

WWAMI CENTER FOR HEALTH WORKFORCE STUDIES

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Project Summary

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Practice Patterns and Characteristics of Nurse Practitioners in Washington State

Background: Nurse practitioners (NPs) are an important component of the primary and specialty health care workforce. In Washington State, the potential impact of nurse practitioners in rural settings is of particular interest as a quarter of the state's population is rural, and rural areas are chronically beset with lack of access to health care. This investigation of the characteristics and practice patterns of nurse practitioners in urban and rural settings provides further understanding of NP contributions to rural health care.

Study Design: In 2003 we surveyed NPs in Washington State on topics such as demographics, educational background, certification, practice characteristics, prescribing practices, and practice barriers. We achieved a response rate of almost 75%.

Findings:

Demography

- ✘ The average age of Washington's NPs was 48.5 years. More than half of currently practicing NPs are over age 50.
- ✘ There is little racial diversity in Washington's NP workforce: 95% of NPs are white. The NP workforce is mostly female (91.7%).

Education

- ✘ The average age at which NPs completed their education was 36.5 years.
- ✘ Greater than 4 out of 5 NPs reported having only one area of certification (82.9%). Family practice was the most commonly reported area of certification (43.7%), followed by adult practice (16.5%) and psych/mental health practice (15.6%).

Full-Time Nurse Practitioner Practice Characteristics by Rural-Urban Status

	Urban (n = 1,050)	Large Rural (n = 117)	Small/Isolated Small Rural (n = 78)	Overall (n = 1,245)
% designated primary care providers§	66.5	81.0	87.0	69.2
% of practice that is primary care§	49.3	65.4	77.0	52.7
% of practice time serving state-assisted or indigent patients§	45.4	49.8	62.5	47.1
% saw a new Medicare patient in month†	54.2	65.0	67.7	56.3
Total weekly Medicare visits (mean)*	20.7	21.3	24.8	21.2

* Nonsignificant.

† $P \leq 0.05$.

‡ $P \leq 0.01$.

§ $P \leq 0.001$.

The numbers of missing cases for each variable are % primary care 35, % of practice that is primary care 103, % practice time serving state-assisted/indigent patients 265, % saw a new Medicare patient in month 301, total weekly Medicare visits 496.



Practice Patterns

✘ Overall, three-quarters of NPs practice as full-time providers. A larger proportion of rural providers reported practicing full time than their urban counterparts (81% vs. 75%).

✘ Washington's NPs work an average of 41 hours per week, 32 hours of which are spent in direct patient care.

✘ A larger proportion of NPs practicing in small/isolated rural and large rural areas are functioning as primary care providers than in urban areas.

Physician Relationships

✘ NPs practicing in rural and urban locations reported having similar work relationships with physicians. State-wide, 11.9% of NPs said there was no physician in their practice.

✘ Overall, 41% of NPs reported that a physician was “nearly always” available on site to discuss patient problems. Seventy-three percent of NPs said that a physician was “nearly always” available by phone to discuss patient problems.

✘ Forty-six percent of NPs described their relationship with the physician in their practice as one of “equal colleagues.”

Nurse Practitioner Specialty Certifications by Rural-Urban Status

	Urban (n = 1,439)	Large Rural (n = 142)	Small/Isolated Small Rural (n = 99)	Overall (n = 1,680)
% family practice§	41.6	50.7	64.6	43.8
% adult care†	17.5	10.6	10.1	16.5
% psychiatric/mental health†	16.5	12.0	8.1	15.7
% women's health†	9.9	17.6	12.1	10.7
% nurse midwifery*	10.2	11.3	9.1	10.2
% pediatrics‡	8.6	4.9	1.0	7.9
% gerontology*	4.2	2.8	5.1	4.2
% acute care*	2.2	2.1	0.0	2.0
% neonatal care*	1.5	0.7	0.0	1.3
% school*	0.6	0.0	0.0	0.5

* Nonsignificant.

† $P \leq 0.05$.

‡ $P \leq 0.01$.

§ $P \leq 0.001$.

There were three missing cases for area of certification.

Note: columns do not add to 100% due to NP holding multiple certifications.

Conclusions: In Washington State, rural NPs practice somewhat differently than their urban counterparts: rural NPs are addressing more primary care needs and care to the underserved. Washington's NP workforce appears to have similar characteristics to the national NP workforce.

Policy Implications: NPs play a critical role in Washington's health care delivery system. Policies to expand care for underserved and rural populations need to take into account the significant contributions of NPs.

Findings from this study are more fully described in WWAMI Center for Health Workforce Studies Working Paper #109: Andrilla CHA, Hart LG, Kaplan L, Brown MA, Practice Patterns and Characteristics of Nurse Practitioners in Washington State, March 2007.