

Primary Care Workforce Facts and Stats No. 3

Distribution of the U.S. Primary Care Workforce

The U.S. primary care workforce includes approximately 209,000 practicing primary care physicians, 56,000 nurse practitioners (NPs), and 30,000 physician assistants (PAs) practicing primary care, for a total of nearly 295,000 primary care professionals (Table 1).

Table 1. U.S. primary care workforce by provider type, 2010

Primary care provider	Number
Physicians	208,807
Nurse practitioners	55,625
Physician assistants	30,402
Total	294,834

Source: AHRQ Primary Care Workforce Facts and Stats #1 and #2.

Uneven geographic distribution of the health care workforce creates problems with access to primary care. While primary care physicians are more likely to practice in rural areas than are non-primary care specialists, they still are more concentrated in urban areas. Within the primary care physician workforce, family physicians and general practitioners are more likely than either general internists or pediatricians to practice in rural areas and to distribute themselves proportionally to the U. S. population (Table 2).

NPs and PAs are more likely than physicians to work in rural areas (16% vs. 11%), and primary care NPs and PAs are much more likely to be rural (28% and 25%, respectively) (Table 2). This rural distribution is higher than that of primary care physicians as a whole and similar to that of family physicians (22%).

Table 2. Geographic distribution of health care professionals, 2010

Geography	All specialties			Primary care					U.S. population
	NP	PA	Physicians	NP	PA	Family physicians/GPs	General internal medicine	General pediatrics	
Urban	84.4%	84.4%	89.0%	72.2%	75.1%	77.5%	89.8%	91.2%	80%
Large rural	8.9%	8.8%	7.1%	11.0%	11.7%	11.1%	6.7%	6.2%	10%
Small rural	3.9%	3.8%	2.6%	7.7%	6.9%	7.2%	2.4%	1.8%	5%
Remote rural/frontier	2.8%	3.0%	1.3%	9.1%	6.3%	4.2%	1.1%	0.8%	5%

Data derived from analysis of National Provider Identifier file, November, 2010; U. S. Census Bureau Population Estimate, 2008. Rural and urban designations are taken from the Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes, a Census tract-based classification scheme that uses standard Census Bureau definitions in combination with work commuting information to characterize rural and urban status and relationships of the Nation's Census tracts. Roughly, large rural populations =10,000-50,000; small rural populations = 2,500 – 9,999; and remote rural/frontier populations = less than 2,500 people. For more information see: <http://depts.washington.edu/uwruca/RUCACodeDes2.pdf> and <http://depts.washington.edu/uwruca/ruca-uses.php>.

