



Australian Government

**Australian Institute of
Health and Welfare**

AIHW

Oral health outreach services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Northern Territory

July 2012 to
December 2023



**Oral health outreach
services for Aboriginal
and Torres Strait
Islander children in the
Northern Territory**

July 2012 to
December 2023



The AIHW is a corporate Commonwealth entity producing authoritative and accessible information and statistics to inform and support better policy and service delivery decisions, leading to better health and wellbeing.

© Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2025



All material presented in this document is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence, with the exception of the Commonwealth Coat of Arms (the terms of use for the Coat of Arms are available at <https://www.pmc.gov.au/government/commonwealth-coat-arms>) or any material owned by third parties, including for example, design, layout or images obtained under licence from third parties and signatures. All reasonable efforts have been made to identify and label material owned by third parties.

The details of the relevant licence conditions are available on the Creative Commons website (available at <https://creativecommons.org>), as is the full legal code for the CC BY 4.0 license.

A complete list of the Institute's publications is available from the Institute's website www.aihw.gov.au.

ISBN 978-1-923272-61-3 (Online)

ISBN 978-1-923272-62-0 (Print)

DOI: 10.25816/vtc2-p720

Suggested citation

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2025) *Oral health outreach services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Northern Territory: July 2012 to December 2023*, catalogue number IHW 300, AIHW, Australian Government.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

Board Chair

The Hon Nicola Roxon

Chief Executive Officer

Dr Zoran Bolevich

Any enquiries relating to copyright or comments on this publication should be directed to:

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

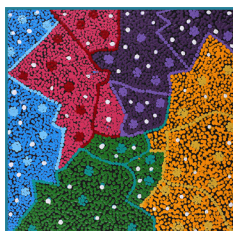
GPO Box 570

Canberra ACT 2601

Tel: (02) 6244 1000

Email: info@aihw.gov.au

Published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.



Ngapa Jukurrpa—Water Dreaming—Puyurru by Nikkita Nangala Sampson
© Warlukurlangu Artists Aboriginal Corporation

Please note that there is the potential for minor revisions of data in this report.
Please check the online version at www.aihw.gov.au for any amendments.

Contents

Summary	vii
1 Introduction	1
Oral health in the Northern Territory	2
Australian Government oral health programs in the Northern Territory	3
About this report	3
Comparability over time	4
Structure of the report	5
2 Dental service delivery	7
What services are provided?	9
Consent rates	9
How many children had full-mouth fluoride varnish and fissure sealant services? ..	10
Full-mouth fluoride varnish	10
Fissure sealants	13
How many children had clinical service visits?	16
Services provided	17
How were services delivered?	18
Trends	19
3 Oral health status	21
How many children had decayed, missing and filled teeth?	22
Oral health status of total population of children	25
Significant Caries Index	25
How has tooth decay experience changed over time?	26
4 Progress against benchmarks	29
Service delivery targets	30
Health outcome targets	31

Appendix A: About the Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment Oral Health Program data collection	32
Data collection, management and reporting	32
History of the program	33
Appendix B: Data quality statement	34
SFNT/NTRAI OHP dental data collection summary	34
Acknowledgments	35
Abbreviations	35
Glossary	36
References	38
List of tables	40
List of figures	40
Related publications	41

Summary

Oral health is an important part of overall health and quality of life. Poor oral health can affect adults and children alike, causing pain, embarrassment, even social marginalisation. For children, the effects can be long-term and carry through to adulthood.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (First Nations) children are more likely than non-Indigenous children to experience tooth decay. Several factors contribute to the poorer oral health of First Nations children, including social disadvantage and lack of access to appropriate diet and dental services.

Since 2007, the Australian Government has helped fund oral health services for First Nations children aged under 16 in the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment Oral Health Program (NTRAI OHP) complements the Northern Territory Government Child Oral Health Program by providing preventive (application of full-mouth fluoride varnish and fissure sealants) and clinical (tooth extractions, diagnostics, restorations and examinations) services.

This report presents data from the NTRAI OHP from July 2012 to December 2023.

How many First Nations children received services in the NTRAI OHP?

In 2023, full-mouth fluoride varnish services, fissure sealant applications and clinical service visits were provided to First Nations children in the Northern Territory under the NTRAI OHP. Of those children:

- 3,864 received 6,262 full-mouth fluoride varnish services, a decrease of 341 services from 2022
- 1,125 received fissure sealant applications to 5,161 teeth during 1,189 services, a decrease of 337 teeth from 2022
- 4,598 received clinical services during 6,973 visits—such as dental assessments, fillings, extractions, or preventive services—a decrease of 532 visits from 2022. This excludes 1,427 visits where only full-mouth fluoride varnish and/or fissure sealant services were provided.

In 2023:



3,864 children received fluoride varnish services



1,125 children received fissure sealant applications



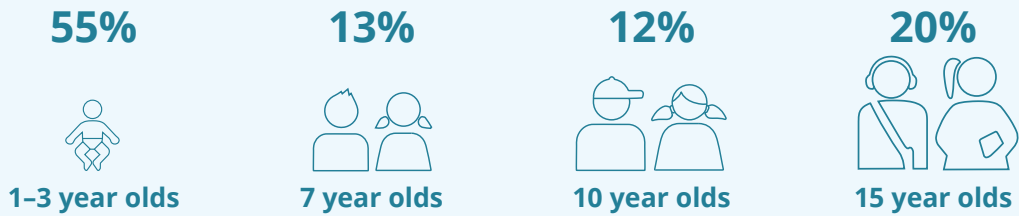
4,598 children received clinical service visits

Source: Table S2.1, S2.3 and S2.6.

How many First Nations children experienced tooth decay in the NTRAI OHP?

Tooth decay varied by age, and in 2023, children aged 10 experienced the highest rate of tooth decay (173 children or 88%). In comparison, children aged 1–3 experienced the lowest rates of tooth decay (117 children or 45%).

Proportion of children in the NTRAI OHP who were caries free varied by age in 2023



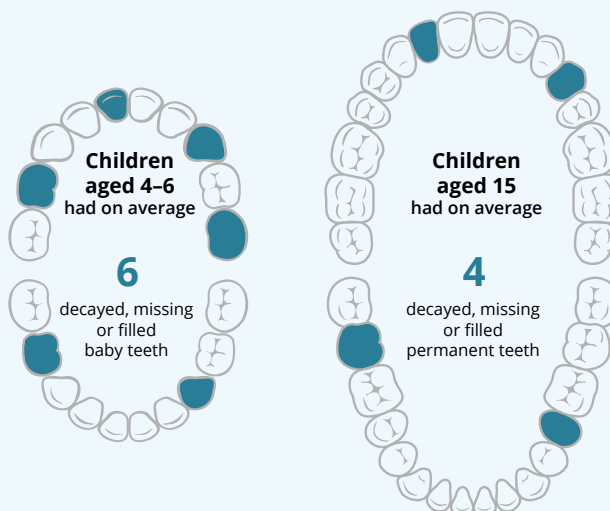
Source: Table S3.1.

How many decayed, missing or filled teeth did First Nations children have?

In addition to tooth decay, a widely used indicator to measure oral health status is a count of the number of decayed, missing or filled teeth.

On average, in 2023, children in the NTRAI OHP aged 4–6 had the highest average number of decayed, missing or filled baby teeth (dmft), at 6 teeth, while children aged 15 had the highest average number of decayed, missing or filled permanent teeth (DMFT), at 4 teeth.

Among First Nations children in the NTRAI OHP in 2023



Source: Table S3.1.

Is the program meeting its benchmarks?

Outcomes for the NTRAI OHP are monitored through performance indicators and benchmarks. The service delivery targets for all three service types were met or exceeded (Table S1).

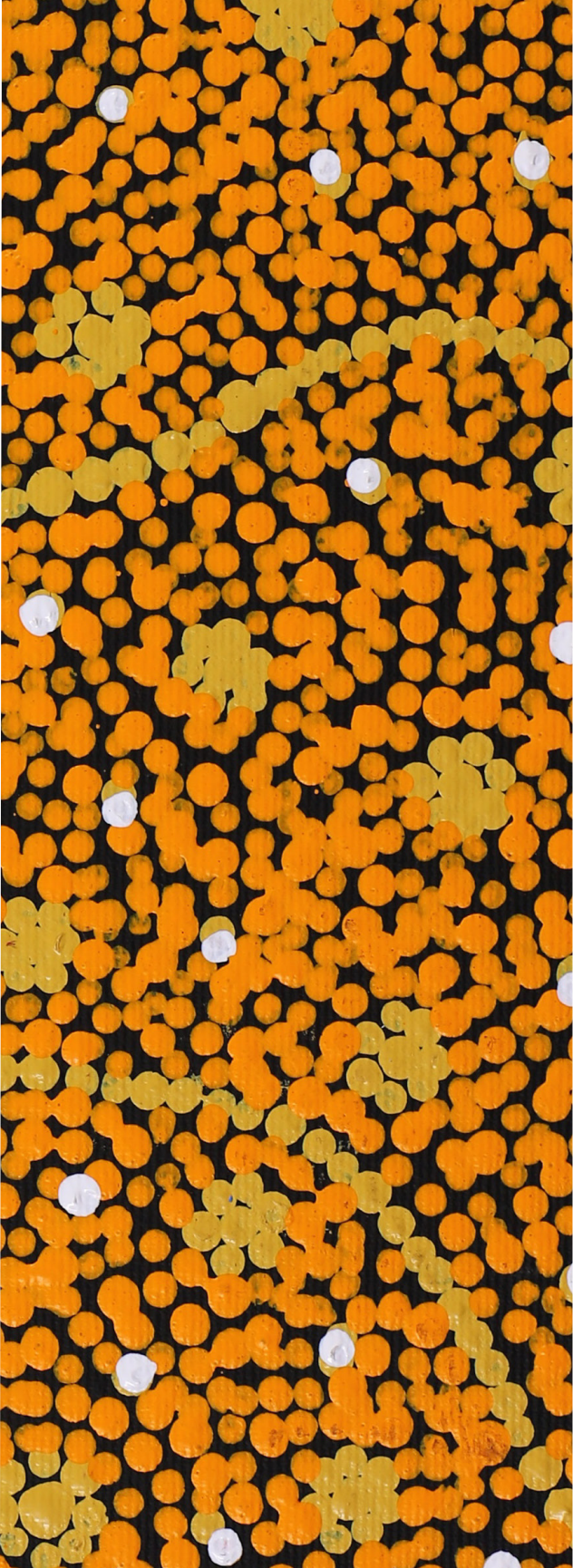
Table S1: Progress against benchmarks, 2023

Service delivery targets	Outcomes
At least 3,600 clinical service visits in 2023	6,973 clinical service visits ^{a,b}
At least 5,750 fluoride varnish applications in 2023	6,262 fluoride varnish applications provided
Fissure sealant applications to at least 1,500 teeth in 2023	Fissure sealant applications to 5,161 teeth
Health outcome targets	
At least 50% of total service items are preventive services	60% of total service items were preventive in 2023

(a) For the 1 January 2023 – 31 December 2023 reporting period, there were two additional payor codes.


