



# Decolonization and Oral Health: A Literature Review

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## BACKGROUND

Indigenous children experience some of the most severe oral health inequities in colonized nations, such as the United States, including disproportionate burdens of dental disease. The American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry acknowledges structural racism shapes social determinants of oral health and identifies Indigenous children as a vulnerable population (AAPD, 2025). AAPD guidelines identify the need for a diverse workforce, discuss elimination of implicit bias in training and education, and acknowledge importance of DEI initiatives, as well as identifying systemic racism as a social determinant of health. This policy falls short of providing a framework for transformation and change. Decolonization is a critical assessment of the impacts of colonization on oral health outcomes and provides framework for solutions to rectify the system level harms of colonization.

## METHODS

Type of study: Qualitative Literature Review  
Articles published with a focus on the decolonization framework in healthcare were analyzed.  
Databases Searched: MEDLINE, Google Scholar, and PubMed, ScienceDirect. Microsoft Co-pilot (Artificial Intelligence) was used as an organizational aid during preliminary article review. Final screening, including decisions and thematic synthesis were conducted by the author.

Inclusion Criteria: 1) reports published in last 30 years, 2) reports that included health and/or oral health in Indigenous populations, 3) reports that discuss decolonization

Exclusion Criteria : 1) unpublished articles, 2) articles that do not discuss health and/or oral health.

Sixty articles were identified; some were duplicates, some were inaccessible and some fell within the exclusion criteria. Twelve articles remained for the qualitative literature review.

The selected studies were read in depth for concepts related to decolonization and analyzed for common themes, and implications that impact dentistry.

## RESULTS

Four main themes emerged: Community Centered Policy & Advocacy, Cultural Safety, Respect & Trust, Trauma Informed Care. The studies represent the global Indigenous and outline shared needs for representation within the dental workforce, the importance of self-determination, and culturally grounded policy.



## CONCLUSIONS

Decolonization offers a useful framework for addressing inequities in vulnerable populations in the health systems, specifically within the dental infrastructure, which could extend beyond Indigenous communities. It is imperative to consider that dental care can be administered through a lens that extends beyond colonization. The review of literature supports that Indigenous people and communities must be included in dental research, education, and health delivery to achieve oral health equity.

Further research *with* Indigenous communities is vital. Future research is needed to measure the impacts of equity-oriented care (decolonization) on organizational practices, patient outcomes, dental education, and population health.

## IMPLICATIONS

Restoring Indigenous autonomy and self-determination in healthcare through decolonization can create a more equitable dental care system for all demographics. There is consistent research and framework stating decolonization practices result in improved health outcomes. Federal dental policy, state dental policy, delivery care models and modalities, patient autonomy, dental education, and equity of care are all areas that should be explored, and decolonized, to address oral health disparities. Every single social determinant of health that impacts Indigenous communities can be correlated back to structural racism through colonization. The act of colonization itself has limited the voice and visibility of Indigenous communities through genocide.

This has created a gap between Indigenous knowledge and findings within literature. Research with Indigenous communities, through an Indigenous lens, can only strengthen the system to create more equitable, inclusive care.

"Promoting accountability in oral health systems and being open to addressing disparities that continue to harm Indigenous and marginalized communities worldwide will contribute to a more equitable and culturally responsive oral health care system for everyone (Foláyan et al., 2025)."

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