

Rural Dental Practice: A Tale of Four States

Background

Much of the rural population, especially children, has inadequate access to dental care. The aim of this study was to investigate and report on rural dentist issues (e.g., demography, training, practice characteristics, staff, and job satisfaction) in four states.

Study Design

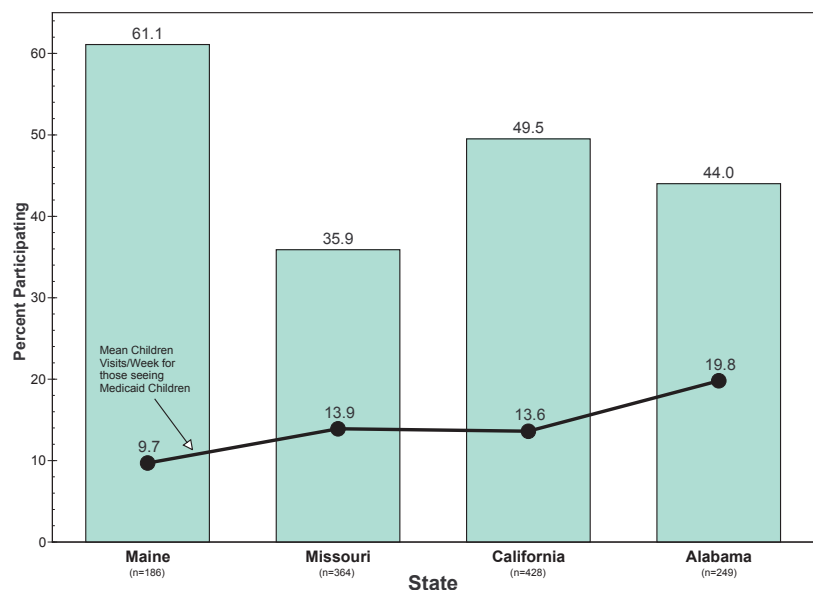
All rural dentists were surveyed in Alabama, California, Maine, and Missouri. Rural locations were defined using the ZIP-code Version 1.11 of the Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes. Four mailings of the four-page questionnaire were performed, with a resulting combined response rate of 75 percent.

Major Findings

- Generally, dentists and their work patterns were similar across the four states.
- Dentist practices varied dramatically across states regarding staffing patterns.
- Vacancy rates for dental hygienists varied greatly from state to state, ranging from 35 percent to 6 percent, while dental assistant vacancy rates varied from 12 percent to 4 percent.
- Dentist Medicaid participation and volume differed widely across the states.
- The majority of dentists in the four states were satisfied with their professional life, but the percentage who felt they were too busy or not busy enough varied widely among the states.

Policy Implications: Rural dentists suggested many ideas to better meet unmet oral health needs. Because the issues are complex and the situations are so different in the survey states, creating general federal policies that work in all states is a daunting challenge. There are dental professional shortages in many rural areas. While training more dentists and dental hygienists is critical, it is not sufficient to provide the population with adequate oral health care. Many other strategies to enhance access, including increasing the ability to pay for dental services, are also needed.

Dentists Participating in Medicaid by State



More exhibits on reverse.

This project was supported by a grant from the federal Office of Rural Health Policy. Findings are more fully described in WWAMI RHRC Working Paper #107: Andrilla CHA, Lishner DM, Hart LG. Rural Dental Practice: A Tale of Four States. March 2006.

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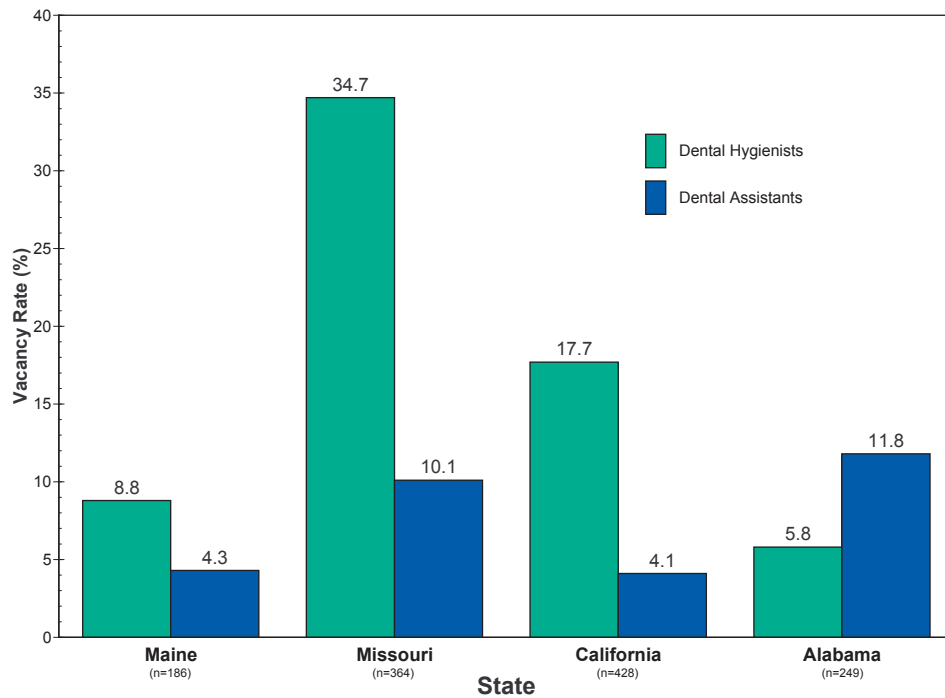
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Rural Dental Hygienist and Dental Assistant Vacancy Rates by State



Demographics of All Rural Dentists Practicing in Maine, Missouri, California, and Alabama

	Maine	Missouri	California	Alabama	Statistical Significance of State Differences
Age (mean)	51.4	50.3	50.9	48.0	0.001*
55 and older	34.7	30.2	38.3	27.7	0.011†
Male (%)	91.8	93.5	89.0	88.1	0.065†
White (%)	95.0	97.3	81.9	96.3	0.000†
Years in state (mean)	30.0	39.8	40.8	41.2	0.000*
Grew up in rural location (%)	39.6	69.4	43.4	67.0	0.000†
Number of respondents‡	220	368	494	272	1,354

* One-way analysis of variance.

† Chi-square test.

‡ The number of missing cases for each state from top to bottom are Maine: 1, 1, 0, 1, 4, 3; Missouri: 1, 1, 0, 1, 2, 2; California: 1, 1, 1, 8, 5, 10; and Alabama: 1, 1, 1, 3, 2, 5.