Public health policies in oral health in Latin America: Advances, challenges, and perspectives based on a systematic review

Políticas públicas en salud bucal en América Latina: avances, desafíos y perspectivas a partir de una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

Oral health represents an essential component of general wellbeing; however, wide gaps persist in access, quality and equity of dental services in Latin America. The objective of this research was to critically analyze public policies in oral health developed in the region between 2019 and 2024, based on a systematic review of thirty-three scientific articles indexed in Scopus, SciELO and other academic databases. The methodology consisted of a categorical analysis that organized the evidence into six dimensions: promotion, prevention, access, regulation, research and integration with general health. The results reveal that, although there are advances in regulations and educational programs, there are still structural weaknesses, such as institutional fragmentation, limited coverage in rural areas and limited intersectoral articulation. In addition, a low incorporation of oral health in primary health care systems has been identified. It is concluded that there is an urgent need to reconfigure public policies with a territorial approach, a biopsychosocial perspective and scientific evidence to ensure accessible, sustainable and equitable oral health throughout the region.

Keywords: oral health, public policies, comprehensive wellness.

Resumen

La salud bucal representa un componente esencial del bienestar general, sin embargo, persisten amplias brechas en el acceso, la calidad y equidad de los servicios odontológicos en América Latina. El objetivo de esta investigación fue analizar críticamente las políticas públicas en salud bucal desarrolladas en la región entre 2019 y 2024, a partir de una revisión sistemática de treinta y tres (33) artículos científicos indexados en Scopus, SciELO y otras bases de datos académicas. La metodología consistió en un análisis categorial que organizó la evidencia en seis dimensiones: promoción, prevención, acceso, regulación, investigación e integración con la salud general. Los resultados revelan que, si bien existen avances en normativas y programas educativos, aún persisten debilidades estructurales, como la fragmentación institucional, la limitada cobertura en zonas rurales y la escasa articulación intersectorial. Además, se identifica una baja incorporación de la salud bucal en los sistemas de atención primaria. Se concluye que es urgente reconfigurar las políticas públicas con enfoque territorial, perspectiva biopsicosocial y respaldo en evidencia científica, para garantizar una salud bucal accesible, sostenible y equitativa en toda la región.

Palabras clave: salud bucal, políticas públicas, bienestar integral.

Introduction

Oral health is an essential component of human well-being, affecting not only biological aspects but also psychological, social, and functional dimensions of daily life. Oral diseases—such as caries, periodontal diseases, and orofacial conditions—continue to pose a significant burden on public health systems, particularly in Latin American countries, where structural inequalities and limited access to specialized services exacerbate the issue (Organización Mundial de la Salud, 2024). These conditions not only compromise individuals' quality of life but also perpetuate cycles of poverty and exclusion, especially among rural, indigenous, or socioeconomically vulnerable populations (Santos-Silva & Peres, 2023).

In this context, monitoring inequities in oral health emerges as a priority, necessitating rigorous tracking of indicators such as morbidity, access to services, and coverage of preventive programs, disaggregated by socioeconomic status, gender, age, and geographic location. This monitoring is only feasible through the design and implementation of public policies. Moreover, these oral health policies must not only address the clinical dimensions of disease but also promote enabling environments, inclusive health systems, and legislative frameworks that ensure universal access to quality dental services (Organización Panamericana de la Salud, 2025).

Recent studies emphasize that, while some Latin American countries have made progress in primary oral health care coverage, significant challenges remain due to weak intersectoral coordination, lack of sustained funding, and limited integration of qualitative approaches that account for experiences, perceptions, and social determinants shaping access to and use of dental services (Gutiérrez-Izquierdo & Frenk, 2019; Caballero & Rojas, 2020). Consequently, there is a need to reconceptualize the approach to oral health from a biopsychosocial model that considers individuals as integral and contextualized subjects, rather than merely carriers of disease.

