can involve surveys that parents that identify as African American can complete, that can identify what dental practices the children are performing and how well they are being performed. From there, the dental professionals will then look at the results of the survey and make determinations on which parents need more education on children's oral health. Studies like these, will not only be able to collect data on the oral behaviors performed by African American children but they can try to help close the gap by identifying why the children may not be getting the proper dental care and educating the parents more on the importance of oral health in developing children. A strength of this study is that a problem was identified, and ways to try and help the problem were created. A limitation of this study is that only one search engine was used to find articles. Many influences will have to contribute to successfully closing the gaps and helping alleviate some of the disparities African Americans face including individual influences, structural, socio-economic and familial factors. There was only one article that was found to be secondary research which highlighted the disparities regarding oral health that these children are facing. To improve these disparities, we can not only implement free education programs and dental cleaning for children but conduct studies that investigate and collect data regarding their oral health. If no improvements are made, these disparities will continue to persist and serve as a barrier.