(b) For the 1 January 2023 – 31 December 2023 reporting period, visits where only full-mouth fluoride varnish and/or fissure sealant services were provided were not included in reporting. These services were included in the 2020 and 2021 reporting periods.





1

Introduction



Oral health plays a vital role in overall health and can affect quality of life. Good oral health allows people to socialise and speak without pain, disease, discomfort or embarrassment. It can prevent children from being socially marginalised and embarrassed because of oral diseases and their consequences (NACDH 2012).

Oral health revolves around the health of the tissues in the mouth – bones, gums, muscles and teeth – with the most common oral diseases affecting the gums (periodontal disease) and teeth (tooth decay). Poor oral health has been linked to various chronic conditions including:

- cardiovascular disease
- oral cancers
- lung conditions
- diabetes
- stroke
- adverse pregnancy outcomes (DHSV 2011).

Poor oral health can affect adults and children alike, but in children, it can have additional long-term negative effects through to adulthood. Illness due to dental conditions or disease in childhood can restrict children’s participation in schooling. Further, dental disease may impair children’s appearance affecting their confidence and their capacity to socialise and develop relationships. As such, encouraging and maintaining good childhood oral health habits, and having access to oral health services, are important to prevent dental disease (NACDH 2012).

Data for First Nations children aged 5–14 show that, in 2018, dental caries accounted for 4.4% of the total non-fatal burden of disease for boys and 5.2% for girls (AIHW 2022).

First Nations Australians are less likely to receive preventive dental care than non-Indigenous Australians and are more likely to have untreated dental disease or to be hospitalised due to oral health (Jamieson et al. 2010; Kruger & Tennant 2015).

Oral health in the Northern Territory

At 30 June 2023, there were an estimated 22,500 First Nations children aged under 16 in the Northern Territory—constituting 41% of the population in the Northern Territory aged under 16. The proportion of the population aged under 16 that identifies as First Nations people is highest in the Northern Territory of all Australian states and territories (proportions range from 2% and 15% in other jurisdictions) (AIHW analysis of ABS 2024).

Children in the Northern Territory have higher levels of tooth decay than in other states and territories and First Nations children experience about 1.5 times as much tooth decay as non-Indigenous children (Ha et al. 2016).

Several factors contribute to the poorer oral health of First Nations children, including:

- poverty and social disadvantage
- lack of availability and access to appropriate diet, resulting in the consumption of processed sugary foods and drinks
- lower use of fluoridated toothpaste
- lack of fluoridated water
- limited or no access to dental services, especially in rural and remote areas.

Australian Government oral health programs in the Northern Territory

The Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment Oral Health Program (NTRAI OHP) – funded by the Australian Government and implemented by the Northern Territory Department of Health—is designed to complement and support existing public dental services.

The program began in July 2015 with funded activities aiming to decrease the prevalence, incidence, severity and impact of oral health problems of First Nations children in the Northern Territory (CFFR 2016). The program works with primary health-care providers to incorporate primary prevention into their services and deliver clinical oral health treatments to First Nations children.


The NTRAI OHP supersedes the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory (SFNT) (July 2012–June 2015) and the Child Health Check Initiative – Closing the Gap, or CHCI(CtG) (2007 to mid-2012) programs.

This report focuses on data collected from the SFNT and NTRAI programs, but also includes some information about changes in oral health over 2009–2023. For more information on the history of the program, see Appendix A.

About this report

This report is an update of the *Oral health outreach services for First Nations children in the Northern Territory: July 2012 to December 2022* report. Supplementary tables are available at <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/indigenous-australians/oral-health-outreach-services-2012-2023/data>.

This report presents information on oral health services provided First Nations children under the age of 16 in the Northern Territory including services provided under the NTRAI OHP and the SFNT OHP. Not all dental services provided in the Northern Territory are captured within this report. The data includes more than 20,000 First Nations children under the age of 16, including those who came through the SFNT/NTRAI OHP between July 2012 and December 2023.



Services provided under the NTRAI OHP are available territory-wide to First Nations children under the age of 16, but mainly focus on children living in remote areas, where the need is greater. Children and young people who receive services through the NTRAI OHP are not a random sample of the population, so the data might not be representative of the general population of First Nations children in the Northern Territory.

This report presents demographic information for children whose parent or guardian provided consent to share their information with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). The consent rate varies depending on the service provided (see Chapter 2 for more information). When a child's parent or guardian does not provide consent to share information, only a limited amount of aggregated information are available to the AIHW.

Children may receive more than one service so the count of services may over estimate the number of children who receive services. In 2023, the proportion of children who received NTRAI OHP services varied by remoteness areas. Of the 3,981 children and young people aged 0–15 with consent to share information, 2,212 children (56%) received NTRAI OHP services in *Very remote* areas, 1,158 (29%) in *Remote* areas, and 611 (15%) received those services in *Outer regional* areas.

Comparability over time

Over time there have been a number of changes to reporting of clinical service visits which may affect the comparability of data over that period of time. Key changes include:

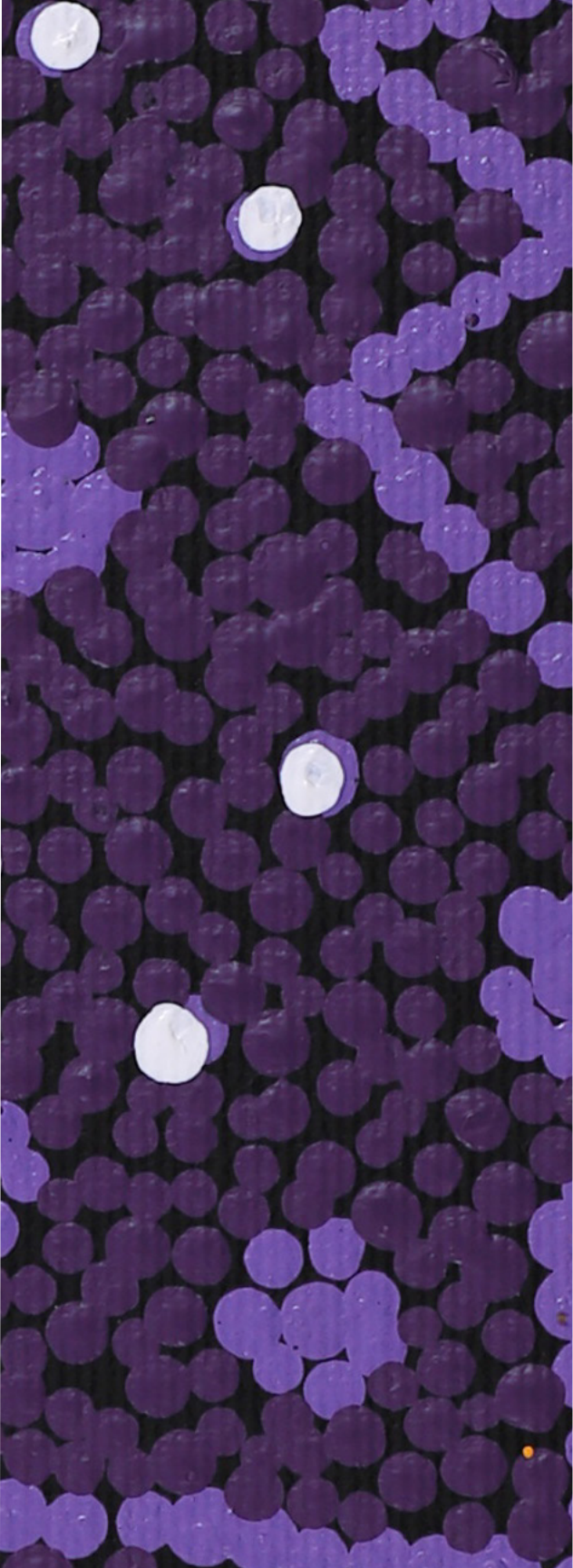
- For 2020 and 2021 the specification for counting the number of clinical service visits for benchmark outcomes included visits where only full-mouth fluoride varnish and/or fissure sealant services were provided
- Data for 2022 and 2023 includes all clinical service visits provided to First Nations children under the age of 16 (those that meet the NTRAI OHP eligibility criteria). These services may be provided under the NTRAI OHP and/or the Northern Territory Government Child Oral Health Program. In previous years, data presented in these reports focused on services that were identified as provided through NTRAI OHP only. This change affects the number of clinical service visits for 2022 and 2023.



Structure of the report

- **Chapter 1** presents the oral health and Australian Government oral health programs in the Northern Territory.
- **Chapter 2** provides information about oral health outreach services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Northern Territory.
- **Chapter 3** presents oral health status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the program.
- **Chapter 4** provides evaluations on whether the program met its benchmarks.
- **Appendix A** provides information about the Oral Health Program data collection.
- **Appendix B** provides information on data quality statement for SFNT/NTRAI OHP dental data collection.





2

Dental service delivery



Key findings

In 2023, in the NTRAI OHP:

- around 3,900 children received full-mouth fluoride varnish services
- around 1,100 children received fissure sealant applications
- children aged 12–15 had the highest average number of teeth with fissure sealants (6.3 teeth per child)
- nearly 4,600 children received clinical services, such as dental examinations, extractions, and restorative procedures – of whom half (50%) were aged 6–11.

Two main types of services are delivered through the NTRAI OHP – preventive and clinical (Box 2.1).

Box 2.1: Types of services

Visit: An attendance (including scheduled and walk-in) at a dental clinic on a specific date. A single visit can involve multiple types of services.

Preventive services

Preventive service: Includes the removal of plaque and calculus, oral hygiene instruction, application of fissure sealants, application of full-mouth fluoride varnish, and other preventive services.

Full-mouth fluoride varnish: The application of a clinically determined amount of fluoride varnish (a concentrated form of fluoride) to the surfaces of the teeth.

Fissure sealants: The application of a protective adhesive to grooves in the biting surfaces of teeth at the back of the mouth, usually as soon as adult molars erupt. The sealants prevent dental plaque and acid build-up, and can last for many years, but require regular check-ups to see if the sealant is intact.

Clinical services

Clinical service: Can include restorative services, endodontics, tooth extractions, diagnostic services or assessments, orthodontic services and periodontic services (treatment of gums).

Clinical service visit: A visit where at least 1 clinical service was delivered (excluding visits where only full-mouth fluoride varnish application and/or fissure sealants were delivered).

What services are provided?

The NTRAI OHP provides funding for clinical and preventive oral health services to First Nations children in the Northern Territory. NTRAI OHP complements and supports services in remote areas that are funded by the Northern Territory Government. Figure 2.1 contains a broad overview of the services and the number of clinical and preventive services provided.

Preventive services are part of routine care in all dental clinics and are provided as part of an individual's dental treatment plan. Specific preventive services include the application of full-mouth fluoride varnish and fissure sealants. Other preventive services include the removal of plaque/calculus, dietary advice and oral health education.