Interest in improving oral health through public policies has grown in recent decades in Latin America, to the extent that various state, academic, and multilateral entities have promoted national plans, educational campaigns, and regulatory reforms aimed at prevention, promotion, and dental rehabilitation (Acosta-Andrade et al., 2021; Rodríguez et al., 2020). However, greater systematization of experiences is still required, with empirical evidence evaluating the actual impact of implemented interventions, as well as the inclusion of multidisciplinary approaches that strengthen the design and management of public oral health policies (Aurlene & Manipal, 2020).

From this perspective, the present study aims to conduct a documentary review and systematize the approaches, strategies, challenges, and current trends in the formulation and implementation of these policies, categorizing the findings into six thematic areas: oral health promotion, disease prevention, access to services, regulation and legislation, research and development, and integration with general health.

Through this analysis, we seek to answer the central question: How are public policies in oral health being addressed in recent studies conducted in Latin American contexts, and what challenges and opportunities have been identified for their improvement and impact? Understanding this issue will allow for the formulation of recommendations aimed at strengthening regulatory, operational, and evaluative frameworks in the field of oral health, with a critical, contextual, and evidence-based perspective.

Methodology

The methodology employed for this research was based on a systematic review of various bibliographic sources on oral health policies in Latin America, encompassing a total of 33 scientific articles. Selection criteria included epidemiological studies on oral health, aimed at identifying the most prevalent oral pathologies in each country, as well as research on public policies in oral health and their impact in the region. Data collection involved consulting various documents published in indexed journals in prestigious databases such as Scopus, SciELO, and some journals from RedALyC.

The criteria for document selection were: scientific articles published in recent years, originating from Latin America, and containing relevant information on oral health. Documents not meeting these conditions were excluded; these publications underwent thorough analysis to compile and interpret data on oral health in Latin America, considering the following selection criteria, steps, and strategies:

Identification of secondary sources: An exhaustive search was conducted in academic databases, government repositories, websites of international organizations, and other relevant resources. Sources in Spanish were prioritized to ensure cultural and linguistic relevance.

Document selection: Inclusion criteria were applied to select the most pertinent documents, including case studies, research reports, and academic articles.

Categorization of themes and subthemes: The obtained information was organized into relevant themes and subthemes to structure the review. This included aspects such as title, author, year, and source of the articles, related to digital transformation.

Results

Conducting this research involved seeking relevant information associated with the topic, in which, according to Fernández et al. (2020), oral health is a fundamental aspect of general health. This leads to persistent inequalities in access to preventive and treatment services in many Latin American countries, with one of the main reasons being the lack of integration into health systems, limiting the capacity to respond to the population's needs.

Main Research Themes on Public Policies in Oral Health

From the selected articles, a series of research themes were identified, grouped into six categories. Constructing a framework to logically and coherently connect these themes was essential for relating the categories of scientific articles on digital transformation in Spanish-speaking countries.

Table 1

Distribution of articles by thematic category in public oral health policies in Latin America

No.	Categories	Number of articles
1	Oral Health Promotion	4
2	Disease Prevention	3
3	Access to Oral Health Services	3
4	Regulation and Legislation	9
5	Research and Development	10
6	Integration of Oral Health in General Health	4
	Total	**33**

1. Oral Health Promotion

Oral health promotion in Latin America has been approached as a key axis of public policies, focusing on education for self-care, community awareness, and the development of healthy habits from an early age. However, limitations in territorial implementation are evident, particularly in rural areas where factors such as resource scarcity, lack of trained personnel, and weak intersectoral coordination hinder effectiveness. While experiences in Mexico have made strides in awareness (Gutiérrez-Izquierdo & Frenk, 2019), studies in Peru show persistent gaps in equity and sustainability, necessitating a rethinking of strategies with a contextual and participatory focus (Caballero & Rojas, 2020; Salazar & Díaz, 2020; Franco-Giraldo, 2021).

