



PERCEPTIONS OF DENTAL THERAPY
REPORT

Dental Students in Michigan

August 2022



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INTRODUCTION

In December 2018, the Michigan legislature passed Senate Bill 541, approving dental therapists as the newest members of the oral health care workforce. This legislative policy was enacted as a strategy to increase access to dental services and to meet the needs of underserved populations in Michigan. Since the bill passed, administrative rules have been promulgated and, as of April 2021, dental therapists have had the ability to practice in the state. The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) has taken the necessary steps to allow licensed dental therapists to enroll in Michigan Medicaid and be reimbursed for services. However, there are currently no dental therapists practicing in the state of Michigan and there are no Michigan-based colleges or universities that offer a dental therapy education program for prospective students.

A survey of dental students was completed as part of a larger study to gain a better understanding of the current context surrounding dental therapy. Specifically, this survey was designed to identify students' perceptions and attitudes toward dental therapy. The survey was targeted to students actively enrolled in a dental school in Michigan.

A total of 52 respondents completed a survey.

RESPONDENTS

Who Responded to the Survey?



Half of respondents were in the first or second year of dental school and half were in the third or fourth year of dental school.



After graduation, many respondents were interested in working as a resident, intern, or associate in a practice or as a full or partial owner of a group practice. Less than one-quarter of respondents expressed interest in working in a community health setting, such as a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC), community health center, or Tribal health center.



Most respondents anticipate debt after graduation – half expect to have \$300,000 or more in debt.



More than half of respondents were female and one-third were male. Half of respondents were White or Caucasian, 15% were Asian or Asian American, 8% were Hispanic, 6% were Black or African American, and 2% were American Indian or Alaska Native.



Peer-reviewed journals, professional associations, and instructors, were information sources that respondents would use to learn more about dental therapy.

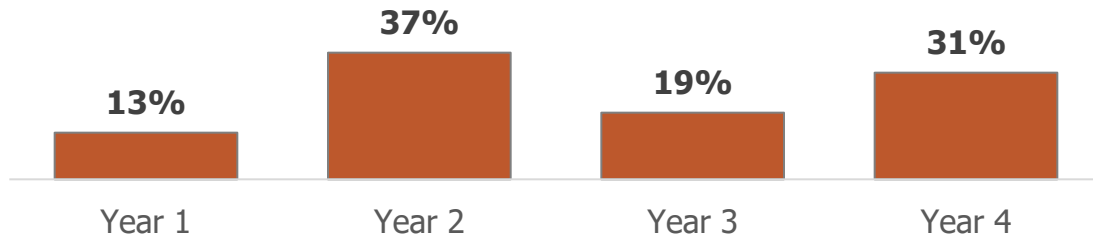


“I have been waiting for this and could not be more excited to have dental therapists here in Michigan. I believe so strongly that this change can make a huge positive impact and that it is 110% necessary to reach the populations that need us the most!” –

Second Year Dental Student

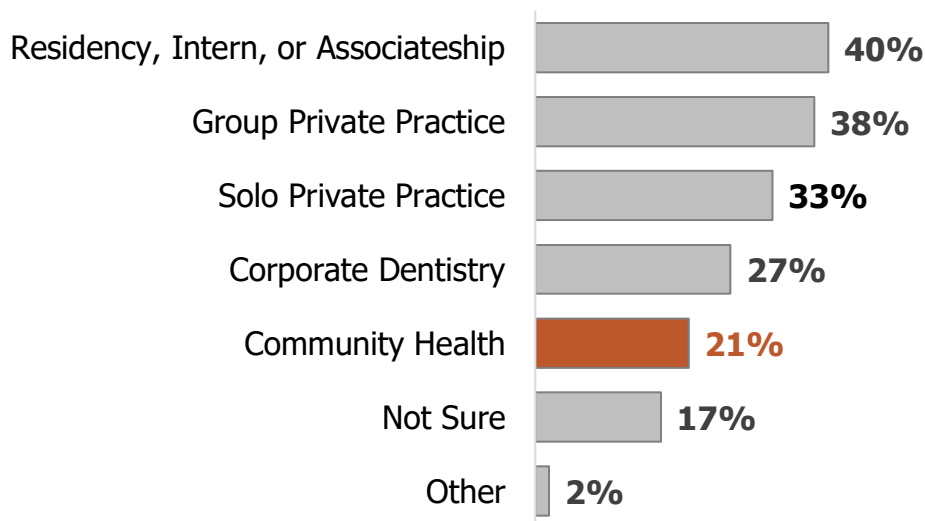
Detailed figures are presented on pages 5-7.

