

# Systematic analysis of public policies on oral health in Latin America: approaches, challenges, and proposals (2020–2025)

**Análisis sistemático de las políticas públicas sobre salud bucal en América Latina: enfoques, retos y propuestas entre 2020 y 2025**

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the recent academic production on public policies related to oral health in Latin America, with the purpose of identifying advances, predominant approaches and areas still little explored. For this purpose, a systematic review of 30 scientific articles extracted from the Scopus and SciELO databases was carried out, covering the period between 2018 and 2023. The analysis was methodologically structured under the guidelines of the PRISMA model, allowing a rigorous and orderly evaluation of the available evidence. The findings were organized into six thematic categories: health promotion, normative description, implementation strategies, rights approach, economic impacts and citizen participation. The most frequent category was oral health promotion and prevention, demonstrating a regional priority for proactive models of care. There is also a growing interest in improving the articulation between sectoral policies and equity in access to dental services. Despite this, issues such as citizen inclusion or the analysis of associated costs remain underdeveloped. In conclusion, the review reveals a growing field that requires greater systematization, as well as integrative regulatory frameworks that respond to the real needs of the most vulnerable populations.

**Keywords:** Latin America, oral health, public policy.

## Resumen

Este estudio analiza la producción académica reciente en torno a las políticas públicas vinculadas con la salud bucal en América Latina, con el propósito de identificar avances, enfoques predominantes y áreas aún poco exploradas. Para ello, se llevó a cabo una revisión sistemática de 30 artículos científicos extraídos de las bases de datos Scopus y SciELO, abarcando el periodo comprendido entre 2018 y 2023. El análisis se estructuró metodológicamente bajo los lineamientos del modelo PRISMA, permitiendo una evaluación rigurosa y ordenada de la evidencia disponible. Los hallazgos fueron organizados en seis categorías temáticas: promoción de la salud, descripción normativa, estrategias de implementación, enfoque de derechos, impactos económicos y participación ciudadana. La categoría más frecuente fue la promoción y prevención en salud bucal, lo que demuestra una prioridad regional por modelos de atención proactivos. Asimismo, se detecta un interés creciente por mejorar la articulación entre las políticas sectoriales y la equidad en el acceso a servicios odontológicos. Pese a ello, temas como la inclusión ciudadana o el análisis de costos asociados siguen estando escasamente desarrollados. En conclusión, la revisión evidencia un campo en crecimiento que requiere mayor sistematicidad, así como marcos normativos integradores que respondan a las necesidades reales de las poblaciones más vulnerables.

**Palabras clave:** América Latina, salud bucal, políticas públicas.

## Introduction

Oral health is a fundamental pillar of overall well-being and an inseparable component of quality of life across its physical, emotional, and social dimensions. According to governmental institutions such as the Pan American Health Organization (OPS, 2020), it is a priority for health systems to incorporate public policies aimed at prevention and sustainability, particularly those focused on strengthening oral health from early stages of life. UNICEF (2020) supports this vision by highlighting that poor oral health in childhood can negatively impact nutrition, cognitive development, and academic performance; thus, it promotes school-based oral hygiene strategies and access to safe drinking water. Additionally, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2022) warns that dental deficiencies are a concrete expression of social inequality, urging states to implement free and universal oral health services.

This perspective necessitates transcending the clinical curative approach, paving the way for structured interventions such as universal access to dental services, education on hygiene practices, and public health measures like fluoridation of drinking water (García et al., 2023). The International Dental Federation (FDI, 2021) has declared that oral health should not be reduced to an aesthetic issue but should be regarded as a core element of non-communicable disease prevention policies, including diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. Furthermore, the International Association for Dental Research (IADR, 2020) has documented robust evidence linking oral pathologies with systemic diseases, necessitating an interdisciplinary and preventive approach from health systems. Collectively, these institutions agree that oral health is a key indicator of equity and sustainability in public health.

In the Latin American context, however, oral health has historically occupied a peripheral position within public agendas. This marginalization has limited its effective inclusion in primary care policies and restricted the implementation of sustained actions. As pointed out by Gispert et al. (2015), oral health interventions are often characterized by their lack of continuity, operational fragmentation, and absence of a rights-based approach, contradicting fundamental principles such as equity, universal accessibility, and health justice.