General dental services that are provided in NTRAI OHP settings include:

- examinations
- restorative fillings
- extractions
- emergency care.

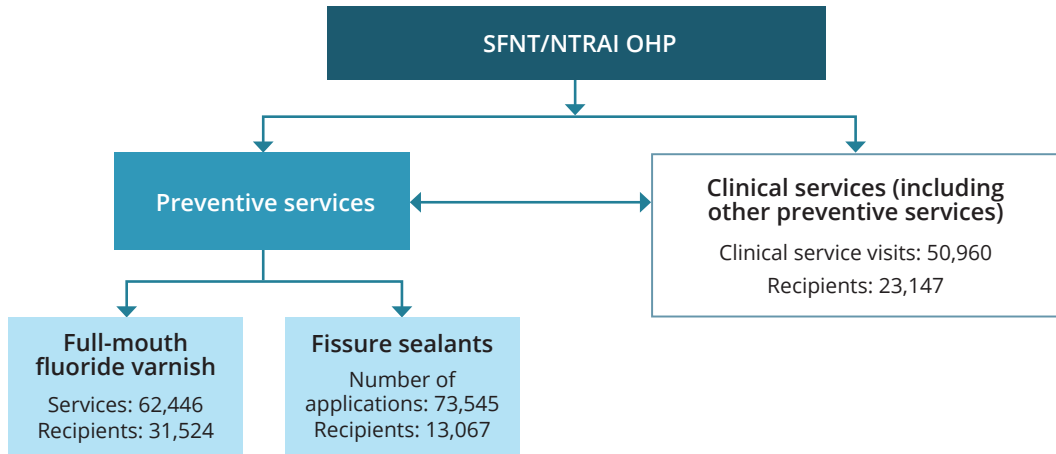
Consent rates

Parents or guardians of children must provide their consent for information to be shared with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). As a result, some information in this report is representative of children for whom consent was obtained, rather than of all children in the program (see Chapter 2 for more information). In 2023, the consent rate was 83% for children who received full-mouth fluoride varnish services, 78% for children who received fissure sealant applications and 71% for those who received clinical service visits. Consent rates have fluctuated for each service type since the beginning of the collection in 2012 to 2023. Children can receive more than one service in a given period. The number of children can be counted accurately only for services where consent was given. Where data is available, more non-consent cases were seen in outer regional areas compared to remote and very remote areas.

When a child's parent or guardian does not provide consent to share information, only a limited amount of combined information is provided to the AIHW. Due to this limited information, in this report the number of non-consent service recipients for most years in the program is assumed to be equal to the number of non-consent visits. As children might have multiple visits, the total number of service recipients presented in Figure 2.1 might be an overestimate of the true number of children who had visits under the SFNT/NTRAI OHP. Children who had consent to share information and had multiple visits within the program, were included only once in the total number of service recipients between July 2012 and December 2023.

See Appendix A for more information.

Figure 2.1: Services provided under the SFNT/NTRAI OHP, July 2012 to December 2023



Notes

1. The 2-way arrows mean that a child can receive multiple types of services – for example, clinical services are preventive services, and services within the 2 categories.
2. A single clinical service visit can involve multiple types of services.
3. The number of fissure sealant applications is the number of teeth to which fissure sealants were applied.
4. The total number of service recipients includes children who did not have consent to share information with the AIHW. As such, for these children, the number of service recipients is assumed to be equal to the number of non-consent visits for most years of the program and might be an overestimate of the true number of service recipients. Children with consent to share information, and who had multiple visits during the program were included only once in the total number of service recipients within each service type.

Source: Tables S2.1, S2.3, S2.6.

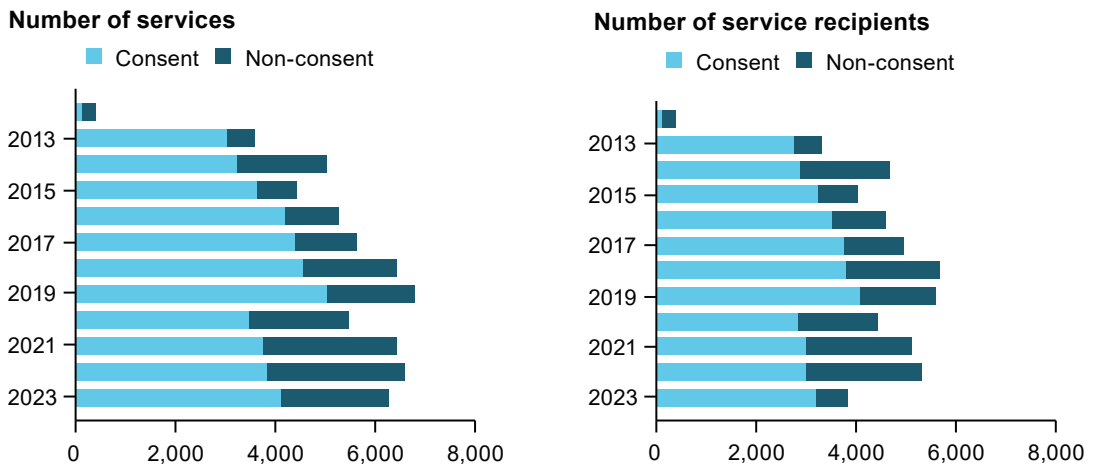
How many children had full-mouth fluoride varnish and fissure sealant services?

Full-mouth fluoride varnish

Full-mouth fluoride varnish has been shown to decrease the incidence of tooth decay by up to 25%–45% when professionally applied 2–4 times per year. It is considered to be a valuable public health intervention (Bonetti & Clarkson 2016; Marinho et al. 2013):

- In 2023, 3,864 children received 6,262 full-mouth fluoride varnish services (Figure 2.2).
- Between July 2012 and December 2023, 31,524 children received 62,446 full-mouth fluoride varnish services – this includes 15,730 children with consent to share information with the AIHW (3,219 children in 2023).
- The number of services and service recipients increased steadily between 2015 and 2019 but fell in 2020 due to restrictions to control the spread of COVID-19 then started increased again in 2021 and 2022. There were falls in services and services recipients in 2023.

Figure 2.2a: Full-mouth fluoride varnish services and service recipients, July 2012 to December 2023



Note: Consent refers to the services and service recipients where consent to share information with the AIHW was provided by the service recipient’s parent or guardian. Where a parent or guardian does not provide consent to share information, only a limited amount of combined information is provided to the AIHW. Due to this limited information, in this report the number of non-consent service recipients for most years is assumed to be equal to the number of non-consent visits.

Source: Table S2.1.

Consent rates to share information have fluctuated over the years. The consent rate for children receiving full-mouth varnish services was high, 83% (3,219 children) in 2023.

In 2023, of those who received full-mouth fluoride varnish services, a slightly higher percentage were girls than boys.

Among First Nations children in the NTRAI OHP in 2023



Received at least 2 full-mouth fluoride varnish services

445 (56%)	353 (44%)
-----------	-----------

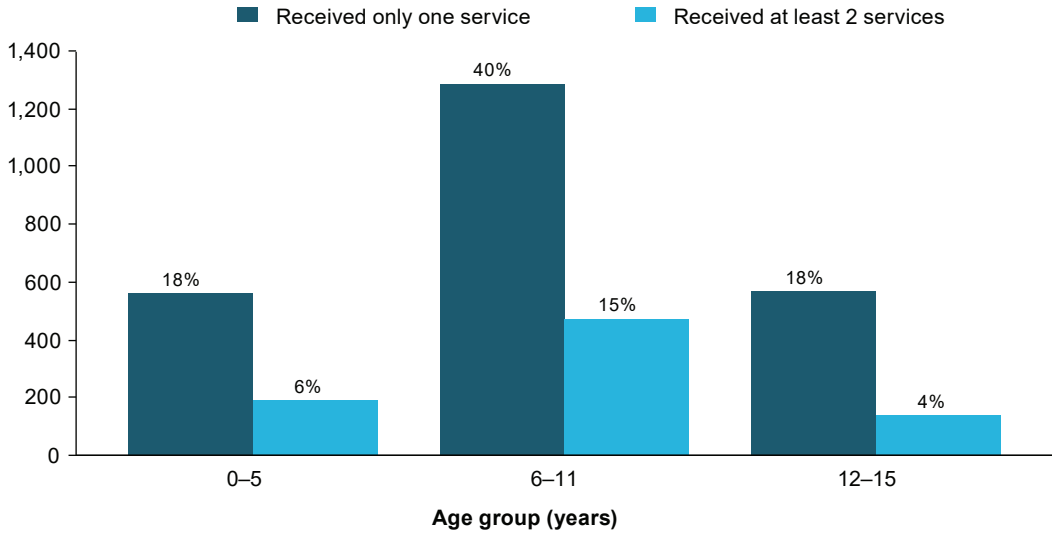
Received only 1 full-mouth fluoride varnish services

1,278 (53%)	1,142 (47%)
-------------	-------------

Note: Numbers of girls and boys do not add up to the total number of children provided elsewhere due to missing sex information for some children.

Children aged 6–11 made up the largest proportion of those who received full-mouth fluoride varnish services through the NTRAI OHP in 2023.

Figure 2.2b: Number of children and adolescents who received full-mouth fluoride varnish services by age and frequency of service, 2023



Notes

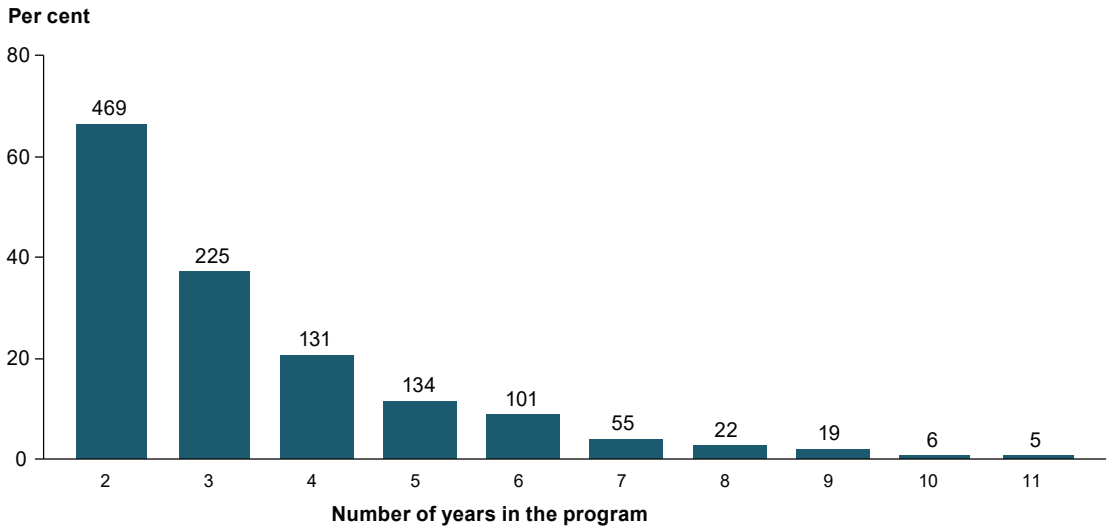
1. Data are reported only where consent was obtained. Missing HRN were counted as received only one service.
2. Age at last service.
3. Proportion calculated with the denominator as the total number of children who received full-mouth fluoride varnish services

Source: Table S2.2.

