

RESEARCH REPORT

Oral Health Providers of Color Face Greater Hardships from the Impact of COVID-19

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Tranby E P, Jacobs M, Thakkar Samtani M, Perry K, and Frantsve-Hawley J. Oral Health Providers of Color Face Greater Hardships from the Impact of COVID-19. Boston, MA: CareQuest Institute for Oral Health; December 2020. DOI: 10.35565/CQI.2020.2027

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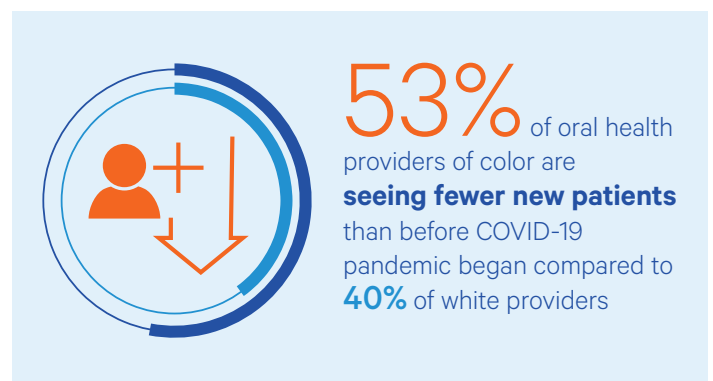
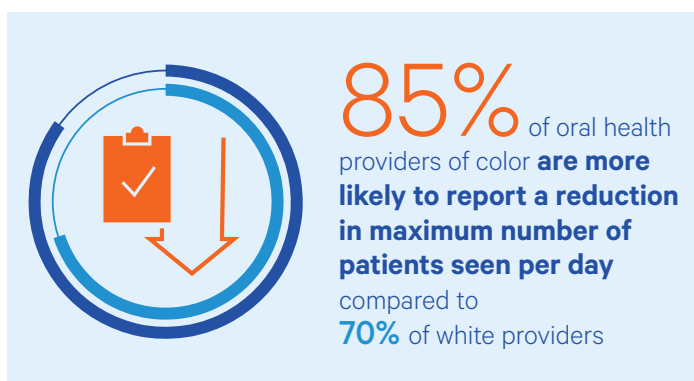
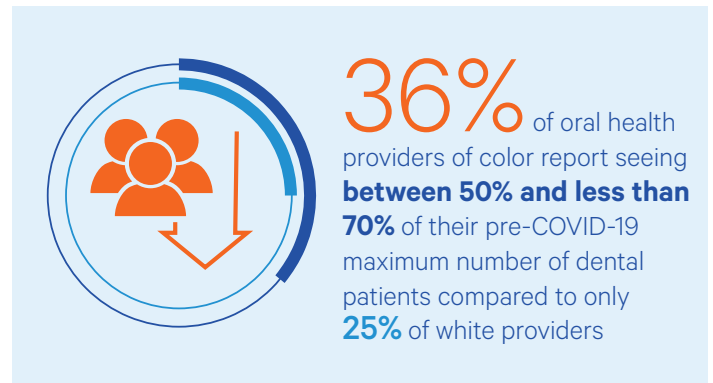
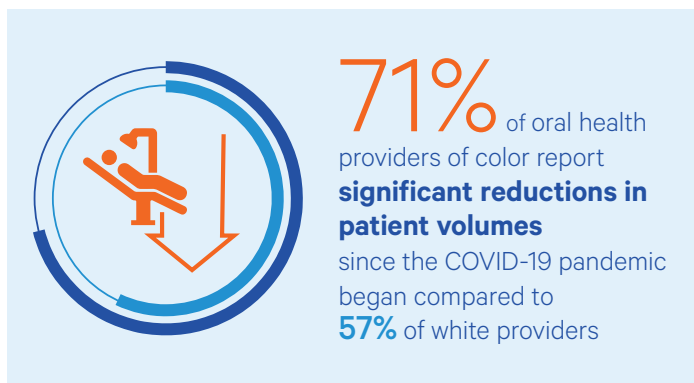
Methods

The DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement conducted this electronic survey from August 13 to September 1 by sending an emailed invitation and link to 21,617 DentaQuest-enrolled dental providers in more than 20 states. Up to three reminders were sent to encourage completion. Respondents were only asked to complete the entire survey if they indicated having a high degree of familiarity with their dental office's patient volume, staffing, dental insurance carriers, treatment protocols, and the office's pre- and post-COVID finances. A total of 2,767 dental providers partially or fully completed the survey for a response rate of 13%. Our analytical sample was limited to providers who passed screening questions, answered the question on racial identification, and excluded public health dental providers to obtain a subsample of 1,568 dental providers stratified by race, with 758 providers identifying as white, 332 identifying as Asian, 156 as Hispanic, 103 as Black, 19 as American Indian, and 300 as "other." Together, those who identified as non-white are referred to as "providers of color." Supplemental analysis reveals no significant differences in the findings between oral health providers of color.

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted oral health care delivery for patients while creating operational and financial uncertainty for dental practices. The pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of color, who have suffered higher rates of hospitalization and death. Just as these communities are experiencing disparities in COVID-19 illness and death, a similar disparity is playing out in how this crisis affects oral health providers of color.

When it comes to delivering oral health care, a survey by the DentaQuest Partnership for Oral Health Advancement in August 2020 reveals that oral health providers who identify as non-white are bearing a greater burden during the COVID-19 pandemic than their white counterparts in adopting new protocols for providing care and coping with related financial pressures. The survey's findings show the pandemic-related changes have disproportionately affected these providers in terms of patient and payment volumes and capacity:

- 71% of oral health providers of color report significant reductions in patient volumes since the COVID-19 pandemic began, compared to 57% of white providers. This 14% gap remains even after accounting for the location and type of practice.
- Oral health providers of color (85%) are more likely than white providers (70%) to report a reduction in maximum number of patients seen per day due to the pandemic-related changes in patient treatment protocols.
- 36% of oral health providers of color report seeing between 50% and less than 70% of their pre-COVID-19 maximum number of dental patients, while only 25% of white providers say they are seeing this proportion of their pre-pandemic patient population.
- 53% of oral health providers of color are seeing fewer new patients than before the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to 40% of white providers.



Firmly Committed to Infection Control Efforts

Despite increased burdens that resulted from COVID-19, providers of color place high importance on adopting practices that protect dental patients and staff.

- Roughly 60% of oral health providers of color think it's extremely important to reduce the spread of aerosols through the air and to reduce the use of aerosol-generating procedures, compared to slightly less than half of white providers.
- More than 90% of all oral health providers, regardless of race and ethnicity, agreed that it was extremely important to clean and disinfect operatories and properly use and secure personal protective equipment (PPE).

Although the survey did not identify reasons why oral health providers of color place greater importance on practices to enhance safety, this attitude could reflect the fact that these dental providers are more likely to serve patients of color, who have suffered disproportionately from COVID-19.

Impact of COVID-19 on Communities of Color

Oral health providers of color tend to return to communities of color to provide oral health care. Historically disadvantaged communities of color, particularly Black, Hispanic, and Native American people, are disproportionately affected by COVID-19. These populations are [more likely to get infected](#) with COVID-19, are 3 to 4 times more likely to be hospitalized with COVID-19, and have died at twice the rate of white Americans. Since February 2020, more than [1 in 1,000 Black Americans](#) have died of COVID-19. The [causes of these disparities are multifaceted](#) and include being concentrated in low-income communities, greater use of public transit, and lower-paying frontline jobs, which lead to greater exposure to the virus. Significantly higher rates of underlying health conditions such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and asthma in these communities lead to a higher risk of hospitalization and death in their residents. The burden of COVID-19 on communities of color has impacted them economically, mentally, and physically, and significantly contributes to and complicates the social inequities seen, which continue today. About 31% of Black Americans in a Washington Post and Ipsos poll indicated that they knew someone who has died from COVID-19, compared to only 9% of white Americans.