This structural exclusion is compounded by territorial and economic inequalities that hinder equitable access to dental services. The Oral Health Foundation (Fundación para la Salud Oral, 2022) warns that these disparities are particularly evident in rural areas and low-income populations, where specialized services are scarce or nonexistent. This situation demands decisive action from the state, through public policies coordinated with sectors such as education, labor, and social development (Contreras, 2016; Martínez & López, 2021).

Moreover, specialized literature emphasizes the need to design policies tailored to the specific sociocultural context of each region. The failure of universal models or those replicated without adaptation demonstrates the importance of contextually evidence-based strategies that consider the particularities of target populations (Quispe & Huamani, 2022). In this sense, the design of relevant interventions involves not only the production of local knowledge but also the strengthening of technical capacities in subnational governments and community participation.

In light of this panorama, the present systematic review aims to identify and analyze the main scientific contributions regarding public policies in oral health developed in Latin America during the period 2020–2025. The study seeks to characterize existing trends, approaches, and gaps in order to provide relevant evidence for the formulation of more comprehensive, equitable, and effective strategies in the regional oral health landscape.

## Methodology

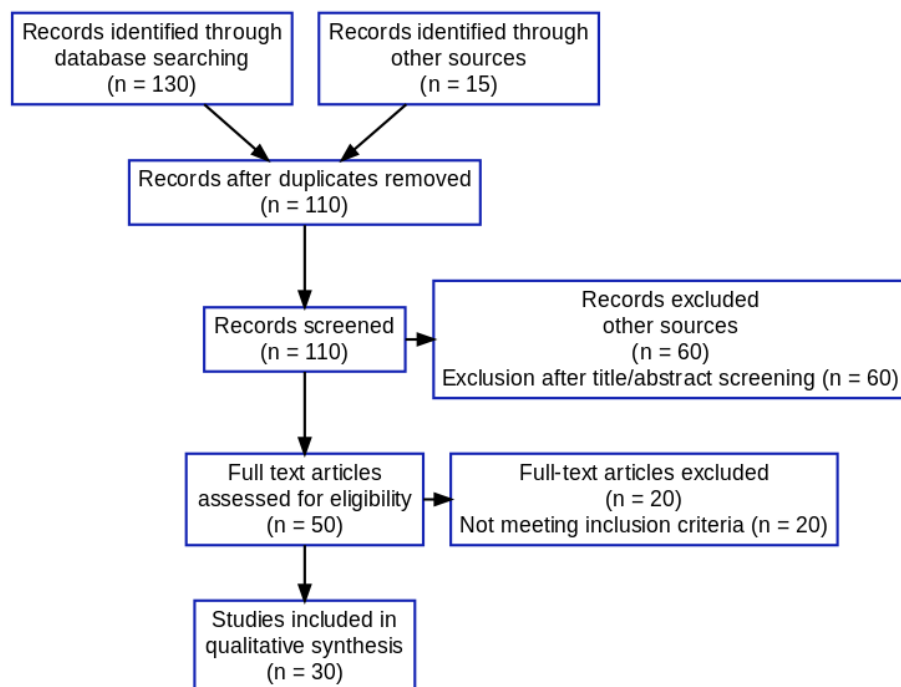
This study is framed within qualitative research with a systematic review design, focusing on the analysis of public policies related to oral health in the Latin American context. The review was conducted following the methodological guidelines proposed by the PRISMA 2020 model, ensuring rigor in the identification, selection, and analysis of documentary sources. The objective was to explore trends, approaches, and gaps in the academic production on this topic from 2020 to 2025.

The document search was carried out in two prestigious academic databases: Scopus and SciELO, selected for their extensive coverage of scientific research relevant to the Latin American context. The information retrieval process utilized key terms in Spanish and Portuguese, combined using Boolean operators such as: “oral health” AND “public policies” AND “Latin America,” as well as related expressions like “access to dental services” OR “oral health prevention.” This strategy allowed for the identification of a considerable number of pertinent publications.

After an initial review, 30 articles that rigorously met the following inclusion criteria were selected: (a) theoretical or empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025 in peer-reviewed scientific journals; (b) research explicitly focused on public policies related to oral health in Latin American countries; and (c) availability of full text in one of the following languages: Spanish, English, or Portuguese. Duplicate sources, documents that did not clearly address the link between oral health and public policies, editorial articles, reviews lacking methodological support, and studies conducted in regions outside the Latin American context were discarded.