The proportion of eligible service recipients receiving an annual fluoride varnish service decreased the longer children stayed in the program (Figure 2.3). Among children who received their first service in 2013 (11 years in the program), 5 children had an annual fluoride varnish service in 2023.

It is difficult to obtain accurate data on the number of fluoride varnish services provided under the program as each year from 2015 about 17%–40% of parents or guardians of children who enter the program do not give consent to share their information with the AIHW.

Figure 2.3: Proportion of service recipients over the period 2013 to 2023 who received an annual fluoride varnish service, by number of years in the SFNT/NTRAI OHP



Notes

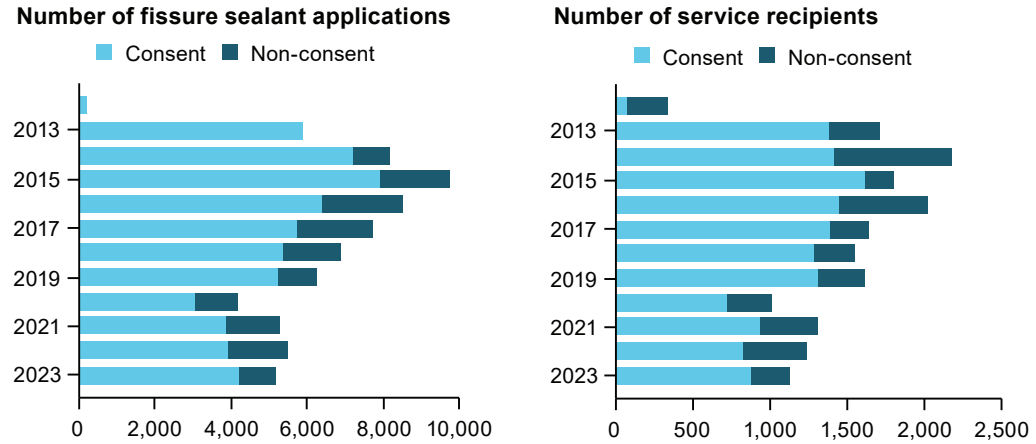
1. Only includes service recipients aged under 16 who were still eligible for services through the NTRAI OHP in 2022.
2. Excludes service recipients whose parent or guardian did not consent to share information.

Source: Table S2.11.

Fissure sealants

- In 2023, 1,125 children had fissure sealants applied to 5,161 teeth (Figure 2.4).
- The number of children in the program who received fissure sealant applications fluctuated over time. Between 2019 and 2020, the number of both fissure sealant applications and service recipients decreased, likely reflecting the impacts COVID-19 restriction. There were increases in the number of fissure sealant applications and services recipients in 2021 and 2022 before decreasing in 2023.
- Between July 2012 and December 2023, around 13,100 children received fissure sealant applications to 73,545 teeth. This includes 8,797 children for whom consent to share information with the AIHW was provided.
- Consent rates to share information have fluctuated since the start of the program. The rate of consent for fissure sealant service recipients was 78% in 2023.

Figure 2.4: Fissure sealant application and service recipients, July 2012 to December 2023



Notes

1. Fissure sealant applications refers to the number of teeth that fissure sealants were applied to.
2. Non-consent data for the number of teeth that fissure sealants were applied to only available from July 2014.

Source: Table S2.3.

A fissure sealant can be applied to numerous teeth during 1 visit. In 2023, among the 1,125 children and young people who had fissure sealants applied, 881 (or 78%) consented to share data. These service recipients had fissure sealants applied to an average of 4.7 teeth.

Among the 591 children who received a fissure sealant service in 2023 and had their dmft/DMFT score recorded, 485 had existing caries. Because teeth with existing caries cannot have fissure sealants applied, children with existing caries had, on average, fissure sealants applied to fewer teeth compared with children with no existing caries (4.6 and 5.5 teeth, respectively).

Children who had fissure sealant applications, by caries status, 2023



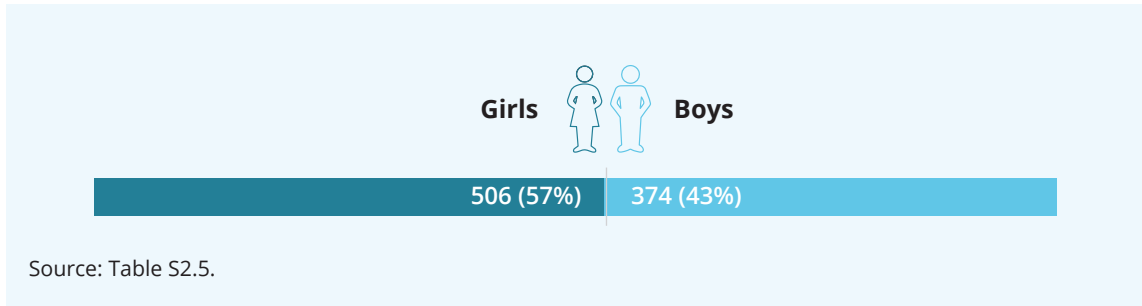
Children **with no existing caries** had an average of **5.5 teeth** with fissure sealants



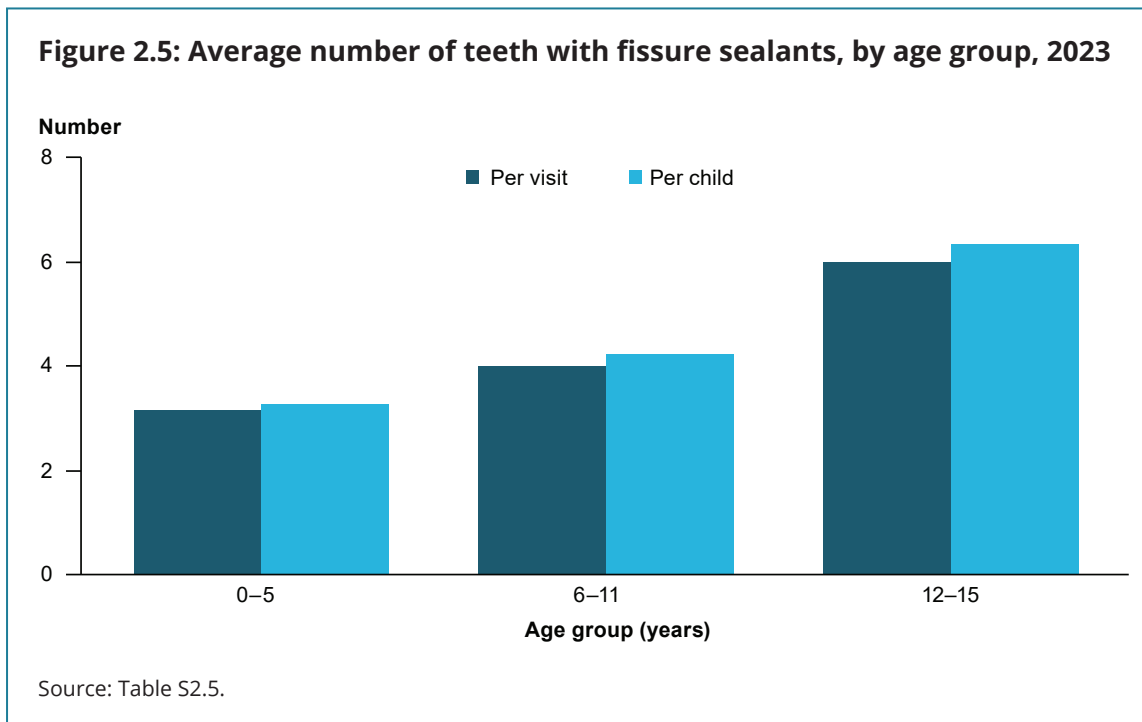
Children **who had existing caries** had an average of **4.6 teeth** with fissure sealants

Source: Table S2.4.

Girls had more visits than boys for fissure sealant applications in 2023 and made up 57% of those who received fissure sealants.



Children aged 6–11 made up the largest proportion (562 children or 64%) of those who received fissure sealants through the NTRAI OHP in 2023. However, children aged 12–15 had the highest average number of fissure sealants per child (6.3) (Figure 2.5). The lower averages for younger children are expected because fissure sealants are more likely to be applied to permanent teeth.



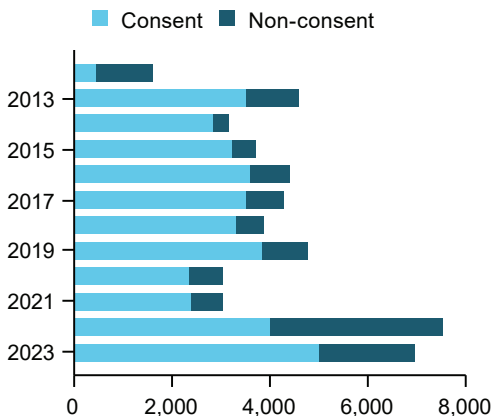
How many children had clinical service visits?

Clinical service visits can include restorative services, endodontics, tooth extractions, diagnostic services or assessments, orthodontic services and periodontic services (treatment of gums).

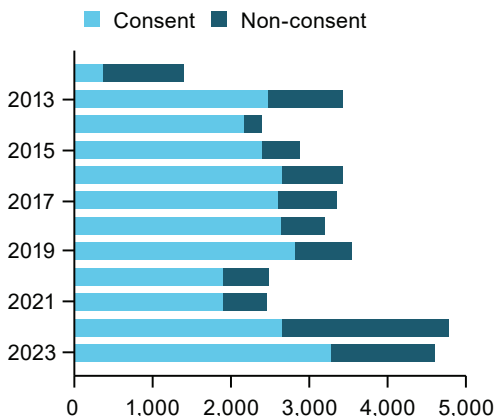
- In 2023, 4,598 children received 6,973 clinical service visits (Figure 2.6).
- Between July 2012 and December 2023, around 23,100 children received about 51,000 clinical service visits. This includes 13,087 children with consent to share information with the AIHW.
- The numbers of visits and service recipients have fluctuated over the years, were lower in 2020 and 2021 but increased again in 2022 before decreasing in 2023.
- Consent rates have fluctuated over time, ranging between 72% of service recipients in 2013 and 91% in 2014. The consent rate in 2023 was 71%, an increase from a consent rate of 56% in 2022.

