



Dental work: Careers in oral care

Elka Torpey | March 2020

Ruchi Sahota's work is all smiles. And that's not just because she helps people keep their teeth and gums healthy. It's also because she likes what she does—and the many people she sees all day. "It's great to be in a career where I connect with people," says Sahota. "Having the opportunity to improve someone's quality of life is priceless."

Sahota is a general dentist, one of many options for a career in oral care. Dental assistants, hygienists, and laboratory technicians are among the other occupations that offer opportunities. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), dental occupations are projected to offer good prospects through 2028.

Employment, wages, and training

In 2018, there were more than 750,000 jobs in dental occupations. [Dental assistants](#) and [dental hygienists](#) together made up about three-quarters of that total. (See table 1.)

Table 1. Dental occupations: Employment, self employment, and wages, 2018, and typical entry-level education and training



| Occupation | Employment, 2018 | Percent self-employed, 2018 ¹ | Median annual wage, 2018 ² | Typical education needed for entry | On-the-job training ³ |
|---------------------------------|------------------|--|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Dental assistants | 346,000 | N/A | \$38,660 | Postsecondary nondegree award | None |
| Dental hygienists | 219,800 | 1 | 74,820 | Associate's degree | None |
| Dental laboratory technicians | 36,500 | 4 | 40,440 | High school diploma or equivalent | Moderate-term on-the-job training |
| Dentists | | | | | |
| General dentists | 136,900 | 16.5 | 151,850 | Doctoral or professional degree | None |
| Oral and maxillofacial surgeons | 5,900 | 16.5 | >=208,000 | Doctoral or professional degree | Internship/residency |
| Orthodontists | 6,500 | 16.7 | >=208,000 | Doctoral or professional degree | Internship/residency |
| Prosthodontists | 500 | 16.8 | 176,540 | Doctoral or professional degree | Internship/residency |
| Dentists, all other specialists | 5,200 | 9.2 | 146,970 | Doctoral or professional degree | Internship/residency |

Note: None of these occupations typically require work experience in a related occupation for entry.

¹ Self-employment data are not available for dental assistants.

² The median annual wage for oral and maxillofacial surgeons and orthodontists was greater than or equal to \$208,000, the highest median annual wage published by the BLS Occupational Employment Statistics program.

³ On-the-job training includes preparation that is typically needed, once employed in an occupation, to attain competency.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections.

Five of the occupations in table 1 are types of [dentists](#): general dentists, oral and maxillofacial surgeons, orthodontists, prosthodontists, and all other dentists. About 16 percent of dentists were self-employed in 2018, compared with the 6-percent rate for all workers.

Wages and hours

Median annual wages for each of the dental occupations shown in table 1 were greater than \$38,640, which is the median annual wage for all occupations in 2018. Oral and maxillofacial surgeons and orthodontists had the highest wages: They made at least \$208,000, the highest median annual wage published by the BLS Occupational Employment Statistics program.

Part-time work is common in some dental occupations, according to the [Current Population Survey](#) (CPS). For example, CPS data show that more than half of all dental hygienists worked part time in 2018. Dental assistants and dentists also had above-average rates of part-time employment.