Figure 1. Respondents by Years of Enrollment in Education Program



The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by years of enrollment in dental school.

Figure 2. Respondents by Career Plans After Graduation

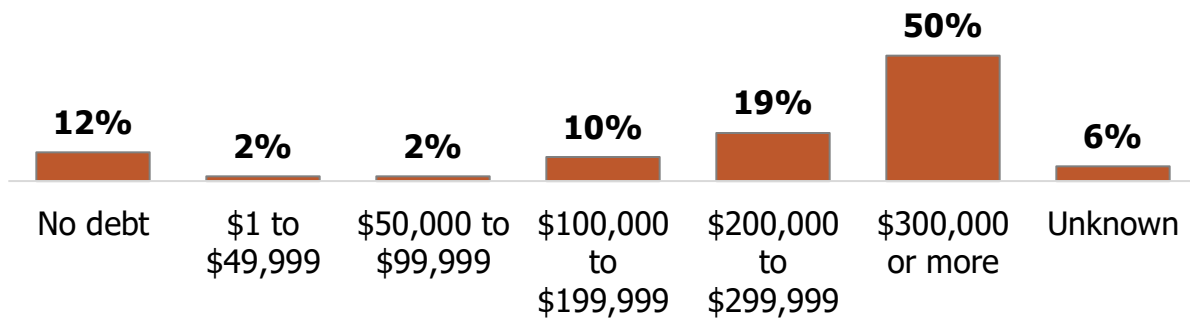


The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by career plans after graduation. Categories were not mutually exclusive and respondents could select more than one choice.



“We have not learned much about this profession in my education. If this group of health professionals are joining our community we need to know more about their scope of practice and duties.” – Second Year Dental Student

Figure 3. Anticipated Debt Amount Upon Graduation

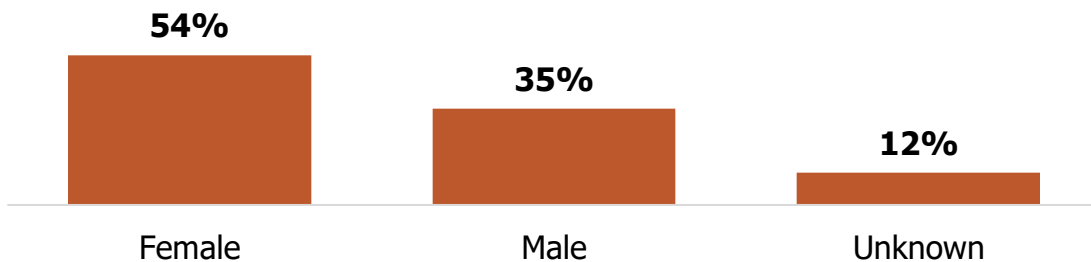


The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by anticipated debt after graduation. Approximately 6% of respondents did not respond to this question (unknown).