Figure 2.6: Clinical service visits and service recipients, July 2012 to December 2023

Number of visits

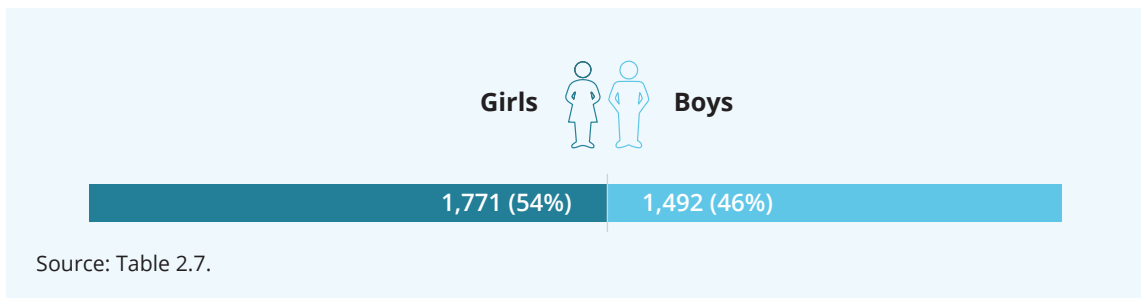


Number of service recipients



Source: Table S2.6.

Overall, In 2023, girls made up a slightly higher proportion of children receiving clinical service visits than boys.

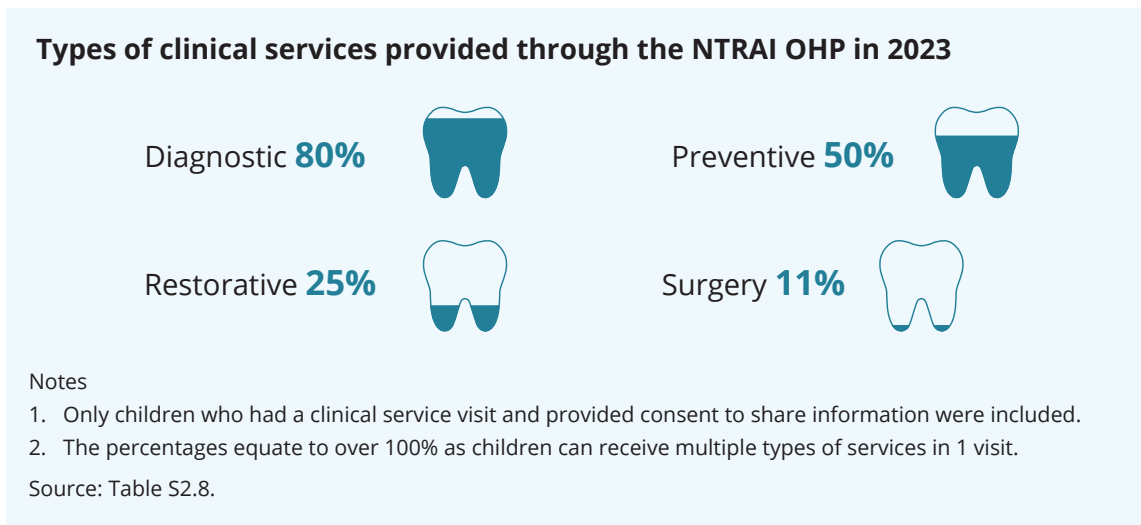


Source: Table 2.7.

In 2023, the majority of children who received a clinical service visit were aged 6–11 (1,639 children or 50%), followed by those aged 12–15 (846 children or 26%) and 0–5 (779 children or 24%) (Table S2.7).

Services provided

In 2023, almost all children who received a clinical service visit in the NTRAI OHP received diagnostic (assessment) services and preventive services other than full-mouth fluoride varnish and fissure sealants. Preventive services include dental prophylaxis (for example, removal of plaque and calculus), as well as dietary advice, oral hygiene instruction and mouthguards.



Notes

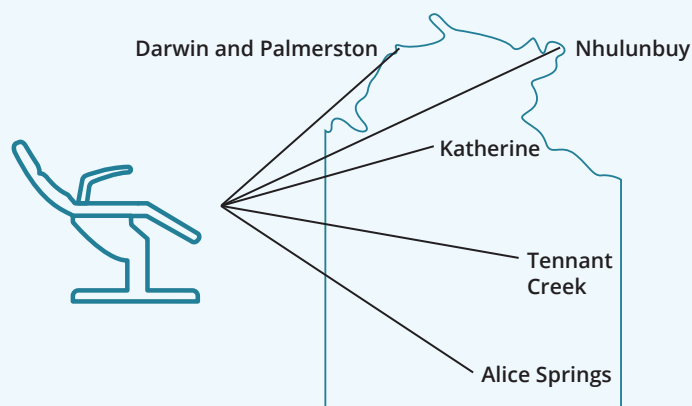
- 1. Only children who had a clinical service visit and provided consent to share information were included.
- 2. The percentages equate to over 100% as children can receive multiple types of services in 1 visit.

Source: Table S2.8.

How were services delivered?

The NTRAI OHP services are provided across the Northern Territory, in multi-chair community clinics as well as single-chair clinics in urban and regional primary schools. Community health centres in remote areas and mobile dental trucks may also provide single-chair clinics to improve access to oral health services in remote areas.

Multi-chair community clinics where NTRAI OHP services are delivered



Dental services provided under general anaesthetic are carried out by Oral Health Services Northern Territory staff in the Northern Territory. Dental services are provided to children under general anaesthetic for the treatment of dental disease and include dental extractions, fillings and stainless-steel crowns. Full-mouth fluoride varnish may be provided during the course of the procedure but is not reported as a preventive service in this instance. Since 2015, data related to services provided under general anaesthetic are not included in this report.

Mobile dental trucks are used to reach many remote communities in Central Australia and Barkly Region. Outreach dental service teams comprising a dentist or a dental/oral health therapist and dental assistant travel to remote communities in Central Australia and Barkly regions for 1–3 weeks at a time. Some teams also travel to remote single-chair clinics.

Remote community health centres are primarily used for service delivery in the Top End, Big Rivers and East Arnhem regions – the northern region of the Northern Territory – where dental teams use a single-chair clinic to provide dental services for 1–3 weeks at a time.

Distance, transport, unpredictable weather, cost, availability of workforce, equipment maintenance and accommodation availability are all factors that challenge service delivery in remote areas of the Northern Territory. However, the NTRAI OHP complements and supports services in remote areas that are funded by the Northern Territory Government, enabling more visits and more equitable access to oral health services.

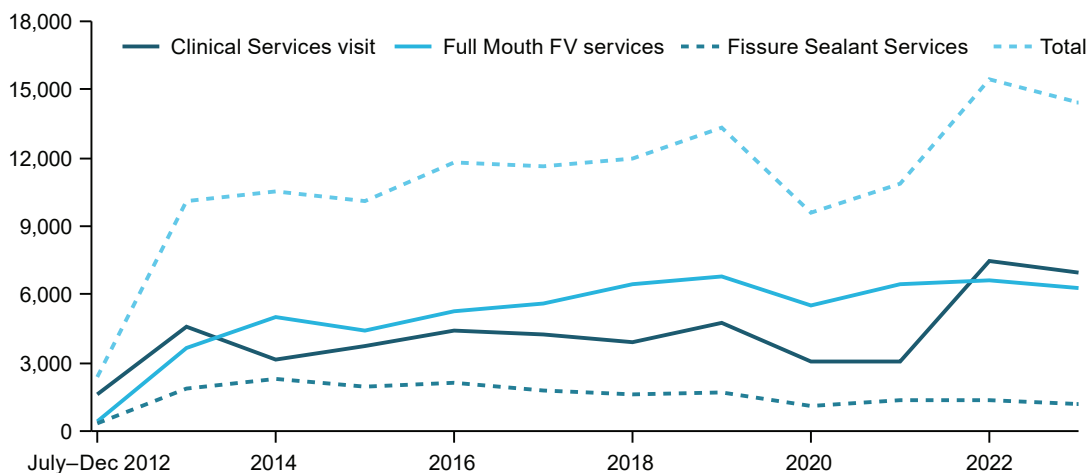
Trends

Early 2020 saw the emergence of a pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus disease COVID-19. Restrictions imposed by the Australian and state and territory governments restricted people’s movement and activities to limit the spread of the disease, and many people changed their behaviour to protect themselves and others from the risk of exposure.

Between July 2012 and 2019, the number of full-mouth fluoride varnish services and clinical services visits provided under NTRAI OHP generally increased. In that same period, the number of services for fissure sealant applications were relatively steady. However, between 2019 and 2020, the number of services decreased for all 3 service types then started to increase again in 2021 and 2022 (Figure 2.7).

Between 2022 and 2023, services under NTRAI OHP decreased by 341 full-mouth fluoride applications, 157 fissure sealant services and 532 clinical service visits.

Figure 2.7: Number of full-mouth fluoride varnish services, clinical service visits and fissure sealant application services, July 2012 to December 2023







3

Oral health status



Key findings

In 2023, among First Nations children in the NTRAI OHP:

- those aged 10 were the most likely to have tooth decay experience (88%)
- those aged 5 had the highest average number of decayed, missing and filled teeth
- generally, the proportion of those who experienced tooth decay fell over time for those aged 9 and below.

How many children had decayed, missing and filled teeth?

Tooth decay is the most prevalent oral disease among children and adults. Therefore, a widely used indicator to measure oral health status is a count of the number of decayed, missing or filled teeth. The decayed, missing or filled teeth (dmft or DMFT) score is a measure of the number of such teeth a child has (Box 3.1).

Box 3.1: The dmft and DMFT score

The dmft or DMFT score counts the number of teeth that are decayed, missing or filled. Lower case dmft refers to deciduous or baby teeth, while upper case DMFT refers to permanent or adult teeth.

For example, a dmft score of 5 means that a child has 5 decayed, missing or filled deciduous teeth.

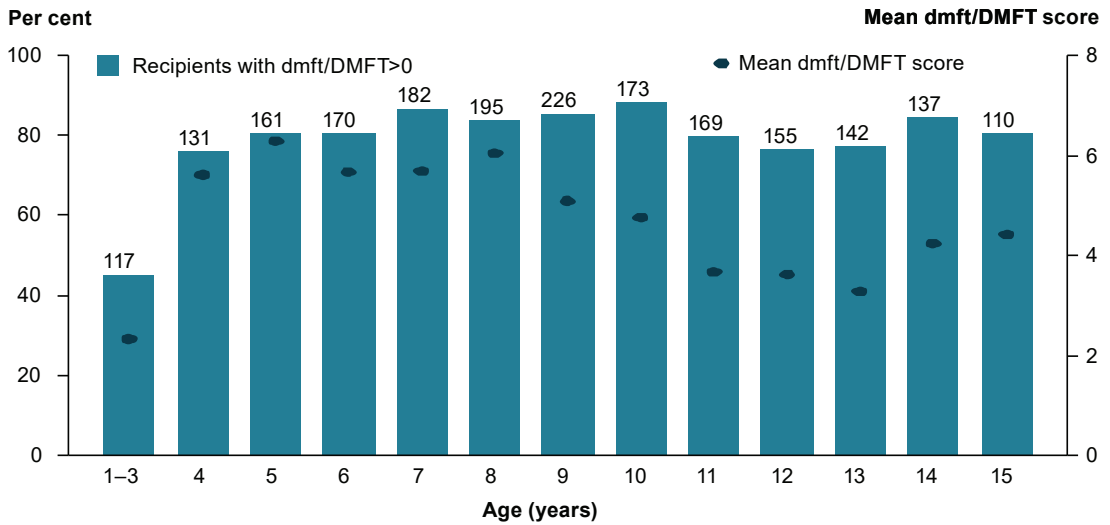
When children have a dmft/DMFT score that is greater than 0, this is known as having caries or tooth decay experience.