60% of oral health providers of color think it's **extremely important to reduce the spread of aerosols through the air** and the use of aerosol-generating procedures compared to slightly less than **50%** of white providers



More than 90% of **all** oral health providers agreed that it was **extremely important to clean and disinfect operatories** and properly use and secure personal protective equipment

More Open to New Approaches

Oral health providers of color are more likely to expect and accept noncontact dentistry as well as other long-term changes that COVID-19 might bring to the dental profession.

- 47% of oral health providers of color anticipate changes in the types of dental procedures they perform or in the way these procedures are conducted, compared to 36% of white providers.
 - 52% of oral health providers of color expect an increased use of minimally invasive and/or limited aerosol-generating procedures, while just 36% of white oral health providers foresee this change.
 - Overall, more than 6 in 10 oral health providers of all races and ethnicities anticipate changes in infection control procedures.
- 69% of providers of color expect changes in the number of patients seen in a typical day, compared to 52% of white providers.

Oral health providers of color are somewhat more likely than white providers to offer oral health services through telehealth and to expect noncontact dentistry to increase:

- 38% of oral health providers of color are currently using telehealth or plan to use it in the near future, compared to 28% of white providers.
- Despite differences in attitudes by race/ethnicity, more than 70% of all providers who use teledentistry expect telehealth encounters to increase or stay the same (76% of providers of color and 80% of white providers).
- 30% of oral health providers of color anticipate increased use of noncontact dentistry (telehealth, telephone calls, etc.), compared to 18% of white providers.
- 21% of oral health providers of color think it's extremely important to utilize telehealth, compared to 12% of white providers.

Alternative Payment Models (APMs)

An APM is a payment approach that gives added incentive payments to provide high-quality and cost-efficient care. It is a form of reimbursement that is not based on the traditional fee-for-service model and that is expected to demonstrate better outcomes for patients at a lower cost. APMs can apply to a specific clinical condition, a care episode, or a population.

In addition, oral health providers of color are more interested than their white peers in learning about how alternative payment models (APMs) could facilitate whole-patient care and serve as a new source of revenue:

- 22% of oral health providers of color anticipate an increased use of APMs as revenue sources, compared to only 10% of white providers.
- 34% of oral health providers of color have an increased interest in learning about APMs, compared to 20% of white providers.
- 16% of oral health providers of color report an increased ability to engage in new or expanded APMs, while only 6% of white providers say they have this ability.
- At least 13% of oral health providers of color report that dental providers should continue expanding value-based payment models and/or implementing APMs such as capitation, in which some or all of reimbursement is paid regardless of utilization as long as benchmarks are met. In contrast, only 7% of white providers feel this way.



Far-Reaching Impacts of COVID-19 on Providers and Communities

Oral health providers of color are impacted by, and see first-hand, the impact of COVID-19 on their communities and the patients of color that they serve. They are uniquely aware of both the effects of oral health on overall health and how COVID-19 affects their patients and those in the community. The disproportionate reduction in patient volume seen in the survey is likely associated with patient fears, illness, and death from COVID-19. Oral health providers of color recognize the role of infection control in providing access to care for a patient base disproportionately impacted by an extremely infectious disease along with their concern for the safety of their patients, themselves, their staff, and the community.

Understanding the impact of this disease and the need to care for their patients, oral health providers of color also are more willing to consider minimally invasive procedures and APMs as well as virtual patient encounters such as teledentistry. Not only are these efforts an attempt to continue to provide access to the care needed by their patients, they also reflect a desire to increase health literacy about the COVID-19 virus and vaccine, identify methods of providing care based on patient behaviors and comfort levels, and maintain the viability of their practices in these unprecedented times.

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CareQuest Institute for Oral Health

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