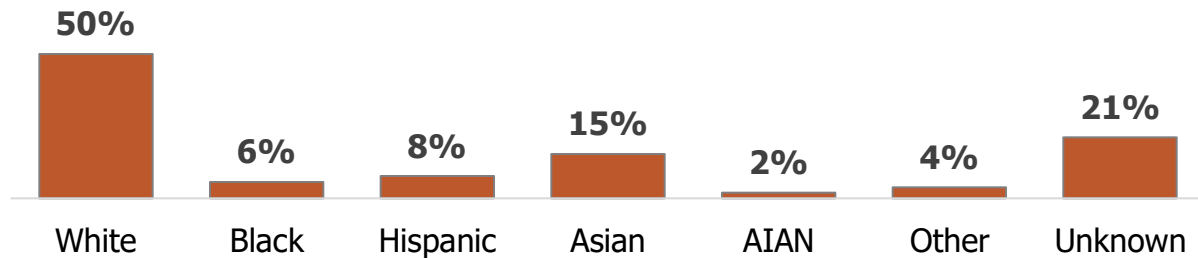
“In the US higher education system, there is no potential for dental therapists to serve the undeserved. The amount of debt I am taking on as a dental student is insanely high. The same will apply for a dental therapist...Expecting people to take on a high burden of debt to then ONLY go and serve in areas where they will be likely to earn low and be unable to pay off their student debt in a reasonable time is absolutely out of touch.” – Third Year Dental Student

Figure 4. Gender Reported by Respondents



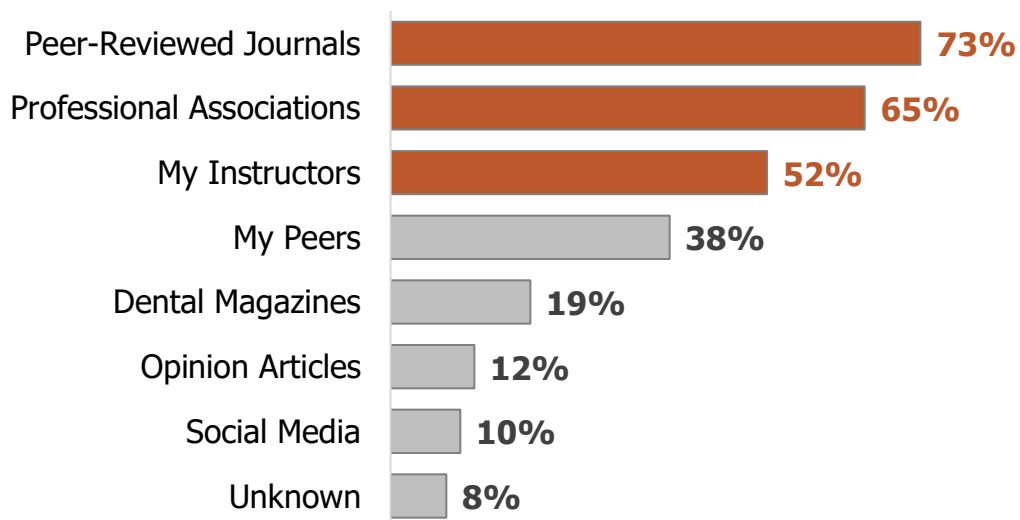
The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by gender. Approximately 12% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (unknown).