Data from children in the NTRAI OHP provides a descriptive 'snapshot' of oral health in a subset of eligible First Nations children at ages 0–15. The proportion of children with tooth decay experience (a dmft/DMFT score greater than 0) varied with age (Figure 3.1). Children aged 7–10 and 14 had the highest percentages of tooth decay experience in 2023, with:

- 88% (or 173 children) of those aged 10 experiencing tooth decay
- 87% (or 182 children) of those aged 7 experiencing tooth decay
- 85% (or 137 children) of those aged 14 experiencing tooth decay
- 84% (or 195 children) of those aged 8 experiencing tooth decay

The highest mean dmft/DMFT scores were among children aged 5 (6.3).

Figure 3.1: Children with tooth decay experience, by age, 2023



Source: Table S3.1.

In general, mean dmft scores were higher than mean DMFT scores, meaning that more decayed, missing and filled teeth were found among children’s baby teeth. The dmft scores for children aged 5–11 were higher than the DMFT scores, but for children aged 12–15 DMFT scores were higher than dmft scores.

In 2023:

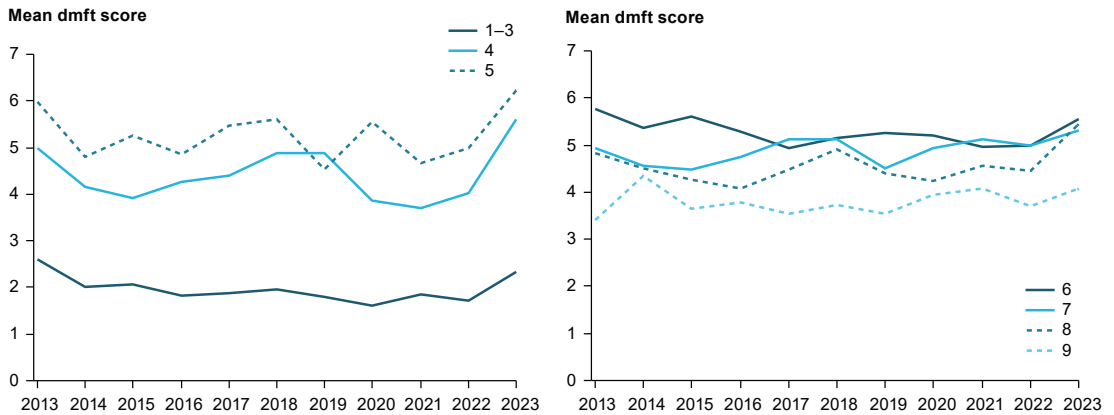
- children aged 4–5 had the highest average dmft score (5.6 and 6.2 respectively))
- children aged 14–15 had the highest average DMFT score (3.5 and 3.9 respectively).

The proportion of children who had experienced decay differed with age and in different years (figures 3.2 and 3.3). Between 2013 and 2023, the mean dmft or mean DMFT also varied by age. Children aged 1–3 and young people aged 11–13 had the lowest dmft and DMFT scores, respectively.

In 2023 the average number of decayed, missing or filled teeth was:

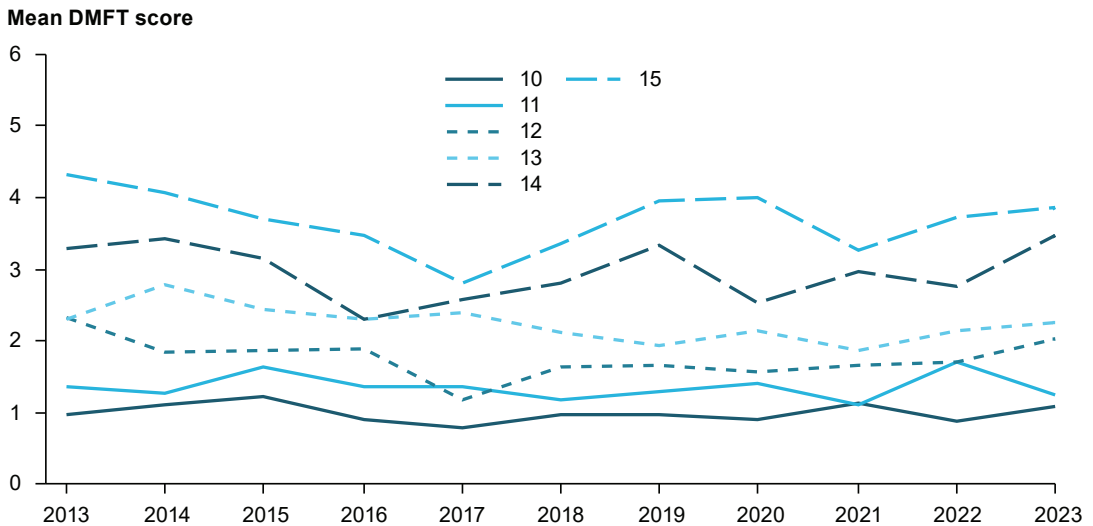
- 12% less than in 2013 among children aged 1–3 (dmft)
- 12% more than in 2013 among children aged 4 (dmft)
- 14% less than in 2013 among children aged 11 (DMFT)
- 13% less than in 2013 among children aged 12 (DMFT).

Figure 3.2: Mean dmft score among children aged 1-9, by age, 2013 to 2023



Source: Tables S3.1, S3.2, S3.3, S3.4, S3.5, S3.6, S3.7, S3.8, S3.9, S3.10 and S3.11.

Figure 3.3: Mean DMFT score among children aged 10-15, by age, 2013 to 2023



Source: Tables S3.1, S3.2, S3.3, S3.4, S3.5, S3.6, S3.7, S3.8, S3.9, S3.10 and S3.11.

Oral health status of total population of children

The National Child Oral Health Study provides a descriptive ‘snapshot’ of oral health in the total child population in Australia. Data are collected nationally from children aged 5–14 using interviews and standardised dental examinations. This study was last conducted in 2012–14.

Nationally, among the survey respondents, in 2012–14:

- 5.5% identified as First Nations people (38.7% in the Northern Territory)
- 2.5% were living in *Remote and very remote* areas (44% of these in the Northern Territory)
- 60.6% of First Nations children aged 5-10 had experienced decay in their deciduous or baby teeth (compared with 40.5% of non-Indigenous children)
- 36% of First Nations children aged 6-14 had experienced decay in their permanent teeth (compared to 22.7% for non-Indigenous children) (Ha et al. 2016).

Previous annual reports have compared the NTRAI OHP outcomes for First Nations children with the results for total child population based on a comparison with the 2012–14 study. However, as the study was conducted a decade ago, this comparative analysis has not been updated for this report because the results may be misleading. Similar analysis may be updated if more recent survey data becomes available.

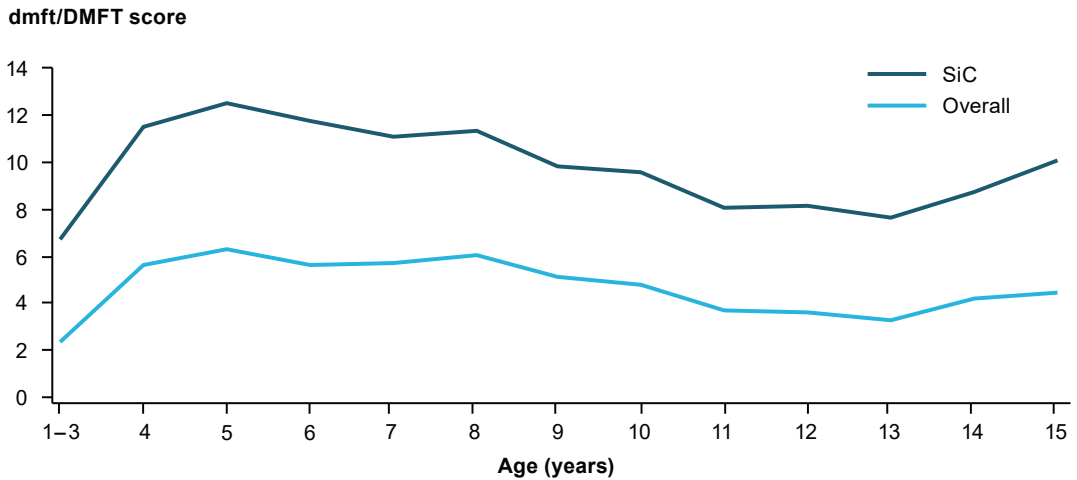
Significant Caries Index

The Significant Caries Index (SiC) is used to identify children who have the most tooth decay experience in a group. In the NTRAI OHP, the SiC value is the average number of dmft/DMFT among children with the highest 30% of dmft/DMFT scores of all children in the program.

Figure 3.4 shows the difference between the mean dmft/DMFT scores among children with SiC values and all children in the NTRAI OHP.

In 2023, children in the NTRAI OHP with the highest 30% of dmft/DMFT scores (SiC values) had scores that were 2–3 times as high as children in the NTRAI OHP overall.

Figure 3.4: SiC and mean total dmft/DMFT scores of children in the NTRAI OHP, by age, 2023



Note: The SiC value is the mean dmft/DMFT score among children in the NTRAI OHP who have the highest 30% of dmft/DMFT scores (the most tooth decay experience).

Source: Table S3.1.

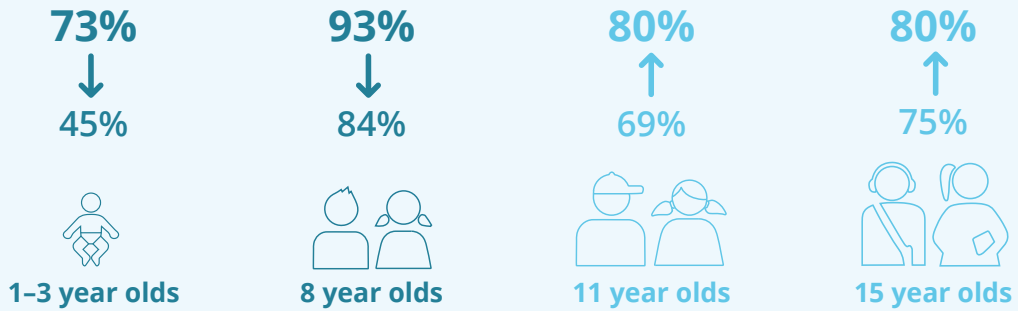
How has tooth decay experience changed over time?

Although this report focuses on services provided under the NTRAI OHP between July 2012 and December 2023, information from 2009 to June 2012 (from the CHCI(CtG) program) are included in this section to provide some insight into longer-term trends.

