The 2015 Environmental Scan

Nurses are the front line of surveillance—they are key to monitoring and detecting signs and symptoms of infection and initiating appropriate treatment and referral. Assuring that there are sufficient numbers of nurses in health care settings, communities, and public health agencies is critical to any efforts to prevent transmission of Ebola virus.

American Academy of Nursing and American Nurses Association, 2014

As the U.S. health care system rises to meet new and ongoing challenges in 2015, nurses will indeed be at the front line. As members of the largest health care profession, nurses are not only the forefront of surveillance; in the coming years, they will play integral roles in population health, primary care, and the redesign of the U.S. health care system.

Ensuring that the care administered by nurses is safe and competent are the 59 boards of nursing (BONs) across the United States and its territories. Nursing regulators oversee licensure and scope of practice, approve nursing programs, and administer state and territory nurse practice acts and regulations. These regulators need current, critical information that addresses regulatory, workforce, political, economic, and social issues involving nurses and the environment in which they operate. This report was developed to provide current, critical information for BONs to fulfill their mission to protect the public while responding to the emerging issues and challenges of 2015 and to strategically plan for the future.

A variety of sources were used to develop this report, including research and scholarly articles, news articles, websites, databases, peer-reviewed journals, direct communications and presentations, annual BON reports, and the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) surveys of BONs. Certain consistent sources of data and graphs are used from year to year to help formulate comparisons and identify trends. New issues, problems, and data on the horizon for 2015 are also included. An abundance of information was reviewed and analyzed to provide a report that can be used to assess the regulatory environment and guide strategic planning. Not all applicable information and data can be captured in this report; however, every attempt was made to produce a well-documented, comprehensive report describing the state of nursing regulation and the environment in which BONs function.

Nursing Workforce

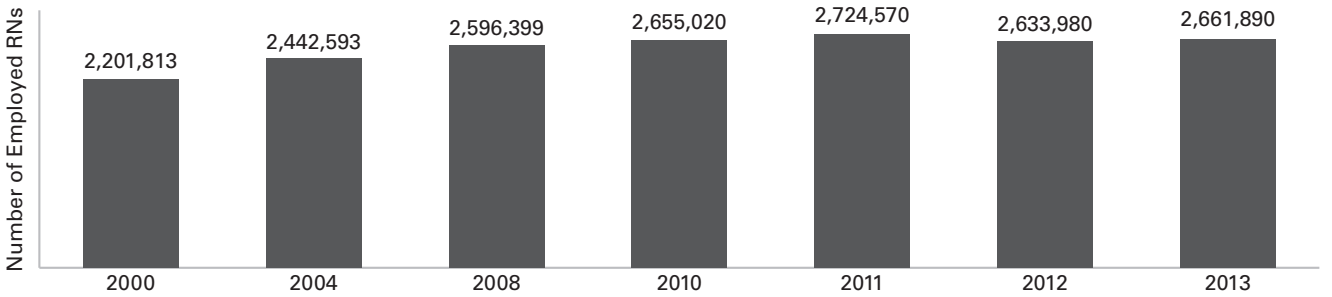
NCSBN's National Nursing Database tracks the number of U.S. licensed nurses from 55 BONs on a daily basis. As of November 2014, there were more than 4,548,331 nurses (registered nurse [RN] and licensed practical/vocational nurse [LPN/VN]) holding an active license in the United States (National Council of State Boards of Nursing [NCSBN], 2014b).

Registered Nurses

There are more than 3,680,612 RNs in the United States as of November 2014 (NCSBN, 2014b). Although a year behind, the most recent Occupational Employment Statistics data (through May 2013) indicate that 2,661,890 RNs were employed in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014b). As illustrated in Figure 1, the number of employed RNs in the United States is once again increasing after a decline in 2012.

FIGURE 1

Total Number of Employed RNs in the United States: 2000-2013

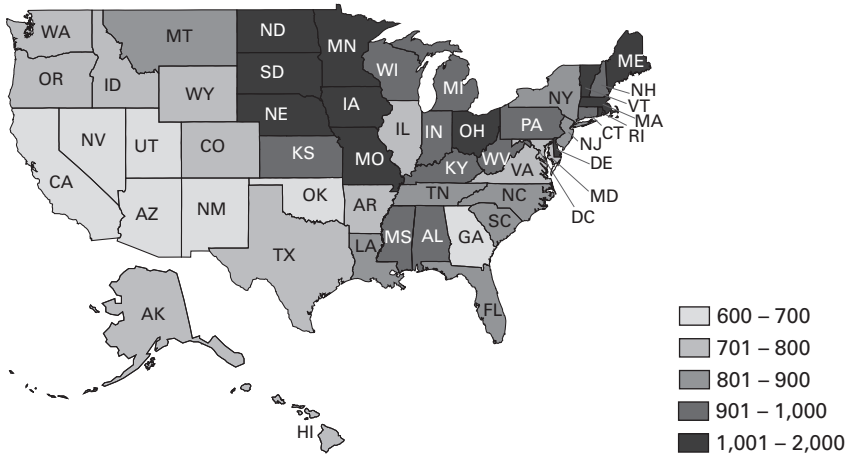


Note. The 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013 statistics were taken from the semiannual Occupational Employment Statistics survey published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014b). The 2000, 2004, and 2008 statistics were taken from the Health Resources and Services Administration's National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses (2010).

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014a) employment projections update for 2012-2022 predict that an additional 526,800 RNs, or a 19% growth rate, will be needed. However, the number of employed RNs per capita varies across the United States. The District of Columbia has the densest RN workforce, and the U.S. Virgin Islands has the sparsest. (See Figure 2 and Table 1 for state-by-state depictions of the ratio of employed RNs per 100,000 population as of May 2013.) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014b)

FIGURE 2

Employed RNs per 100,000 Population, by State



Note. State population estimates are from the U.S. Census Bureau (2014). Population estimates for the U.S. territories are from the World Bank (2014).

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