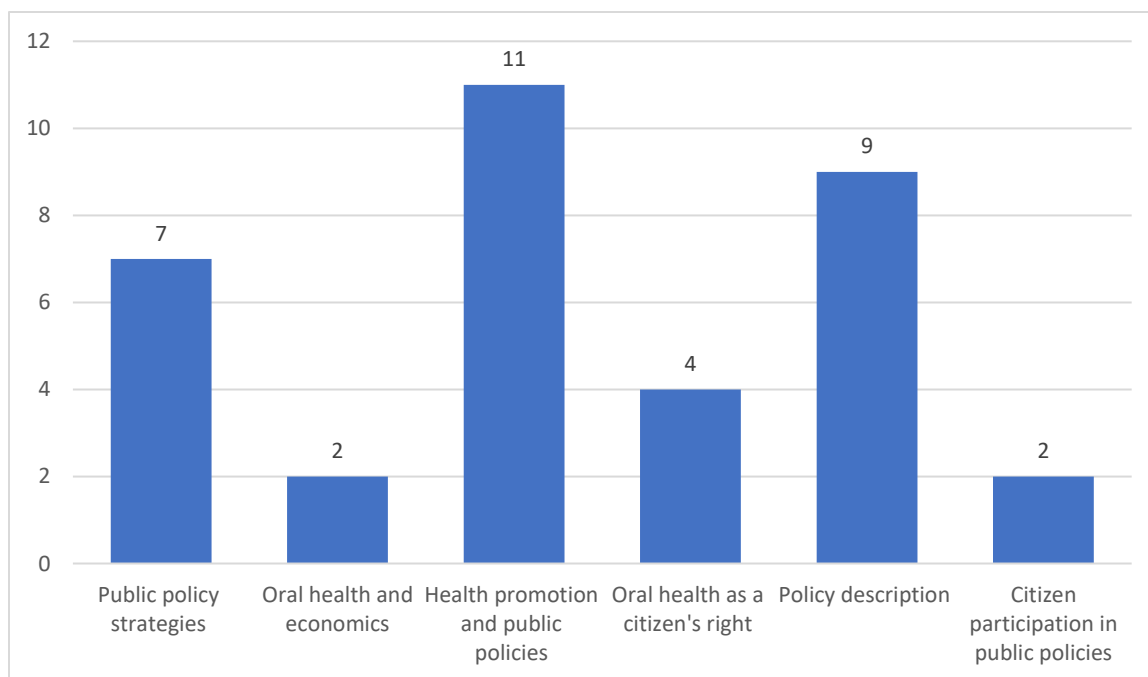
The data were organized and classified into six emerging thematic categories after a critical reading and content analysis: (1) Health promotion and public policies (11 articles), (2) Policy description (9), (3) Public policy strategies (7), (4) Oral health as a citizen's right (4), (5) Oral health and economics (2), and (6) Citizen participation in public policies (2). This categorization allowed for the identification of recurring patterns, areas of emphasis, and research gaps, which were discussed in terms of their relevance for formulating inclusive, sustainable, and evidence-based policies in the region.

**Figure 1**  
PRISMA flow diagram for article selection process



**Note:** Source: content generated from <https://hollyhartman.shinyapps.io/PRISMAFlowDiagram/>

**Figure 2**  
Research topic categories in public policies for oral health



Farfán Martínez, J. M., Villegas Alvarez, A. M., Rivera Ynoñan, J. L., & Ruiz Villavicencio, G. E. (2026). Systematic analysis of public policies on oral health in Latin America: approaches, challenges, and proposals (2020–2025). *Revista InveCom*, 6(1). 1-9. <https://zenodo.org/records/15616937>

In Figure 2, it can be observed that health promotion and public policies present a greater number of articles. Comprehensive protocols were formulated, and evaluative benchmarks were standardized in the treatment and prevention of various oral pathologies. A notable advantage of existing policies lies in facilitating promotion and prevention through the teaching of proper tooth-brushing methodologies, timely identification of bacterial biofilm, and the implementation of motivating educational discourses.

## Results

The systematic analysis of the 30 reviewed articles identified six main thematic categories related to public policies in oral health in Latin America. These categories reflect the multicausal and multidimensional approach adopted by research surrounding oral health as a strategic component of health systems in the region.