Figure 5. Race and Ethnicity Reported by Respondents



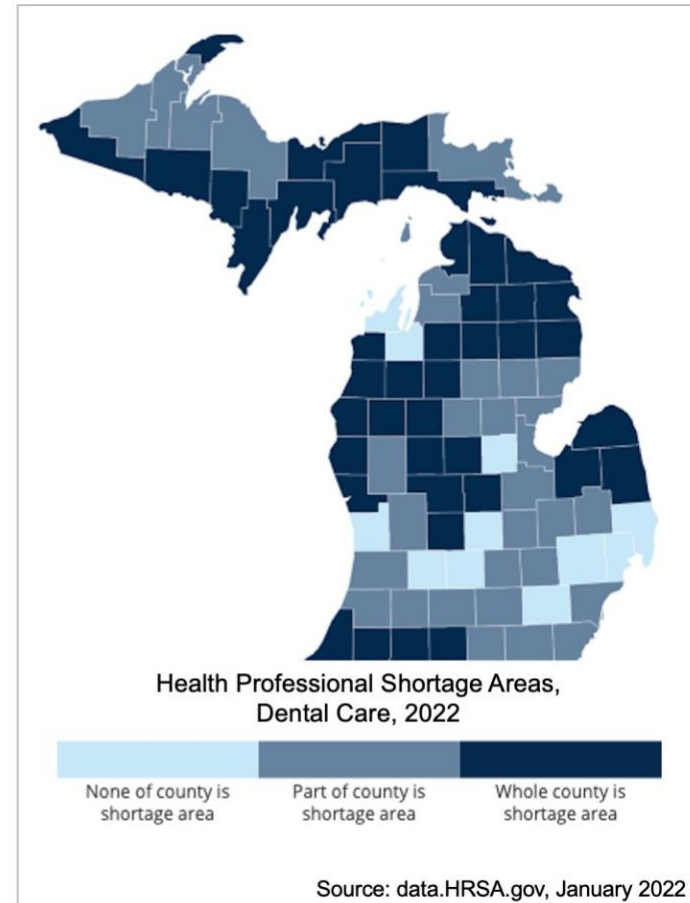
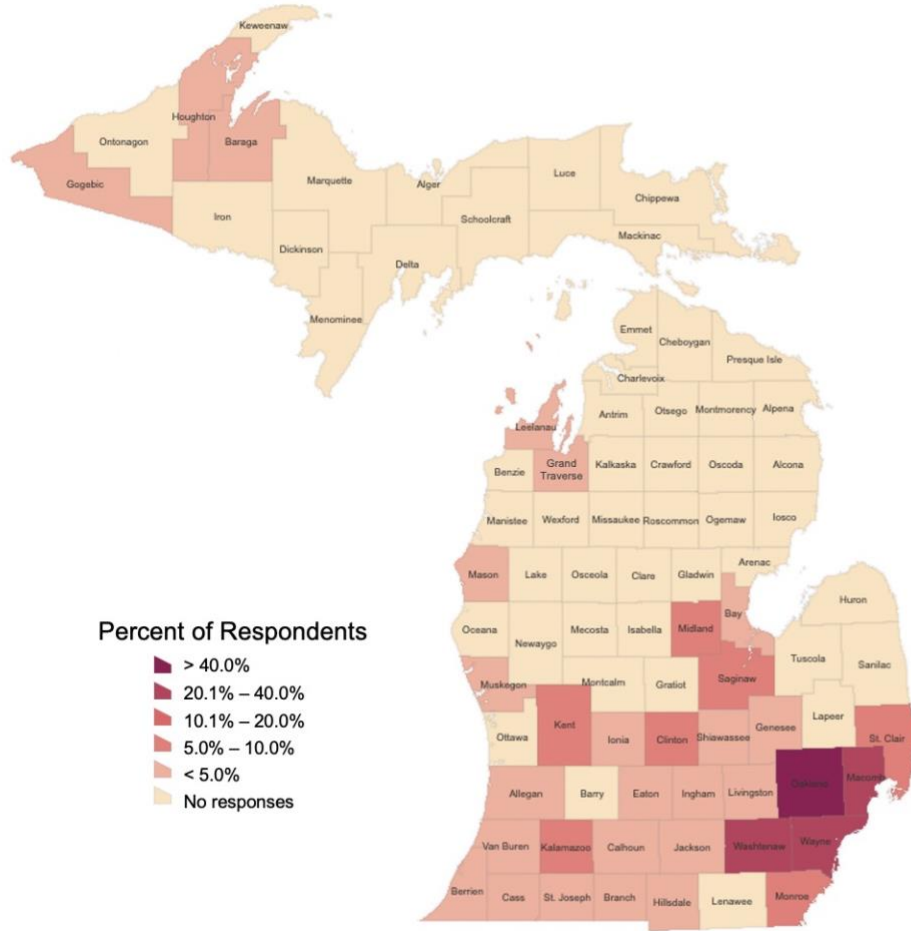
The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by race and ethnicity. AIAN = American Indian or Alaska Native; Other race and ethnicity includes respondents who identified as Caribbean or Middle Eastern. Categories were not mutually exclusive and respondents could select more than one race or ethnicity. Approximately 21% of respondents did not provide an answer to this question (unknown).