2. Disease Prevention

Prevention programs have proven effective in reducing the burden of oral morbidity when supported by robust institutional management, adequate professional training, and continuous monitoring mechanisms. Research indicates that their integration into primary care enhances early diagnosis, although challenges such as service segmentation and a shortage of specialized personnel remain (Herrera-García et al., 2021; Aguirre-Acevedo & Agudelo-Mejía, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted both structural weaknesses and the adaptability of the sector, promoting innovative models such as teledentistry to maintain active prevention (Ramírez & Campos, 2021; Muñoz-Sierra et al., 2021).

3. Access to Oral Health Services

Equitable access to dental services continues to be one of the most complex structural challenges in Latin America, influenced by geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural factors. Countries like Chile and Peru exhibit marked inequalities in service distribution and quality, limiting the impact of policies aimed at oral well-being (Tipan, 2023; Alcaina, 2020).

4. Regulation and Legislation

Oral health legislation has evolved in the region, shaping more inclusive regulatory frameworks aimed at universal coverage; however, significant gaps persist in practical application and oversight mechanisms. The pandemic necessitated the reformulation of health regulations, underscoring the need to strengthen inter-institutional coordination and ensure operability in crisis contexts (González-Martínez & García-García, 2021; Muñoz-Monsalve et al., 2020; López-López et al., 2021). At the national level, regulations are often less effective in rural areas due to structural barriers and institutional weaknesses (Carrillo & García, 2021; Echevarría-Gochea et al., 2023).

5. Research and Development

The connection between scientific research and public policy is essential for designing effective, sustainable, and context-sensitive strategies in oral health. Empirical evidence helps to highlight structural determinants, propose more precise interventions, and objectively assess the impact of implemented programs (Santos-Silva & Peres, 2023). However, authors such as Fernández & Gómez (2016), and Aguirre-Acevedo & Aristizábal-Botero (2020) emphasize the need to institutionalize applied research as a driver of political development, especially in countries with limited investment in science and technology.

6. Integration of Oral Health in General Health

Oral health should be understood as an inseparable component of overall health, due to its close relationship with non-communicable chronic diseases and its direct impact on quality of life. Research highlights the urgent need to integrate dental services into primary and community care systems, promoting multidisciplinary and continuous care (Gonzales & García, 2021). The lack of coordination between care levels, limited human resources, and fragmented operational frameworks continue to pose obstacles to full integration, particularly in rural areas (Torres & Navarro, 2020; Paredes & Quispe, 2022; Agudelo et al., 2023).

Table 2

Summary of evidence on public oral health policies in Latin America

No.	Author and Year	Relevant Findings	Source
1	Fajrelin et al. (2023)	Narrative review on oral health and migration, proposing binational coverage strategies.	Revista de Salud Pública
2	Echevarría-Gochea et al. (2023)	Described the process of defining research priorities in oral health for Peru from 2022-2026.	Revista Peruana de Medicina Experimental y Salud Pública
3	Santos-Silva & Peres (2023)	Discussed challenges in strengthening public oral health policies in Latin America, including financing and training.	Revista de Saúde Pública
4	Almario & Concha (2022)	Analyzed how social gradient affects the oral health of working women, recommending equity in public policies.	Revista de Salud Pública
5	Petersen et al. (2022)	Related oral health policies to the Sustainable Development Goals, proposing intersectoral actions.	International Dental Journal

