

WWAMI CENTER FOR HEALTH WORKFORCE STUDIES

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Project Summary

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Characteristics of Registered Nurses in Rural vs. Urban Areas: Implications for Strategies to Alleviate Nursing Shortages in the United States

Background: We compared characteristics of rural and urban registered nurses (RNs) in the United States using national survey data, and examined certain characteristics of rural RNs that should be considered in developing strategies to alleviate nursing shortages. Such strategies require understanding of rural RNs' work, education, and commuting patterns.

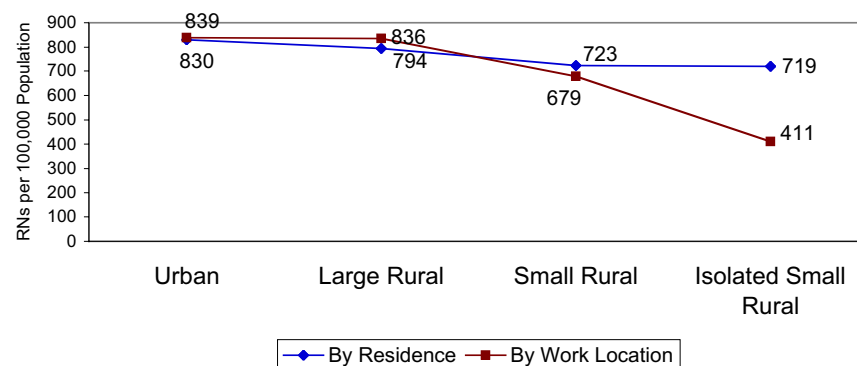
Methods: Using data from the National RN Sample Survey, our analyses examined the representative sample of RNs employed in nursing in the 50 United States in 2000. We used residence and work location ZIP codes to classify RNs into the Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) classifications of urban, large rural, small rural and isolated small rural area types. Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS software, and statistical significance was determined using SUDAAN.

Policy Implications: Strategies to reduce nurse shortages require understanding of rural RNs' work, education, and commuting patterns. Additional investigation is needed to understand the motivations of rural nurses who commute to less rural areas for work. If higher wages attract and retain nurses, and urban employers are better positioned than rural employers to raise wages, this policy could draw larger numbers of RNs from rural to urban settings. A "one size fits all" approach to resolving nurse shortages may benefit one geographic area type at the expense of others.

Major Findings:

- ✘ Rural and urban RNs are similar in age and gender.
- ✘ Nonwhites, Hispanics, and men are underrepresented in all rural and urban areas.
- ✘ Rural RNs are less likely to pursue baccalaureate or higher degrees in nursing than urban RNs.
- ✘ Rural RNs are less likely to work in hospitals and more likely to work full time and in public/community health than urban RNs.
- ✘ The more rural an RN's residence, the more likely s/he is to commute to another area for work and the lower salary s/he receives.
- ✘ There are only 411 RNs working in isolated small rural areas per 100,000 population compared with 679 in small rural, 836 in large rural, and 839 in urban areas.

RNs per 100,000 Population by Residence and Work Location



Findings from this study are more fully described in WWAMI Center for Health Workforce Studies Working Paper #91: Skillman SM, Palazzo L, Keepnews D, Hart LG, Characteristics of Registered Nurses in Rural vs. Urban Areas: Implications for Strategies to Alleviate Nursing Shortages in the United States, January 2005 (revised).