Figure 6. Preferred Information Source to Learn About Dental Therapy



The figure above presents the percent of survey respondents by the preferred information source to learn more about dental therapy. Categories were not mutually exclusive and respondents could select more than one information source.

Where in Michigan Would Respondents Like to Practice?



Respondents were asked to indicate where they would prefer to practice as a dentist. Approximately 12% of respondents reported that they did not intend to practice in Michigan and 8% did not have a preference of where to practice in Michigan. Of the remaining 42 respondents, most preferred to practice in Oakland (41%), Wayne (31%), Washtenaw (26%), and Macomb (24%) counties.

ATTITUDES

What Are Respondents' Attitudes Towards Dental Therapy?

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with eight statements related to dental therapy.



The majority of respondents agreed that dental practitioners have a responsibility to provide care to underserved populations and that significant disparities exist for many residents due to poor access to care.



Less respondents agreed that the dental therapy model will improve access to care in underserved areas and will expand the number of practices that accept Medicaid insurance.



More than half of respondents agreed that they had a good understanding of the role of dental therapists; nearly one-quarter reported they did not have a good understanding and 19% were unsure about their understanding of dental therapy.



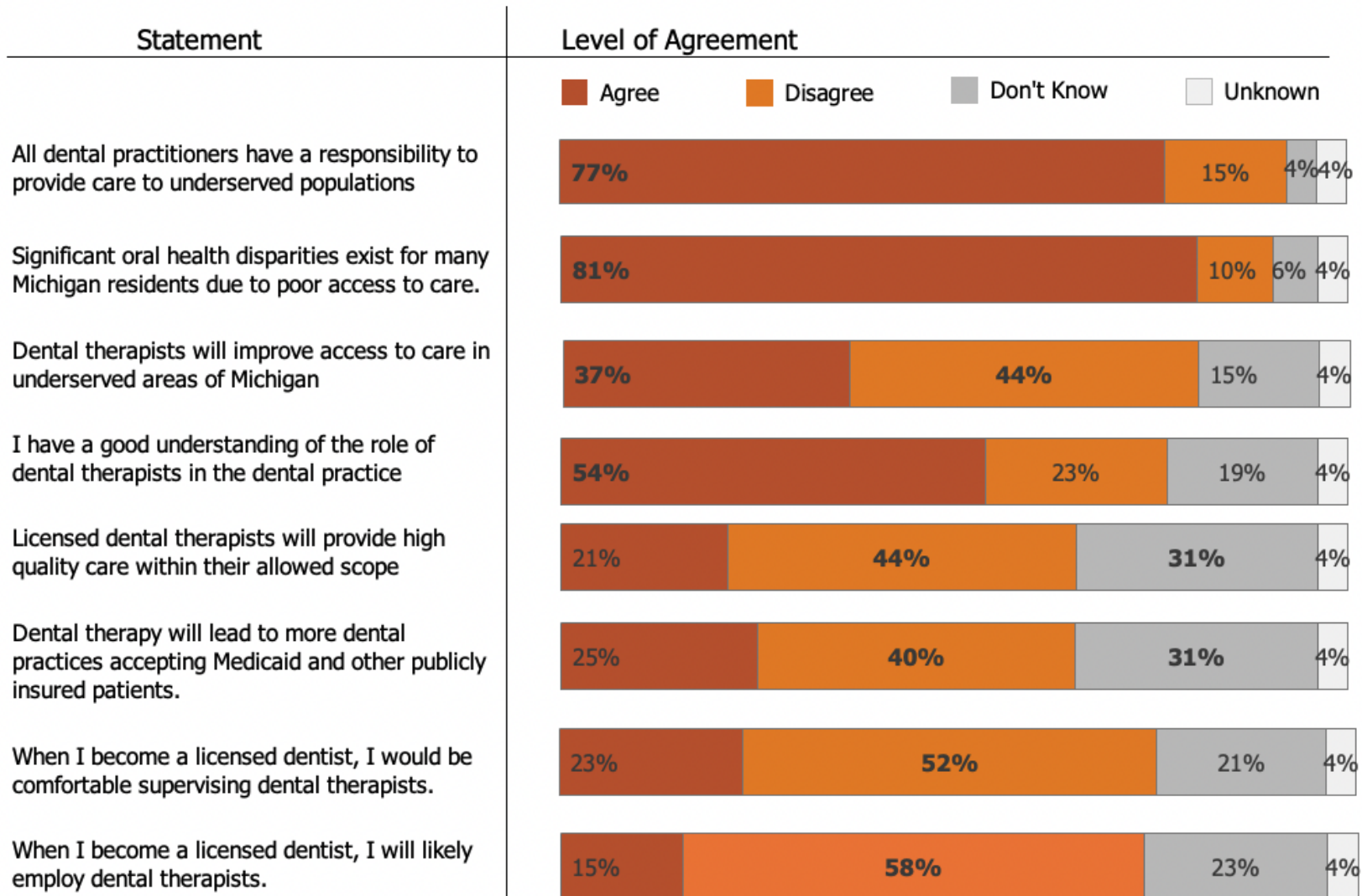
Only 21% of respondents agreed that licensed dental therapists will provide high quality care.