From 2013 to 2023, the mean dmft/DMFT increased for most age groups, except for children aged 1–3 and 6, where it decreased from 2.6 to 2.3 and 5.9 to 5.7, respectively, and for children aged 15, where it remained at 4.4.

From March 2009 to December 2023, the proportion of children with tooth decay experience decreased for those aged 9 years and below but increased for those aged 10 years and over, except for children aged 12, for whom it decreased from 81% to 76%.

Tooth decay experience from March 2009 to December 2023



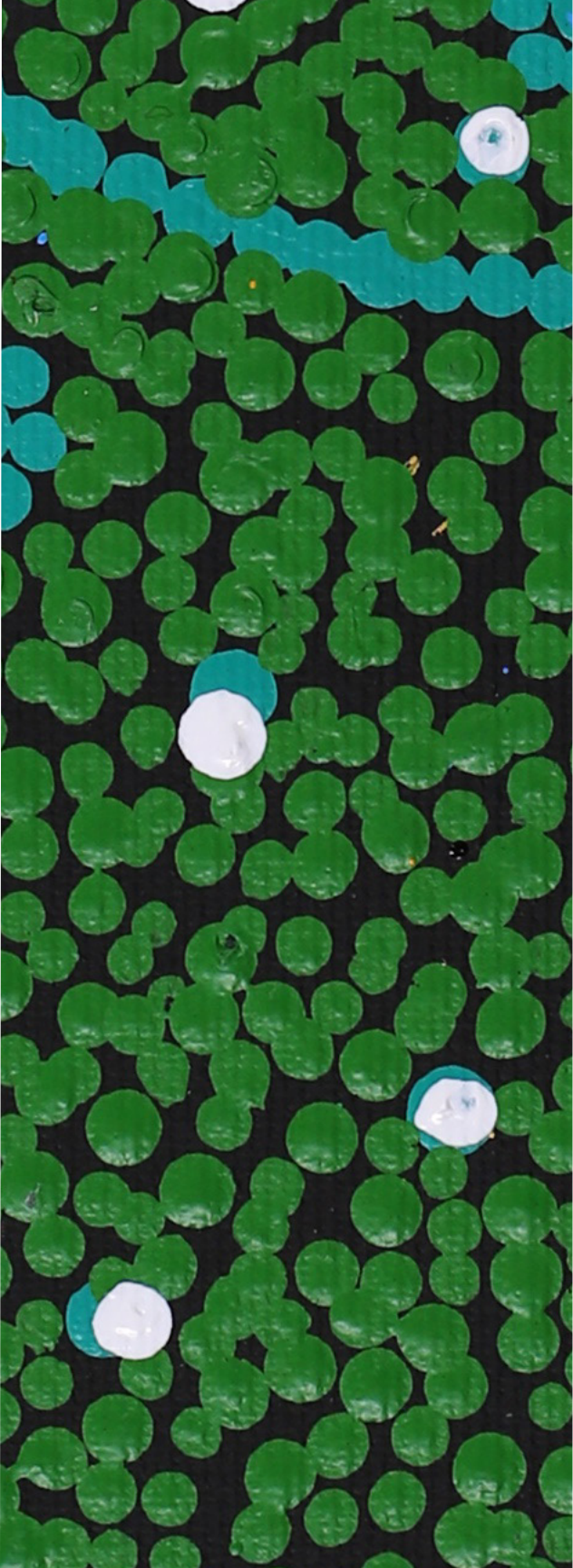
Source: Table S3.12.

Changes over time could be either associated with changes in the sample of children who were in the program at different times, or due to actual changes in tooth decay experience among children in the program. A number of reasons could explain changes over time:

- Preventive interventions (for example, full-mouth fluoride varnish) introduced at the population level through the SFNT/NTRAI OHP and fluoridation of drinking water could decrease tooth decay.
- The CHCI(CtG) cohort is relatively small, and the smaller sample size could cause variability in the findings.
- Children aged 6–10 have fewer teeth because their permanent teeth are still developing after they have lost their baby teeth. This could be a reason for this age group having the smallest increase in dmft/DMFT over time.

Results are based on data made available to the AIHW periodically and are not representative of the whole population.





4

Progress against benchmarks

The NTRAI OHP has performance indicators and benchmarks to monitor the program’s outcomes. The targets are set jointly by the Australian and Northern Territory departments of health, through the Northern Territory Health Implementation Plan (CFFR 2016).

Service delivery targets

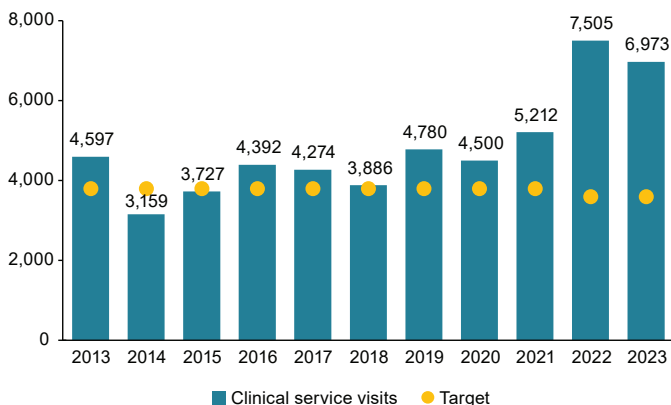
In 2020 and 2021, COVID-19 restrictions may have affected the number of services delivered under the NTRAI OHP. However, the service delivery targets for all service types were met or exceeded. In 2022 and 2023, there was reductions in current targets based on the program reported capability and capacity and all of them were met or exceeded.

The annual targets for fluoride varnish applications and fissure sealant applications were originally set out in the Northern Territory Health Implementation Plan of the NTRAI National Partnership and may change based on agreement between the Australian and Northern Territory governments.

Indicator:
Clinical service visits provided

Target: 3,600 occasions of clinical service in 2023

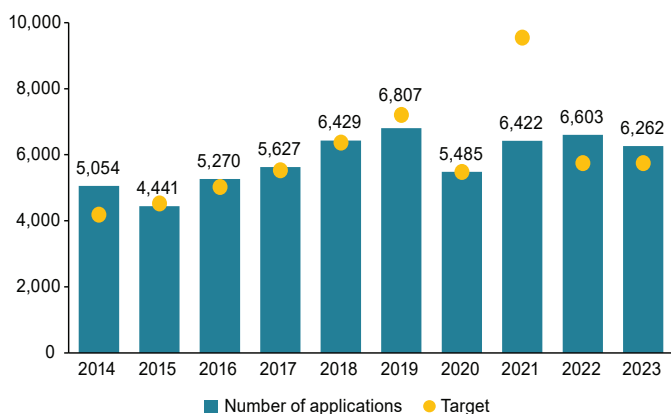
Note: For 2020 and 2021, the specification for counting the number of clinical service visits includes visits where only full-mouth fluoride varnish and/or fissure sealant services were provided. This was agreed with the Commonwealth Department of Health. Two new payor codes were included in reporting clinical services in 2022 and 2023.



Indicator:
Fluoride varnish applications

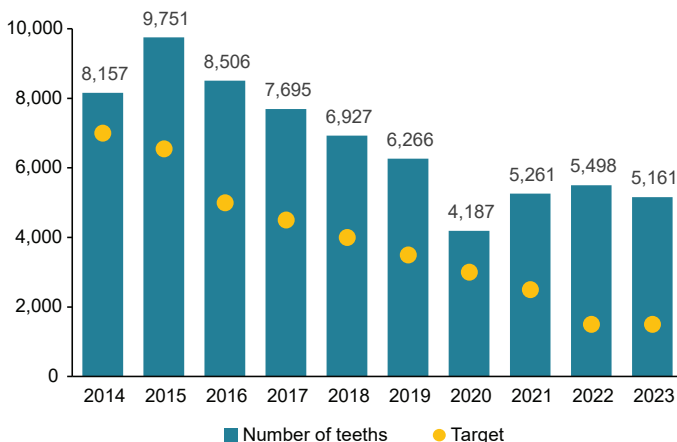
Target: 5,750 fluoride varnish applications in 2023

Note: There was a reduction in targets in 2020, 2022 and 2023 based on Northern Territory Department of Health’s reported capability and capacity (including due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic).



Indicator:
Fissure sealant applications

Target: Fissure sealant applications in to 1,500 teeth in 2023



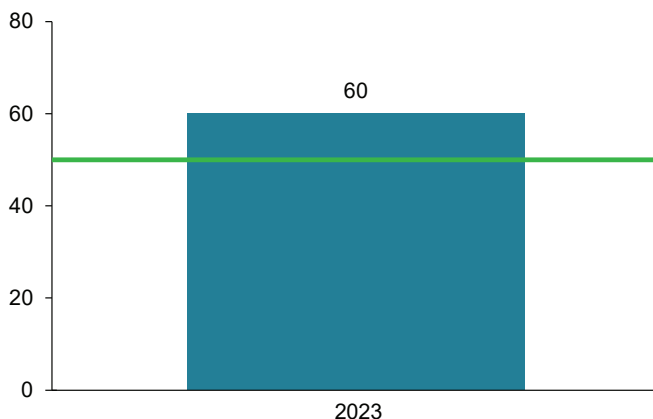
Health outcome targets

In 2023, the health outcome target for prioritisation of preventive services was exceeded.

Indicator:
Prioritisation of preventive services

Target: At least 50% of total service items are **preventive services** in 2023

Note: the data for the preventive services target include fissure sealants, full-mouth fluoride varnish and preventive services (for example, removal of plaque/calculus) that were provided during clinical visits. Only data where consent was obtained to share information were used.





Appendix A: About the Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment Oral Health Program data collection

Data collection, management and reporting

The Department of Health commissioned the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) to collect, manage and report on oral health services data provided through the Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment Oral Health Program (NTRAI OHP).

The data are extracted from an electronic information system in which dental professionals record clinical information, before the data are sent electronically to the AIHW.

Children who receive oral health services under the NTRAI OHP are not a random sample of First Nations children in the Northern Territory. Further, not all dental services provided in the Northern Territory are captured in the NTRAI dental data collection. Services provided through other funding sources (for example, the Northern Territory Government or private sector) are not included in this report. As a result, findings in this report are not representative of all First Nations children in the Northern Territory.

The data the AIHW receives rely on parents or guardians of service recipients providing their consent to share individual information. Detailed information on dental services is sent to the AIHW only when consent is given. In cases where that consent is not given, the AIHW receives only a limited amount of combined information.

Due to this limited information, the number of non-consent service recipients presented in this report for most years is assumed to be equal to the number of non-consent services. As a result, apart from the total number of services and service recipients, other information in this report is representative of children for whom consent was obtained, rather than of all service recipients.



History of the program

Services provided by the NTRAI OHP were originally a part of the Child Health Check Initiative (CHCI), a response to the poor oral health found among First Nations children in the Northern Territory National Emergency Response prescribed areas in mid-2007.