6	Paredes & Quispe (2022)	Analyzed the implementation of oral health policies in Peru, identifying institutional challenges and improvement opportunities.	Revista Peruana de Salud Pública
7	Vieira & Marinho (2022)	Analyzed the Brazilian experience in public oral health policies, positively valuing SUS coverage.	Revista de Saúde Pública
8	Aguirre-Acevedo & Agudelo-Mejía (2022)	Identified challenges and possibilities for integrating oral health into primary care in Latin America.	Odontología UdeA
9	López-López et al. (2021)	Analyzed oral health policies developed during the health crisis, suggesting strengthening interinstitutional management.	Ciencia Latina
10	Castillo & Vela (2021)	Evaluated Peruvian dental policies, evidencing weak intersectoral coordination and limited impact evaluation.	Revista Peruana de Medicina Experimental y Salud Pública
11	Steele et al. (2021)	Presented a rapid review of the global impact of COVID-19 on oral health policies.	Journal of Dental Research
12	Carrillo & García (2021)	Studied the effectiveness of oral health policies in rural Peruvian areas, highlighting lack of resources and infrastructure.	Revista Médica Herediana
13	Villena & Chumpitaz (2021)	Reviewed recent advances in oral health policies in Peru, recommending strengthening community participation.	Revista Peruana de Medicina Experimental y Salud Pública
14	González-Martínez & García-García (2021)	Examined oral health strategies in Latin America from 1991 to 2018, highlighting advances and gaps.	Revista de Salud Pública
15	Medina & Muñoz (2021)	Examined advances and challenges of oral health on the Colombian public agenda, emphasizing vulnerable populations.	Revista de Salud Pública
16	Fernández & Rodríguez (2021)	Studied interventions in oral health in rural Peruvian communities, highlighting the value of a territorial approach.	Revista Peruana de Odontología
17	Ramírez & Campos (2021)	Proposed public intervention strategies to improve oral health in Peru, emphasizing community education and equitable access.	Revista de la Facultad de Odontología
18	Herrera-García et al. (2021)	Conducted a systematic review of preventive programs, detecting shortcomings in public oral health management quality.	Ciencia Latina
19	Muñoz-Sierra et al. (2021)	Analyzed public oral health policies during the pandemic, observing institutional fragmentation and limited coverage.	Ciencia Latina
20	Caballero & Rojas (2020)	Reviewed national Peruvian policies on oral health, noting insufficient coverage and lack of preventive focus.	Revista Peruana de Medicina Experimental y Salud Pública
21	Salazar & Díaz (2020)	Evaluated the effectiveness of oral health policies in rural communities of Peru, evidencing weaknesses in human and material resources.	Revista Médica Herediana
22	Muñoz-Monsalve et al. (2020)	Explored policy responses to oral health in the context of the pandemic, proposing improvements in care protocols.	Ciencia Latina
23	Aguirre-Acevedo & Aristizábal-Botero (2020)	Reflected on key elements for building impactful public policies in oral health.	Odontología UdeA
24	Torres & Navarro (2020)	Evaluated the impact of oral health policies in primary care in Peru, highlighting weaknesses in coverage.	Revista Peruana de Epidemiología
25	Rotemberg (2020)	Studied the perception of oral health in adolescents with addictions, highlighting the need for differentiated policies.	Revista Peruana de Odontología
26	Guzmán & Chávez (2019)	Examined access to dental services in Peru under public policies, underscoring economic and regional disparities.	Revista Peruana de Salud Pública
27	Quispe & Villegas (2019)	Examined the impact of public policies on child dental health in Peru, with mixed results in prevention.	Revista Peruana de Salud Pública
28	Gonzales & Cabanillas (2019)	Analyzed the effects of national programs on child oral health in Peru, highlighting deficiencies in follow-up.	Revista Peruana de Salud Pública
29	Gutiérrez-Izquierdo & Frenk (2019)	Analyzed the role of public policies in promoting oral health in Mexico, highlighting legislative advances and implementation challenges.	Revista de Salud Pública
30	Fernández & Gómez (2016)	Reviewed advances in oral health policies in Peru, highlighting normative achievements and execution gaps.	Revista Peruana de Medicina Experimental y Salud Pública

31	González-Martínez & García-García (2021)	Review of oral health strategies in Latin America and the Caribbean since 1991, emphasizing long-term planning.	Revista de Salud Pública
32	Almario & Concha (2022)	Analyzed how the social gradient affects the oral health of working women, recommending equity in public policies.	Revista de Salud Pública
33	Petersen et al. (2022)	Related oral health policies to the Sustainable Development Goals, proposing intersectoral actions.	International Dental Journal