Less than one-quarter of respondents agreed that, when they become dentists, they would be comfortable supervising dental therapists and 15% of respondents agreed that they will likely employ dental therapists.

A detailed figure is presented on page 10.

Figure 8. Respondents' Agreement with Statements Related to Dental Therapy



COMMENTS

What Comments Did Respondents Share?

Respondents were offered an open space to share any additional thoughts or comments about dental therapy and 15 of the 52 respondents (29%) provided comments.

Responses were reviewed and organized based on common ideas. The following themes that emerged related to the role of dental therapists on the dental care team, the novelty of the dental therapy workforce model, and access to oral health care for underserved communities.



Role of Dental Therapists. Some respondents did not readily see where dental therapists fit within the dental care team. They felt that the skills of dental therapists were redundant to a dentist and that dental therapists would divert job opportunities from dentists.

"With increasing number of dental schools opening and debt rising, there is no need to have a mid-provider considering that it's hard to secure a job with over saturation of the market. We do not need to lose our patients to dental therapists....Private practices would be less willing to hire associates and more willing to hire a "dental therapist" for lower pay, especially if restorations are involved." – Third Year Dental Student

"If dental therapists do preventive and restorative work, then what roles will a dentist have?" – Third Year Dental Student



Novelty of Dental Therapy Model. Some respondents noted the newness of the dental therapy workforce model and commented on the importance of learning more about dental therapists' scope and duties to better prepare them in their professional careers as dentists.

"We have not learned much about this profession in my education. If this group of health professionals are joining our community we need to know more about their scope of practice and duties." – Second Year Dental Student

"I believe many of my peers lack professional experience and have narrow minded views on the upcoming mid-level provider. They also lack understanding of what other team members in the profession are capable of and I believe it skews their opinions of the upcoming profession." – Second Year Dental Student



Access to Dental Care. Some respondents commented on the ability to increase access to oral health care within underserved populations. While one respondent believed that this would help reach underserved populations, another respondent did not believe that the dental therapy model could succeed.

"I have been waiting for this and could not be more excited to have dental therapists here in Michigan. I believe so strongly that this change can make a huge positive impact and that it is 110% necessary to reach the populations that need us the most!" – Second Year Dental Student

"In the US higher education system, there is no potential for dental therapists to serve the undeserved. The amount of debt I am taking on as a dental student is insanely high. The same will apply for a dental therapist...Expecting people to take on a high burden of debt to then ONLY go and serve in areas where they will be likely to earn low and be unable to pay off their student debt in a reasonable time is absolutely out of touch." – Third Year Dental Student

CONCLUSIONS

Support for Dental Therapy. The dental students who responded to this survey generally did not have a good opinion of dental therapy, with the majority believing dental therapists will not deliver high-quality care. Less than one-quarter of respondents were open to the idea of supervising or employing dental therapists. Several respondents indicated concern that dental therapists may compete for their patient pool or employment opportunities. Also notable is the extremely low response rate, as over 1,200 students in Michigan's dental education system were invited to participate. An opportunity exists to engage with Michigan dental students in meaningful ways to improve their perception of dental therapy.