The most represented category was the promotion of oral health within public policies, evidenced in 11 studies (Contreras, 2013; Galante et al., 2022; Contreras, 2016). This trend indicates a paradigm shift from a curative model to preventive and structural approaches, integrating actions such as education in oral hygiene, the inclusion of content in school curricula, and the implementation of water fluoridation policies (FDI, 2021; UNICEF, 2019). Authors agree that promotion is key to reducing the prevalence of diseases such as dental caries and periodontitis, especially in contexts with high inequality in access to health services (Quispe & Huamani, 2022; Ladera & Medina, 2023).

Secondly, the category of “description and analysis” of existing policies appears in 9 articles, evidencing interest in mapping regulatory frameworks, identifying structural gaps, and proposing evaluation mechanisms. Various studies (Garrido and Cornejo, 2021; León et al., 2021; Parise et al., 2020) identify institutional fragmentation, weaknesses in operational implementation, and scarce impact evaluation as persistent obstacles. The review suggests strengthening public governance through specific indicators and control mechanisms that allow for monitoring the effectiveness of policies over time (ECLAC, 2022; Franco et al., 2004).

The third category, “implementation strategies for public policies,” is represented in 7 studies. These investigations propose approaches such as interprofessional care, territorialization of services, and the integration of oral health into local development plans (Remuzgo & Remuzgo, 2022; Lara et al., 2020). The need to train health personnel in comprehensive approaches and establish sustainable public budgets that ensure the continuity of programs is also emphasized (Espinoza Chávez et al., 2025; Ortega et al., 2007).

The category “oral health as a citizen's right,” included in 4 articles, raises the necessity of legally recognizing access to dental care as part of the fundamental right to health (Lorenzo et al., 2025; Gispert & Bécquer, 2015). This perspective compels states to guarantee universal services, with an emphasis on vulnerable populations (children, the elderly, rural populations), and promotes the justiciability of this right in constitutional courts (Lara-Carrillo et al., 2020).

Additionally, two categories that are underdeveloped but conceptually relevant were identified: “oral health and economics” and “citizen participation in public policies,” both with 2 studies. In the first case, limited evaluation of the economic impact of oral diseases on health systems was noted, which constrains the construction of cost-benefit arguments supporting their prioritization (Herrera-Serna et al., 2020; Cargua Ríos et al., 2025). In the second case, low citizen participation in the design and implementation of oral health policies affects their legitimacy and long-term sustainability (Díaz Aldret, 2017; Nogueira et al., 2021).

## Main contributions to public policies in oral health

Each item represents a relevant finding or proposal regarding oral health and its relation to public policies. These aspects have been organized according to their order of appearance, indicating how many articles address each category. Table 1 shows that there are multiple theoretical and practical contributions related to oral health, some presented in a few articles and others addressed in up to seven studies. These categories reflect both needs and concrete proposals for strengthening oral health from a comprehensive and intersectoral approach.

The most frequent category (7 articles) refers to the application of various strategies aimed at reducing the incidence of dental caries, reflecting a constant concern for improving health indicators from a preventive perspective.

The importance of incorporating oral health into intersectoral public policies and promoting educational sessions contextualized to each community's reality is also identified as key elements for effective care. Additionally, the formulation of concrete intervention proposals and the promotion of epidemiological research are considered essential for evidence-based planning.

Moreover, several categories highlight the need to push for specific public policies in oral health as part of a healthy living approach at all stages, as well as to include this theme in the national agenda. The active role of dental professionals in the health system reform process is emphasized, with a focus that transitions from curative to health promotion.

**Table 1**  
*Frequency of proposals or contributions made in the articles*

| Categories                                                                             | Number of Articles |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Consolidation of public policies through effective governmental planning               | 4                  |
| Educational sessions aligned with local health realities                               | 3                  |
| Specific initiatives to guarantee the right to oral health                             | 4                  |
| Incorporation of oral health into national agendas as part of overall well-being       | 3                  |
| Production of epidemiological studies to support decisions and policies in oral health | 3                  |
| Inclusion of dental professionals in reforms aimed at health promotion                 | 3                  |
| Implementation of measures to reduce the prevalence of dental caries                   | 5                  |
| Integration of oral health into sustainable intersectoral policies                     | 3                  |
| Execution of national research priorities in oral health                               | 2                  |
| <b>Total</b>                                                                           | <b>30</b>          |

Overall, the categories in Table 1 demonstrate a demand for stability in public policies, sustainability in implemented actions, and a broad and inclusive vision of the right to oral health. If articulated correctly, these actions could lead to a substantial improvement in the quality of life for the most vulnerable populations.