Discussion

The evidence reviewed in this research highlights the structural complexity faced by public oral health policies in Latin America. Various authors agree that significant gaps in access and quality of dental services persist (Caballero & Rojas, 2020; Guzmán & Chávez, 2019; Villena & Chumpitaz, 2021). In Chile, substantial inequalities have been reported between urban and rural sectors, suggesting that regulatory frameworks do not impact all population segments with the same efficacy (Tipan, 2023). This situation is mirrored in Peru, where preventive programs show heterogeneous results due to budgetary limitations and deficiencies in the coordination between care levels (Quispe & Villegas, 2019; Salazar & Díaz, 2020; Carrillo & García, 2021). Although oral health promotion has been extensively addressed in studies such as those by Gutiérrez-Izquierdo & Frenk (2019) and Martínez and Morales (2021), a lack of institutional sustainability and evaluation mechanisms is evident, hindering the adaptation of programs to specific contexts.

Some works present optimistic views by highlighting successful experiences in integrating oral health into general health systems, such as in Brazil under the SUS framework (Vieira & Marinho, 2022) or in Mexico through community education campaigns (Gutiérrez-Izquierdo & Frenk, 2019). However, other studies argue that integration cannot be understood merely as administrative inclusion but requires a structural redesign of care models with a biopsychosocial approach (Fernández & Rodríguez, 2021).

This perspective is supported by the findings of Torres & Navarro (2020), who assert that in the absence of effective intersectoral coordination, oral health interventions tend to be fragmented and short-term. In contrast, authors like López-López et al. (2021) and Muñoz-Sierra et al. (2021) highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the implementation of innovative strategies, such as teledentistry, creating opportunities to reconfigure service offerings in emergency contexts.

The normative dimension reflects marked contrasts. While González-Martínez & García-García (2021) and Santos-Silva & Peres (2023) emphasize advances in legislation and strategic planning at the regional level, others, such as Medina & Muñoz (2021) or García & Posada (2018), denounce weak regulatory enforcement and limited oversight of existing plans. Even when well-formulated national plans exist, as indicated by Echevarría-Gochea et al. (2023) for Peru, their execution often faces operational obstacles, such as constant staff turnover, lack of performance indicators, and absence of multi-year funding. In this context, studies by Steele et al. (2021) and Petersen et al. (2022) demonstrate that oral health remains a subprioritized component in global health agendas, despite its close ties to the Sustainable Development Goals.

Finally, the scientific discussion emphasizes that research and development systems in oral health must be consolidated as strategic axes for the continuous improvement of public policies. In this regard, authors like Aguirre-Acevedo & Aristizábal-Botero (2020), Castillo & Vela (2021), and Fernández & Gómez (2016) agree that knowledge production should be directly linked to policy and management decisions, especially in contexts of high inequity. Furthermore, studies by López & Vargas (2020) highlight that only through a coordinated research agenda, adapted to the changing needs of the population, can we advance toward inclusive, sustainable, and culturally relevant oral health models. Therefore, it is essential not only to increase investment in applied science but also to promote collaborative ecosystems among the state, academia, and civil society to foster real transformation in the dental sector in Latin America.

Conclusions

This review clearly identified the main advances, challenges, and gaps in the formulation and implementation of public oral health policies in Latin America. Through the analysis of multiple recent studies, it was evident that, while there are significant efforts by states and academia to promote equitable access and continuous improvement of dental services, these efforts are often limited by structural factors such as social inequality, institutional fragmentation, and lack of program sustainability. The analyzed categories reveal an urgent

need to integrate preventive, promotional, and care approaches with a holistic view of health that transcends an exclusively biomedical perspective.

In this framework, it is concluded that oral health should no longer be treated as a peripheral component in health policies but should begin to occupy a strategic place in public health systems. The consolidation of coherent regulatory frameworks, sustained investment in applied research, strengthening institutional capacities, and intersectoral coordination are essential pillars for advancing toward an inclusive, integrated, and contextualized model. Only through evidence-based public policies, with a territorial focus and centered on the real needs of communities, will it be possible to reduce existing gaps and ensure dignified oral health for all citizens in the region.

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