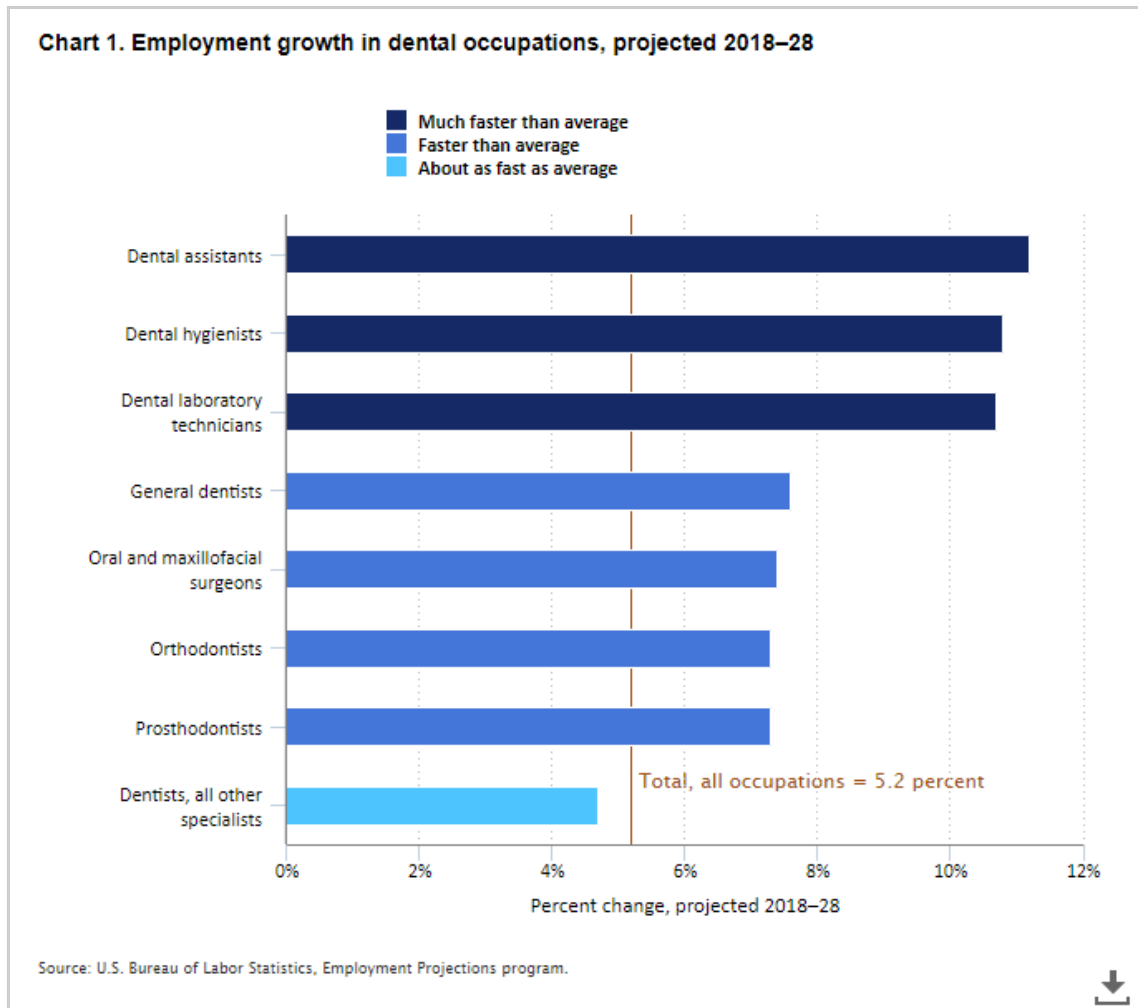
Getting started

Dental occupations have different education, training, and licensing requirements. In addition to education, most of the occupations in table 1 require training for workers to attain competency in their job tasks. For example, [dental laboratory technicians](#) may enter the occupation with a high school diploma but, once hired, they typically need 1 to 12 months of on-the-job training to fully develop their skills.

Every state requires dentists and dental hygienists to be licensed. Requirements depend on the state but often include earning a degree from an accredited program and passing written and clinical examinations. Some states also require licensing for dental assistants and dental laboratory technicians. Check with your state's licensing agency for details.