Reaching Underserved Populations. Although most respondents acknowledged that oral health disparities exist due to lack of access and agreed that all providers have a responsibility to provide care to underserved populations, less than one quarter were interested in practicing in a public health setting. Additionally, respondents' preferred practice areas closely aligned with the better-served regions shown on Michigan's Dental HPSA map (on page 8). These trends underscore the concern that, under the previous dental workforce structure, future dentists would not close the care gaps that maintain disparities in underserved communities. However, utilizing dental therapists to reach care to communities in need will be of great value to both dental teams and patients.

Misinformation About Dental Therapy. The Michigan dental community is early in its learning curve about the dental therapy profession. Just over half of dental student respondents felt they had a good understanding of the dental therapist's role in the dental team. Furthermore, many of the responses and comments indicated either a lack of awareness or misunderstandings about dental therapy. Considering dental students will graduate into a workforce that includes dental therapists, it is especially important to ensure that thorough and accurate information reaches them before they begin practicing.

NEXT STEPS



Utilize the most-cited sources for information about dental therapy to disseminate accurate information. Include dental therapy articles in peer-reviewed journals and student association newsletters.



Offer in-class sessions about dental therapists as team members students may work with upon graduation.



Develop and share resources demonstrating the types of settings dental therapy legislation allows, showing the low risk of competition to dentists in non-shortage areas.



Develop and share resources showing the typical service mix in public health settings and the potential for dental therapy to allow working higher in scope for public health dentists.



Distribute this report to the Michigan dental professional communities, dental educators, dental and allied dental students, foundations supportive of dental initiatives, oral health coalitions, associations, and other supportive organizations.

RESOURCES

For additional information about dental therapy:

- Center for Health Workforce Studies, School of Public Health, University at Albany, State University of New York, May 2022: [Provider and Patient Satisfaction With the Dental Therapy Workforce at Apple Tree Dental](#)
- Center for Health Workforce Studies, School of Public Health, University at Albany, State University of New York, August 2020: [The Contributions of Dental Therapists and Advanced Dental Therapists in the Dental Centers of Apple Tree Dental in Minnesota](#)
- [National Partnership for Dental Therapy](#)
- [MI Dental Access](#)

METHODS

The 16-question survey was administered via Survey Monkey, an online survey software company. The survey was open from March 22, 2022 to April 22, 2022. Questions on respondents' attitudes toward dental therapy were adapted from a previous study¹ using a three-item categorical scale (agree, disagree, and don't know). To gain a deeper understanding of how dental therapy was perceived by respondents, an open-ended question asking for additional thoughts or comments about dental therapy was included at the end of the survey. Demographic questions asked about year of study in dental school, career plans post-graduation, preferred geographic region to practice dentistry, anticipated debt after graduation, race or ethnicity, and gender.

To reach students, an email invitation with a survey link was sent to key contacts of dental school programs in Michigan in which a request was made to forward the email invitation to their relevant students. Key contacts included program directors of dental schools at the University of Detroit Mercy and University of Michigan.

There are limitations to these findings. As this study used a convenience sample to survey dental students, findings are not generalizable to the population of students as a whole. Also, students who either felt strongly in favor of or strongly opposed to dental therapy may have been more likely to complete the survey.

¹ Lopez, N., Blue, Christine Mary, Self, Karl D. "Dental School Faculty Perceptions of and Attitudes Toward the New Dental Therapy Model." *Journal of Dental Education*, Vol. 76, No. 4, 383-394, 2012.

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