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The Effect of Dental Therapists on Access to Dental Care

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The Effect of Dental Therapists on Access to Dental Care

Oral health is an important indicator of overall individual health and general well-being. Unfortunately, there is a lack of dental care availability and access in many parts of the United States. According to the Health Resources and Services Administration, as of December 31, 2018 there were nearly 6,000 Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) in the US. Around 58 million people live in these shortage areas and it is estimated that over 10,000 practitioners are necessary to meet the needs of these populations.

Occupational licensing, or permission from the government to provide dental care, is one factor that may affect costs of and access to care. This research addresses one of the major issues facing Americans seeking dental care today — lack of access due to both costs and limited availability of qualified caregivers.

We conducted a literature review and performed a policy analysis based on previous studies on this subject.

• We reviewed literature examining the effects of occupational licensing and the impacts of dental therapists in the US and other countries.

• Our analysis of existing research found that “increased licensing restrictiveness did not improve dental health, but it did raise the prices of basic dental services.” (Kleiner, 2000)

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Dental Therapists

• Dental therapists are mid-level providers of dental care similar to a physician assistant.

• They work under dentist supervision and perform about 80 simple procedures (compared to over 400 for a dentist), but the scope of their practice varies by state.

• They require only a fraction of the training a dentist receives.

• This helps lower costs for consumers.

There is an evident need for greater access to dental care at lower prices in the US. One possible solution is to reform regulation to allow dental therapists to practice. There is not evidence that dental therapists lead to worse health outcomes. Similar to welfare benefits from reforming occupational licensing in other industries, reforming regulation to allow dental therapists could increase access to dental care opportunities for poor or underserved communities in the US.

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