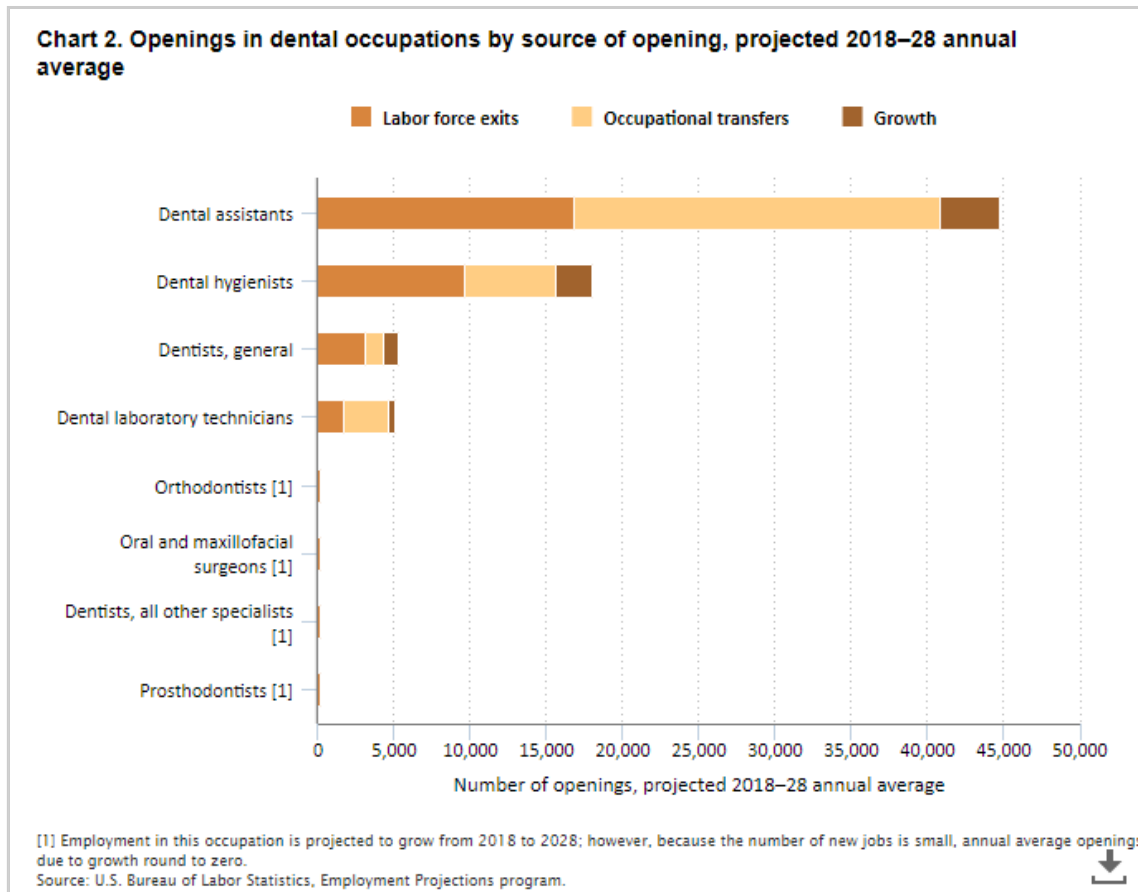
Outlook and more

BLS projects employment in most dental occupations to grow faster or much faster than the average for all occupations over the 2018–28 decade. (See chart 1.) Demand for dental services is expected to increase as people recognize the link between oral health and overall health and as an aging population requires more dental work.



Openings

Employment growth is expected to result in thousands of openings each year for people looking to enter dental occupations. But many more openings are projected to stem from workers who leave these occupations permanently, either to exit the labor force or to transfer to other occupations. (See chart 2.)



As chart 2 shows, BLS projects more openings each year, on average, over the decade for dental assistants than for all other dental occupations. More than half of the 44,800 openings for dental assistants projected each year, on average, are expected to arise from assistants transferring to different occupations.

Career preview

Fast growth and many openings aren’t the only factors to consider when deciding on a career path. Sahota suggests looking beyond the data to get a clear idea about what dental occupations involve. “Go and shadow people, talk to them, and try to find mentors in dentistry,” she says. “Really try to soak up as much of the experience of being in a dental office as you can. That will help you understand whether it’s right for you.”

For more information

Learn more about dental careers in the [Occupational Outlook Handbook \(OOH\)](#). The OOH describes what workers do, the work environment, job outlook, and more for hundreds of occupations. Visit the Employment Projections site for additional data about [occupational openings](#).

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SUGGESTED CITATION:

Elka Torpey, "Dental work: Careers in oral care," *Career Outlook*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, March 2020.

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