Will the Nursing Shortage Affect Pediatric Care?

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“Maybe,” say LHC Scholars Meredith Kilgore, Jeroan Allison, and colleagues. “This study was conducted as a first step in understanding nursing supply relative to potential pediatric demand. We found tremendous variability among U.S. states related to estimated pediatric nurses, potential pediatric demand, and allocated pediatric beds.”

According to federal estimates, the United States could experience a shortfall of one million nurses by 2020. How the shortage will impact the care needed for 76 million aging baby boomers has been frequently discussed. Other specialty areas such as pediatric care must be considered as nursing resources become more constrained. A wide variety of data is collected about registered nurses (RNs) but not information about where nurses work other than broad categories such as hospitals or home health. This leaves a gap in our understanding about the needs, both now and in the future, related to children’s health care.

Because there is no national entity that collects and trends the number of pediatric nurses relative to pediatric demand, this study explored one potential method for understanding the supply-demand chain using existing national data. The researchers conducted their analysis with merged data from the American Hospital Association and the U.S. Census from the year 2000. They aimed to describe states in terms of estimated full-time pediatric RNs, persons from birth to 18 years of age, number of designated pediatric beds, and RNs for potential pediatric patients per 100,000 total lives. Three of the most populous states, California, Texas, and New York, have the greatest number of pediatric beds, estimated RNs for these beds, and potential demand. At the same time these states do not have the most RNs per 100,000 potential pediatric patients.

“The nursing shortage is real,” say the researchers, “and will continue to plague a system that is fragmented and difficult to maneuver for patients and families. It is critical for specialty areas in nursing such as pediatrics to be actively engaged in the discussion about nursing resources related to potential demand. This work is particularly well suited to begin in earnest at the state level.”