The program later continued under the Closing the Gap (CtG) initiative in the Northern Territory National Partnership Agreement from mid-2009 to mid-2012. These 2 programs, from 2007 to mid2012, are collectively referred to as the CHCI(CtG). Improvements were seen in the oral health of children who received services through CHCI(CtG) oral health programs, which shows their importance.

As a result of these improvements in oral health, the Australian Government continued to fund, and also expanded, the program under the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Oral Health Program (SFNT OHP) from July 2012 to June 2015. This program has been continued through the NTRAI OHP since July 2015.

Appendix B: Data quality statement

SFNT/NTRAI OHP dental data collection summary

- This data collection includes more than 20,000 First Nations children and adolescents aged 0–15 who received oral health services under the SFNT OHP and, later, the NTRAI OHP.
- Data collected as part of the SFNT/NTRAI OHP are a by-product of a clinical process. Dental professionals who provide clinical services document the results on standard data collection forms or in a computer-based data collection system.
- In the first 6 months of the SFNT/NTRAI OHP (July to December 2012), the consent rate to share data with the AIHW was low (27% for clinical service visit recipients, 26% for full-mouth fluoride varnish recipients, and 22% for fissure sealant recipients), so data collected in this period are not representative of all SFNT dental services and service recipients. Consent rates have fluctuated since the initial period for all services in the collection. In 2023, consent rates for service recipients were 71% for clinical service recipients, 83% for full-mouth fluoride varnish recipients and 78% for fissure sealant recipients.

A full data quality statement for the SFNT/NTRAI OHP dental data collection can be found online at <https://meteor.aihw.gov.au/content/803650>.

Acknowledgments

Ms Mai Nguyen, Ms Ruth Penm of the AIHW's First Nations Health and Welfare Group prepared this report. The authors thank Dr Fadwa Al-Yaman and Ms Jo Baker of the AIHW for their guidance and comments.

The Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care provided funds to support data collection and report production, and members of the First Nations Health Division are thanked for their comments on this report.

The authors also acknowledge the assistance, cooperation and feedback of the Northern Territory Department of Health. Special thanks go to the many clinicians and administrators who supported this data collection while also providing clinical services in remote locations across the Northern Territory.

As well, the authors wish to thank the families of the children who consented to share their information with the AIHW for this report.

Abbreviations

AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
CHCI(CtG)	Child Health Check Initiative/Closing the Gap program
dmft	decayed, missing or filled deciduous (baby) teeth
DMFT	decayed, missing or filled permanent (adult) teeth
NTRAI	Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment
OHP	Oral Health Program
SFNT	Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory
SiC	Significant Caries Index

Glossary

deciduous (baby) teeth: Primary teeth that develop during the embryonic stage of human development and erupt (that is, become visible in the mouth) during infancy. They are usually lost and replaced by permanent teeth, but in the absence of permanent replacements, can remain functional for many years.

dental caries: A biofilm-mediated disease that can lead to cavities (small holes) in the tooth structure which compromise both the structure and the health of the tooth, and commonly known as tooth decay.

diagnostic services: Services that include:

- examinations (consultations; written reports; referrals; and initial, periodic and emergency oral examinations)
- radiographical examination and interpretation (intraoral radiographs and skull radiographs)
- other diagnostic services (including bacteriological examinations, antibiotic sensitivity tests, biopsies and models).

dmft: Decayed, missing or filled **deciduous (or baby) teeth**.

DMFT: Decayed, missing or filled **permanent (or adult) teeth**.

dmft/DMFT: The score for **deciduous (baby) teeth** and **permanent teeth** combined (that is, dmft + DMFT).

endodontics: Pulp or nerve treatments (pulp capping, pulpotomy, extirpation or debridement of root canal).

extraction: Removal of permanent or deciduous tooth or tooth fragment.

fissure sealants: Protective adhesive applied to grooves in the biting surfaces of teeth at the back of the mouth, usually as soon as adult molars erupt. The sealants prevent dental plaque and acid build-up, and can last for many years; however, regular check-ups are required to see if the sealant is intact.

full-mouth fluoride varnish: A clinically determined amount of fluoride varnish (a concentrated form of fluoride) applied to the surfaces of teeth.

First Nations: A person of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which they live.

permanent teeth: Adult or secondary teeth that start to erupt at about 6 years of age. By about age 21, a person usually has 32 permanent teeth.

preventive services: Services including:

- dental prophylaxis (removal of plaque, removal of calculus, recontouring of existing restorations)
- topical fluoride (application of fluoride solution or gel, instruction on self-application)
- other preventive services (including dietary advice, oral hygiene instruction, fissure sealing and provision of mouthguards).

Remoteness: Remoteness Areas divide Australia into five classes of remoteness on the basis of a measure of relative access to services. The five remoteness classes are: *Major cities*, *Inner regional*, *Outer regional*, *Remote* and *Very remote*. Remoteness areas are derived from the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia Plus (ARIA+) classification produced by the University of Adelaide.


restorative services: Removal of diseased tooth structures and replacement with amalgams, glass ionomer, silicate and composite resins (filling of 1, 2, 3 or more surfaces).

Significant Caries Index (SiC): Mean dmft/DMFT score among children who have the highest 30% of dmft/DMFT scores.

tooth decay experience: A dmft/DMFT score greater than 0.

References

- ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2024. Estimates and projections of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Canberra: ABS. Accessed 4 October 2024, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/estimates-and-projections-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release>>.
- ABS 2024. National, state and territory population. Canberra: ABS. Accessed 4 October 2024, <<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/latest-release>>.
- AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) (2022) *Australian Burden of Disease Study: impact and causes of illness and death in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 2018*. Cat. No. BOD 32, AIHW, Australia Government.
- AIHW (2021) *Australian Burden of Disease Study: impact and causes of illness and death in Australia 2018*. Cat. no. BOD 29, AIHW, Australia Government.
- Arruda AO, Senthamarai Kannan R, Inglehart MR, Rezende CT & Sohn W 2011. Effect of 5% fluoride varnish application on caries among school children in rural Brazil: a randomized controlled trial. *Community Dentistry and Oral Epidemiology* 40(3):267–76.
- Bonetti D & Clarkson JE 2016. Fluoride varnish for caries prevention: efficacy and implementation. *Caries Research* 2016, 50 (Supplement 1):45–9.
- CFFR (Council on Federal Financial Relations) 2016. Northern Territory Health Implementation Plan. Canberra: Council of Australian Governments.
- DHSV (Dental Health Services Victoria) 2011. Links between oral health and general health – the case for action: Dental Health Services Victoria. Melbourne: DHSV. Viewed 10 October 2019, <https://www.dhsv.org.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/2515/links-between-oral-health-and-general-health-the-case-for-action.pdf>.
- Ha D, Roberts-Thomson K, Arrow P, Peres K & Do L 2016. Children’s oral health status in Australia, 2012–14. In: Do LG & Spencer AJ (eds). *Oral health of Australian children: the National Child Oral Health Study 2012–14*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide, 86–152.
- Health (Department of Health) 2020. [Australian Health Protection Principal Committee \(AHPPC\) coronavirus \(COVID-19\) statement on 18 March 2020](#). Canberra: Department of Health. Accessed 30 April 2021.
- Jamieson LM, Roberts-Thomson KF & Sayers SM 2010. Risk indicators for severe impaired oral health among Indigenous Australian young adults. *BMC Oral Health* 10(1):1–11.
- Kruger E & Tennant M 2015. Potentially preventable hospital separations related to oral health: a 10-year analysis. *Australian Dental Journal* 60(2):205–11.



Marinho VCC, Worthington HV, Walsh T & Clarkson JE 2013. Fluoride varnishes for preventing dental caries in children and adolescents. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2013(7):CD002279. doi:10.1002/14651858.CD002279.pub2.

NACDH (National Advisory Council on Dental Health) 2012. Report of the National Advisory Council on Dental Health. Canberra: NACDH.

Weintraub JA, Ramos-Gomez F, Jue B, Shain S, Hoover CI, Featherstone JDB et al. 2006. Fluoride varnish efficacy in preventing early childhood caries. Journal of Dental Research 85(2):172–6.



List of tables

Table S1: Progress against benchmarks, 2023ix

List of figures

Figure 2.1: Services provided under the SFNT/NTRAI OHP, July 2012 to December 2023 10

Figure 2.2a: Full-mouth fluoride varnish services and service recipients, July 2012 to December 2023 11

Figure 2.2b: Number of children and adolescents who received full-mouth fluoride varnish services by age and frequency of service, 2023 12

Figure 2.3: Proportion of service recipients over the period 2013 to 2023 who received an annual fluoride varnish service, by number of years in the SFNT/NTRAI OHP 13

Figure 2.4: Fissure sealant application and service recipients, July 2012 to December 2023 14

Figure 2.5: Average number of teeth with fissure sealants, by age group, 2023 15

Figure 2.6: Clinical service visits and service recipients, July 2012 to December 2023 16

Figure 2.7: Number of full-mouth fluoride varnish services, clinical service visits and fissure sealant application services, July 2012 to December 2023 19

Figure 3.1: Children with tooth decay experience, by age, 2023 23

Figure 3.2: Mean dmft score among children aged 1–9, by age, 2013 to 2023 24

Figure 3.3: Mean DMFT score among children aged 10–15, by age, 2013 to 2023 24

Figure 3.4: SiC and mean total dmft/DMFT scores of children in the NTRAI OHP, by age, 2023 26

Related publications

The following AIHW publications might be of interest:

- AIHW 2024. Oral health and dental care in Australia. Web report, Cat. no. DEN 231. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2023. Oral health outreach services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Northern Territory July 2012 to December 2022. Cat. no. IHW 279. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2022. Oral health outreach services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Northern Territory July 2012 to December 2021. Cat. no. IHW 265. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2021. Oral health outreach services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Northern Territory July 2012 to December 2020. Cat. no. IHW 264. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2021. Oral health outreach services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the Northern Territory July 2012 to December 2019. Cat. no. IHW 235. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2019. Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment: Oral Health Program July 2012 to December 2018. Cat. no. IHW 224. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2019. Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment: Oral Health Program July 2012 to December 2017. Cat. no. IHW 205. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2018. Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment: Oral Health Program July 2012 to December 2016. Cat. no. IHW 190. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2017. Northern Territory Remote Aboriginal Investment: Oral Health Program July 2012 to December 2015. Cat. no. IHW 175. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2014. Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory: Oral Health Program July 2012 to December 2013. Cat. no. IHW 144. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2012. Northern Territory Emergency Response Child Health Check Initiative – follow-up services for oral and ear health: final report, 2007–2012. Cat. no. DEN 223. Canberra: AIHW.
- AIHW 2011. Dental health of Indigenous children in the Northern Territory: findings from the Closing the Gap Program. Cat. no. IHW 41. Canberra: AIHW.

These reports can be downloaded from www.aihw.gov.au/publications. The website also includes information on ordering printed copies.



This report is part of a series of annual reports that present information on oral health outreach services provided to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people aged under 16 in the Northern Territory. There were some improvements over time in the proportion of First Nations children in the NTRAI OHP with tooth decay.



Stronger evidence,
better decisions,
improved health and welfare