



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Facts About the Nursing Workforce

Following are key facts about the nursing workforce of today and tomorrow.

Jul 27, 2010

Today's Nursing Workforce

In recent years, the nursing workforce in the United States has grown larger, more diverse, better educated, a little older and somewhat better paid, according to data from the federal government.

Overall size of nursing workforce. According to the [Health Resources and Services Administration](#) (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the nation has an estimated 3.06 million licensed registered nurses—more than ever before. That figure represents a 5.3 percent increase since HRSA's last survey in 2004, outpacing U.S. population growth of 3.8 percent during the same period.

Most recent nursing workforce trends. In June 2010, the health care sector of the nation's economy continued to grow, adding more than 9,000 new jobs, according to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#). Over the preceding 12 months, the health care sector has added an average of more than 18,000 jobs per month.

Ratio of nurses to patients. The nation had 854 nurses per 100,000 people in 2008, up from 825 nurses per 100,000 people in 2004. That ratio varies from state to state. Utah has the fewest registered nurses per person with 598 per 100,000 people, while the District of Columbia has the most, with 1,868 per 100,000. Regionally, New England has more nurses per 100,000 people than any other region, with 1,130; the Pacific states (Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, Washington) have the fewest, with 685. (Source: [HRSA](#).)

Nursing shortage. According to [researchers](#), the nation faces a shortage of 250,000 nurses by 2025 the result of several trends, including the increased need for health care for aging Baby Boomers and the influx of new patients into the system as a result of health care reform.

In or out of practice. The great majority of the nation's nurses, 84.4 percent, are still in practice, and 63.2 percent are working full-time. (Source: [HRSA](#).)

Race. The nation's nursing workforce is increasingly diverse, although white women are still over-represented by comparison to the general population. White, non-Hispanics (65.6 percent of the U.S. population) are 83.2 percent of licensed registered nurses (down from 87.5 percent in 2004). Asian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders account for the next largest demographic group at 5.8 percent (while 4.5 percent of the U.S. population). Non-Hispanic Blacks are 5.4 percent of registered nurses (while 12.2 percent of the U.S. population), and Hispanics/Latinos (of any race) are 3.6 percent of registered nurses (while 15.4 percent of the U.S. population). (Source: [HRSA](#).)

Gender. Women continue to outnumber men in the profession, by more than 15 to 1 in 2008. But the trend line is toward more diversity. Among those who became registered nurses after 1990, the ratio is just 10 to 1. Men account for 6.6 percent of the nursing population today, up from less than 3 percent in 1980. (Source: [HRSA](#).)

Age. The average age of registered nurses held relatively steady over the last four years, increasing from 46.8 years to 47.0 years. This slight increase arrests a long-term trend toward an older nursing workforce. In 2000, the average age was 45.2 years, and in 1996, it was 44.3 years. Nevertheless, nearly 45 percent of registered nurses were 50 years of age or older in 2008, meaning that high retirement rates are in the near future. (Source: [HRSA](#).)

Education. In all, 36.8 percent of nurses have bachelor's degrees (up from 22.3 percent in 1980), while 36.1 percent of nurses have associate degrees (up from 17.9 percent in 1980). Meanwhile, the percentage of registered nurses whose highest degree is a nursing diploma has declined over the last 30 years from 54.7 percent in 1980 to 13.9 percent in 2008. Advanced degrees are increasingly common, as well: 13.2 percent of nurses held master's or doctorates in 2008, up from 5.2 percent in 1980. (Note that the data for bachelor's and higher degrees include both nursing and non-nursing degrees.) (Source: [HRSA](#).)

The Nursing Workforce of the Near Future

The nursing workforce is expected to grow quickly over the next several years, responding to increased demand from the aging Baby Boomer population and an increase in the number of people with access to health care.

Long-term employment trend. According to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS), nursing is poised to add more jobs to the nation's economy over the next decade than any other single profession. By 2018, more than 580,000 new jobs for registered nurses will be created, with an additional 460,000 jobs for home health care workers. Together the two professions will account for nearly 7 percent of all new jobs created in the United States during the period.

Attrition vs. gains. The [BLS](#) predicts that the number of nursing jobs will grow from 2.62 million in 2008 to 3.20 million in 2018—a 22 percent increase. At the same time, 458,000 nurses will leave the profession, bringing the total number of available nursing jobs—including both newly created jobs and jobs left vacant by nurses who leave the profession—to 1.04 million.

Other health care jobs. The [BLS](#) anticipates that the number of home health aide jobs will grow quickly, at a 50-percent rate, from 920,000 to 1.38 million during the same period. An additional 276,000 jobs will be created for nursing aides, orderlies and attendants, while 376,000 jobs will be created for personal and home care aides. In all, by 2018, nearly 1.7 million new jobs are expected to be created for nurses, home health aides, nursing aides, and orderlies and attendants. That accounts for more than 11 percent of all new jobs likely to be created during the period.