

# Untreated Tooth Decay, Inequities Increase in Children's Oral Health

Tooth decay is the most common chronic disease among kids.



**2 in 3**

**third graders in Washington have experienced tooth decay.**

More than 1 in 5 have rampant decay (7+ teeth). For children from low income households, that increases to 1 in 3 children.

Children do better in school when they're cavity free.

But progress in cavity prevention has declined according to the 2023-2024 Washington State Smile Survey.

**1 in 5**

**third graders have untreated cavities.**

**12%** 2015-16

**19%** 2023-24

% 3<sup>rd</sup> graders with untreated cavities

**Data shows increasing untreated decay and widening disparities across groups**, with children of color experiencing more untreated decay.

**Too many children are in pain.**  
And oral pain is disrupting learning.

**Over 3,000**

**second and third graders** may be sitting in class each day with oral pain.

Those students would fill

**42 buses.**



**For children, severe tooth decay can cause:**

- ✗ Chronic pain and infection
- ✗ Difficulty speaking, eating, and learning
- ✗ Self-esteem issues

**\$20 return for every \$1 invested in prevention,**

like dental sealants and fluoridated water.

Source: CDC 2022

**Prevention is key.**

Dental sealants prevent cavities, but too many kids are still missing out.

Nearly half of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders (48%) had protective sealants in 2024, which is **higher than the national average** of 32% for 8 year old children.

WA  
**48%**

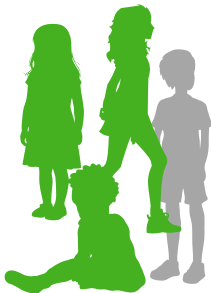
US  
**32%**

% 3<sup>rd</sup> graders with dental sealants

**Equity data tells an even starker story.**

**Children in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade experiencing homelessness** face the highest burden of oral disease.

**3 in 4** have tooth decay and 1 in 4 has untreated cavities.



2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders from low-income households are **more than twice as likely to suffer from rampant tooth decay** compared to higher income peers.

**32%** of low-income 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders

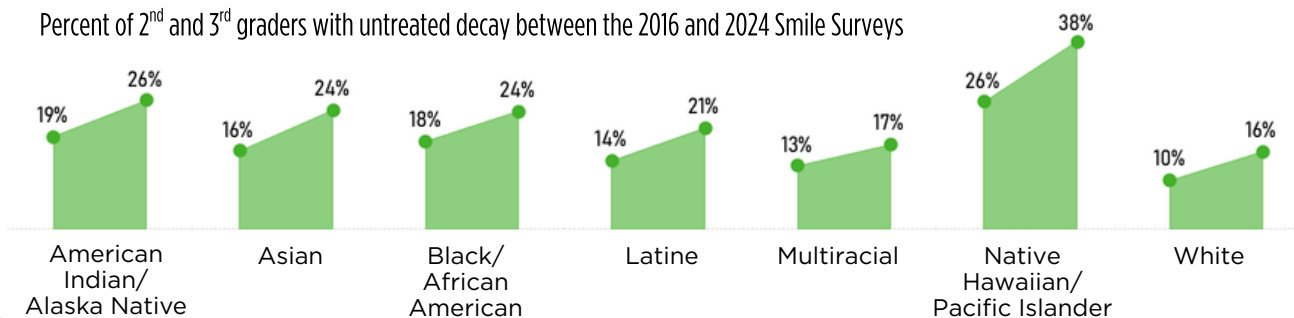
**14%** not low-income

% 3<sup>rd</sup> graders with rampant tooth decay by free and reduced lunch qualification



**Untreated decay has increased across all race/ethnicity groups since 2016**, with children of color more likely to have untreated decay.

Percent of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders with untreated decay between the 2016 and 2024 Smile Surveys



Tooth decay carries a steep cost **each year** in the United States:

**\$2 billion** in ER visits

Source: AHRQ 2021

### What can we do?



Encourage **prevention** efforts.



**Expand access to dental care**, especially for children with the greatest needs.



Further **expand collaborations at the community and statewide levels** to advance policies and programs to improve children's oral health, access to care and reduce inequities.



**Healthy Mouths, Healthy Minds.**

Every child should learn pain free.

**ARCORA**  
Foundation  
Bending the Arc of Oral Health Toward Equity

[arcorafoundation.org/smile-survey](https://arcorafoundation.org/smile-survey)

The 6<sup>th</sup> Smile Survey was conducted statewide to assess oral health status among Washington 2nd and 3rd grade students from 2023–2024, in partnership with the Washington State Department of Health and the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. **For additional references for figures cited in this infographic, please see the Smile Survey website.**