

# Threats to the Future Supply of Rural Registered Nurses

Susan M. Skillman MS, Mark P. Doescher MD MSPH, Roger A. Rosenblatt, MD MPH MFR

## Issues

Shortages of registered nurses (RNs) in rural areas of the United States may grow even greater in coming years as the “baby boom” generation retires and as RNs commute to larger towns and urban areas for work.

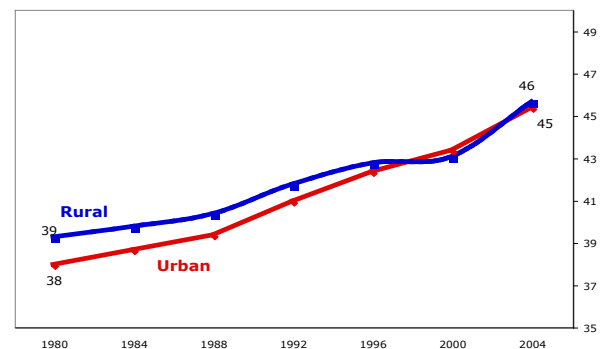
## Evidence

- RN shortages nationwide are forecast to increase to more than 1 million FTEs by 2020.<sup>1</sup>
- Access to health care in rural areas is often limited by uneven distribution of health care providers, including RNs.<sup>2</sup>
- Rural RNs’ average age in 2004 was 6 years older than it was in 1980. In 2004 working RNs living in rural areas were 45 years old, on average, and 20% were age 55 or older.<sup>3</sup>
- Despite an increased number of RN’s per capita living in rural areas, larger percentages are working outside of the rural area types in which they live. As a consequence, the number of RNs per capita who work in rural areas remains lower than in urban areas. Commuting RNs are younger, on average, than those who work in the rural areas types in which they live.<sup>3-4</sup>

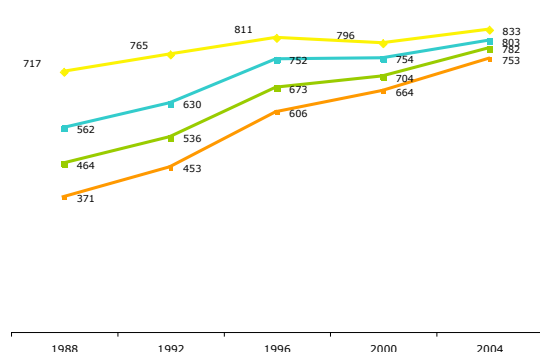
## Potential Solutions

- Support and expand nursing education programs that are the most accessible for rural students, such as those at community colleges and through distance education programs.
- Admit more students to nursing schools who are likely to choose rural careers, such as those from rural locations.
- Prepare RNs for the challenges of rural nursing through the use of rural-relevant curricula and opportunities for rural clinical experiences during education.
- Provide evidence-based information about the “best practices” for recruiting and retaining RNs in rural facilities to help rural hospitals and health care facilities successfully compete with employers in larger towns and urban areas.

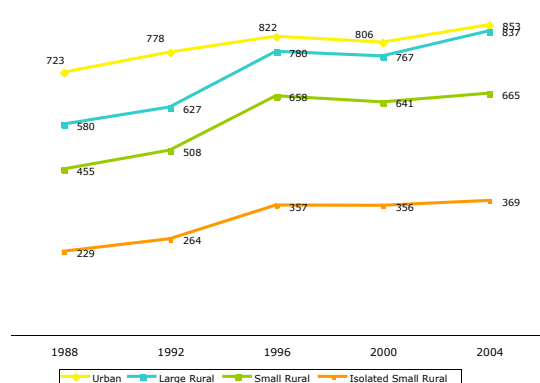
**Average Age of RNs Living in Rural and Urban Areas**



**Number of RNs Per 100,000 Population by RN Residence**



**Number of RNs Per 100,000 Population by RN Work Location**



## References

1. National Center for Health Workforce Analysis. (2002). *Projected supply, demand, and shortages of registered nurses: 2000-2020*. Rockville, MD: Bureau of Health Professions, Health Resources and Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; 2002.
2. Larson EH, Johnson KE, Norris TE, Lishner DM, Rosenblatt RA, Hart LG. *State of the health workforce in rural America: profiles and comparisons*. Seattle, WA: WWAMI Rural Health Research Center, University of Washington; 2003.
3. Skillman SM, Palazzo L, Hart LG, Butterfield P. *Changes in the rural registered nurse workforce from 1980 to 2004*. Final Report #115. Seattle, WA: WWAMI Rural Health Research Center, University of Washington; 2007.
4. Skillman SM, et al. Unpublished.