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Poverty in our state has many consequences for families, making it tougher to pay the rent and harder to put food on the table. But there is one impact that New Yorkers may overlook. Children's Dental Health Month is a good time to consider another reason why living on the economic margins is nothing to smile about.

Low-income children are more likely to have tooth decay. In fact, six of 10 low-income, third-grade children in New York State have experienced tooth decay. If untreated, cavities can cause pain and make it tough for children to eat, sleep, speak or learn.

Prevention is key. Any child can get a cavity if she isn't eating right and isn't brushing at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste. A variety of factors, including the lack of dental insurance, can make it harder for families to get access to regular dental care. For some of these families, fluoride toothpaste and fluoridated water are the only forms of prevention they receive.

Fluoride is a mineral that exists naturally in water, but many communities add more to reach a level that is shown to reduce cavity rates. A 2010 study conducted here in New York State showed that low-income children in less fluoridated counties needed 33 percent more fillings, root canals and tooth extractions than those in counties where fluoridated water was common.

According to the Center for Disease Control, there are still some communities in Erie County - specifically rural areas - that do not add fluoride to the water. Communities that don't add more fluoride to their water are missing a low-cost opportunity to provide everyone — wealthy or poor — with a healthy dose of prevention.

Comment [A1]: We could add a link here.

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