## Discussion

The comprehensive analysis of the literature reveals that oral health continues to be a subordinate dimension within public health policies in Latin America, despite its close connection to overall well-being and its potential to prevent systemic diseases (Organización Mundial de la Salud [OMS], 2022; Watt et al., 2022; Cargua et al., 2025; Echevarría et al., 2023). Studies such as those by Franco, Morales & Pérez (2004) and Gispert & Bécquer (2015) emphasize that the structural incorporation of oral health into the state agenda is crucial for achieving health equity. This lag is reflected in the limited sustainability of existing policies and the absence of effective governance mechanisms that link local, regional, and national levels (Pimentel et al., 2021; Remuzgo & Remuzgo, 2022).

One of the main emerging categories in the analyzed studies is the promotion of oral health as a core element of public policies, highlighting the urgency of implementing educational strategies adapted to the sociocultural realities of each community (Agudelo et al., 2023; Contreras, 2016; Lara et al., 2020). In this regard, education from early childhood, interprofessional training, and citizen awareness are essential components for achieving sustainable interventions (Assadi, 2018; Castañeda & Sotelo, 2023; Garrido & Cornejo, 2021). Furthermore, authors such as Martínez & López (2021) and Lorenzo et al. (2025) stress the need to design policies that consider local conditions to enhance their effectiveness, integrating principles of social justice and human rights.

Regarding access equity, multiple sources confirm that deep inequalities persist due to social determinants such as socioeconomic level, geographic location, and the cultural capital of users (Fundación para la Salud Oral, 2022; Cunha & Leite, 2022). This situation is particularly severe in vulnerable contexts where dental services are scarce or nonexistent. As noted by Cifuentes & Sánchez (2022), the lack of epidemiological monitoring limits the capacity to plan evidence-based actions, perpetuating cycles of exclusion. This deficiency is exacerbated by the absence of a structural preventive approach in many public oral health programs (García et al., 2023; Nogueira et al., 2021).



The studies analyzed identify increased attention to the connection between oral health and various systemic conditions, particularly non-communicable diseases such as periodontal disease, certain types of cancer, and cardiovascular complications (Marín-Jaramillo and Duque-Duque, 2021; Herrera-Serna et al., 2020; Morales et al., 2020). Despite this growing understanding, limitations persist in formulating intersectoral public policies that address this relationship effectively. Galante et al. (2022) highlight the need to advance towards an articulated Latin American governance model based on common standards that strengthen both regulatory frameworks and the technical capacities of health personnel.

Moreover, mechanisms for citizen participation in the creation and oversight of oral health policies are still in their infancy (Díaz Aldret, 2017; Díaz Couso et al., 2019). The health crisis generated by COVID-19 exposed not only the structural weaknesses of dental systems but also the importance of building strategies that include citizens as active agents in prevention and response (Quispe & Huamani, 2022; Cerci et al., 2025). Consequently, it is urgent to move towards inclusive management models that transcend the medical-assistential paradigm and promote shared responsibility between the state and civil society in ensuring the right to oral health.

## Conclusions

The results obtained reveal a heterogeneous landscape with marked gaps in the formulation and implementation of public policies aimed at oral health in Latin America. Although there are recognized normative advances and an increasing scientific output on the topic, effective incorporation into health systems remains limited. The lack of institutional articulation, the discontinuity of governmental strategies, and weak cooperation among sectors restrict the reach of these policies, especially in contexts of high social vulnerability. This is compounded by the limited availability of updated epidemiological studies and the scarce inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes, negatively impacting access equity to dental services.

In response to these challenges, it is necessary to adopt a perspective of oral health centered on social justice, prevention, and the recognition of the right to health. Achieving this requires strengthening governance systems, promoting continuous training for oral health personnel, developing culturally relevant pedagogical strategies, and formulating comprehensive policies that respond to the specific conditions of each territory. This set of actions represents a fundamental step towards building more inclusive, sustainable health systems aimed at ensuring the oral well-being of the entire population in the region.

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