

Health Workforce Policy Brief

January 2015



University of California
San Francisco

healthworkforce.ucsf.edu

Entry and Exit of Workers in Long-Term Care

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I. Introduction/Background

In the past decade, the health care industry, and long-term care (LTC) in particular, saw substantial job growth. In anticipation of growing demand for LTC due to an aging demographic, employment opportunities in LTC are expected to surpass those of other U.S. sectors. Health care policymakers and health workforce planners are concerned about ensuring an adequate pipeline of appropriately trained workers for LTC jobs. This study examines the demographics, socioeconomic status, and job mobility of workers by LTC sector and occupation. The study identifies the characteristics associated with job mobility and turnover of LTC workers, and their pathways to LTC jobs.

II. Methods

We pooled data from 2003 to 2013 of the Annual Social and Economic Supplement ("March Supplement") of the Current Population Survey. We defined the "LTC industry" to include the following sectors: 1) home health care services, 2) nursing care facilities, 3) residential care services, without nursing, 4) individual and family services, 5) community food and housing/emergency services, and 6) private households. We identified "LTC occupations" that were either highly prevalent in, or relevant to, LTC delivery including: 1) registered nurse (RN), 2) licensed practical nurse/licensed vocational nurse (LPN/LVN), 3) nursing, psychiatric, and home health aide (NPHH), 4) medical assistant and other health care support occupation (MA), 5) personal and home care aide (PCA), 6) social and community service manager, 7) social worker, 8) miscellaneous community and social service specialist, and 9) physical therapist.

III. Findings

LTC employs a high share of low-skilled workers, and many jobs in LTC are not involved in providing direct health care. Despite the expected increases in demand for LTC services as Baby Boomers age, the rate at which workers leave LTC is outpacing the rate of entry across all LTC sectors. LTC entrants and leavers were generally younger than those who remained in the industry. Nursing care facilities tended to draw workers from hospitals, while individual and family services tended to draw workers from leisure and hospitality. A large share of LTC entrants was not in the labor force in the prior year; of these, a dominant proportion reported previously being in school or taking care of the home or family. Most LTC leavers -- especially those with lower skill levels -- found themselves unemployed or out of the labor force upon exit, and these LTC leavers tended to report higher rates of work disability and higher rates of poverty.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

- 1) As demand for long-term care workers grows, there may be challenges in maintaining an adequate and well-trained LTC workforce.
- 2) Future research should explore the longer-term employment paths of LTC workers who become unemployed or leave the labor market.
- 3) To improve recruitment and retention of the LTC workforce, and to address these workers' high poverty rate and lack of upward mobility, employers, educators, and policymakers should consider investments in education and training.

IV. Conclusion

Our analysis suggests that health care policymakers and workforce planners should be concerned about sector and occupational turnover in LTC. The pipeline may not be sufficient if the rate of exit continues to outpace the rate of entry in LTC does not appear to be an attractive career option for workers given that LTC entrants are increasingly younger, low-skilled, and have low incomes, with no clear career ladder or evidence of job mobility. Of further concern is that LTC leavers report greater levels of work disability, have high levels of poverty, and often leave unemployed or out of the labor market. These patterns suggest that there may be challenges to maintaining an adequate and well-trained workforce as LTC demand grows.

V. Policy Implications

Future research should explore the longer-term employment paths of LTC workers who become unemployed or leave the labor market. It is not known if these transitions provide opportunities to obtain higher-paying jobs or develop new skills, or if they increase the likelihood that LTC workers will live in poverty. In order to improve recruitment and retention of an adequately trained LTC workforce, as well as to address the high rate of poverty and lack of upward mobility of many LTC occupations, employers, educators, and policymakers should consider investments in education and training.

Charts/Tables

Figure 1. Share of Entrants versus Leavers in Six Long-Term Care Sectors, Pooled 2003-2013

