Health Workforce Policy Brief

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How Do Long-Term Care Workers Spend Their Time? Answers from the American Time-Use Survey

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I. Introduction/Background

Long-term care (LTC) workers provide day-to-day care to patients in residential facilities, community-based settings, and private homes. Over the next decade, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects much faster growth in LTC-related occupations than other occupations. The challenge of meeting future demand for LTC workers is exacerbated by high rates of turnover, which is frequently associated with burnout. We examined time spent on work-related and non-work related activities by the LTC workforce and compared their activities with those of workers with comparable education/skills from other health professions (OHPs) to better understand factors that might contribute to work stress, burnout, and retention among LTC workers.

II. Methods

We examined 12 years of data from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS) conducted by the BLS to understand patterns of time use among LTC workers and compare their time use with that of workers in other sectors of the health care industry. We also categorized LTC occupations by higher-skill and lower-skill levels and compared workers in each of these groups with their counterparts in non-LTC health care occupations.

III. Findings

The LTC workforce has a significantly larger share of non-White workers, has less education, and is living in poverty more often compared with OHPs. While LTC workers spent more time on leisure, much of this time difference was attributable to more time watching TV and less time exercising. Unskilled workers spent less time on activities likely to promote overall well-being and health, such as exercising and sleeping. This was consistent with findings of poorer health of LTC workers relative to OHPs. Despite differences in health and health-promoting activities, LTC workers reported similar levels of work/life satisfaction and quality of life compared with OHPs. LTC workers more often provided eldercare to family members or friends several times per month or even daily, suggesting they may be providing such care both professionally and informally, potentially exacerbating the risk of burnout in this group of workers.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

1) LTC workers spent more time watching TV and less time exercising than other health professionals. They also had higher average body-mass index. LTC employers should promote healthy behaviors for their workers.

2) LTC workers more often provided eldercare for family members or friends more often than did other health professionals. The impact of this on LTC worker stress and time demands needs investigation.

3) Quality of life and work-life satisfaction was similar between LTC workers and other health professionals.

IV. Conclusions and Policy Implications

Both skilled and unskilled LTC workers have lower education levels than their counterparts in other health care sectors, and they earn lower wages. Employers need to develop strategies to support career advancement and wage mobility for LTC workers. Employers should address the tendency toward sedentary lifestyle among LTC workers as obesity and hypertension are associated with higher costs to employers, both through greater health spending and lower productivity. The greater frequency of LTC workers providing care to elders outside their work warrants exploration. It is unknown whether this phenomenon reflects family decisions about how best to address care needs of aging family members or an unwanted burden that increases stress, or both. The value of informal care in the U.S. is estimated at over $500 billion, and such care exacts a significant burden on households. It is possible that LTC workers are in the best position to take on this burden in their homes, but it also may increase pressure on an already strained workforce.

Table 1. LTC workers spend more minutes per day on work-related travel, social activities, and watching TV, and less time on sports and recreation, than other health professionals (OHPs)

	Average minutes per day for LTC N=1,629	Average minutes per day for OHP N=4,788
WORK	293.9	276.0
Work related Travel*	21.9	18.9
LEISURE	250.5	245.4
Social activities*	226.6	215.4
Sports, activities, recreation*	9.9	16.2
Watching TV*	127.5	116.9
Caring for children	28.8	31.0
Education	11.3	12.5
Household activities	121.7	126.4
Sleep	505.7	510.2

* Difference between LTC workers and OHP is statistically significant with p<=0.05.
Source: American Time Use Survey, years 2003-2014.

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