

Trends in Licensed Practical Nurse/Licensed Vocational Nurse Education and Licensure Examinations, 1998 to 2013

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I. Introduction/Background

Licensed practical nurses (LPNs), referred to as licensed vocational nurses (LVNs) in some states, are the second-largest health care occupation that requires postsecondary education. More LPNs work in long-term care (LTC) than in any other sector. Demand for LPNs is projected to grow substantially over the coming decades, particularly among LTC providers. One-third of LPNs are over age 50 years, prompting questions about whether the supply of newly licensed LPNs will be adequate to meet demand.

II. Methods

We analyzed data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), describing LPN education programs. IPEDS is the most comprehensive source of data on postsecondary education in the United States. We also compiled data from the National Council of State Boards of Nursing on persons taking the NCLEX-PN.

III. Findings

Between 1998 and 2013, the number of LPN education programs in the U.S. grew by 30%, from 839 to 1,094 programs. The number of persons completing these programs grew by 64%, peaking in 2011. The number of LPN education programs operated by for-profit institutions grew more than 8-fold, and the number of persons completing programs at for-profit institutions grew at about the same rate. The share of programs at public institutions fell from 94% to 79% with their share of completions falling from 92% to 73%. The proportion of Non-White completers grew compared with Whites, but as of 2013, Whites remained the majority of completers, at 69%. Non-Whites were more likely to complete for-profit LPN education programs than were Whites. The ratio of LPN completions to population varies across the four Census regions, ranging from a low of 6/100,000 persons in the West to a high of 10/100,000 persons in the Midwest. In 2014, the overall pass rate for the licensing examination was 70%; 97% of students completed their education in the US, and these were more likely to pass the exam on the first attempt than internationally educated LPNs (82% vs. 50%). While the overall number of persons taking the NCLEX-PN exam increased between 1998 and 2014, the pass rate for all takers decreased from 78% to 70% and the pass rate for US-educated LPNs taking the exam for the first time also decreased from 87% to 82% during this time period.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

- 1) The number of newly licensed LPNs grew substantially between 1998 and 2011, but then decreased slightly by 2013. Most of the new licensees trained at for-profit LPN education programs.
- 2) Non-Whites represent an increasing proportion of persons completing LPN education programs, and they are more likely than Whites to complete for-profit programs.
- 3) LPN education outcomes should be monitored to assess whether supply is keeping pace with demand. Monitoring the for-profit sector is particularly important, as it accounts for a large and growing percentage of completions, especially among non-Whites.
- 4) Policymakers should also explore why non-White students are more likely to enroll in for-profit LPN education programs than are Whites.

IV. Conclusion

The numbers of persons completing LPN education programs and passing the LPN licensure examination grew substantially between 1998 and 2011 and then decreased slightly between 2011 and 2013. Much of this increase is due to exponential growth in the numbers of persons completing for-profit LPN education programs, who now account for 24% of completions. The numbers of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians completing LPN education programs have grown more rapidly than the number of Whites completing LPN education and they are more likely than Whites to complete for-profit LPN education programs.

V. Policy Implications

These findings suggest a need to monitor trends in LPN education over time to assess whether supply is keeping pace with demand; in particular it is critical to determine whether the decrease in completions between 2011 and 2013 reflects a minor adjustment due to the improvement of the US economy or the start of a long-term downward trend in completions. Monitoring trends in for-profit LPN education is especially important because this sector accounts for a large and growing percentage of completions, especially among non-Whites. Students attending for-profit higher education institutions often incur substantially more student loan debt than students attending public institutions. In addition, recent increases in federal government scrutiny of for-profit higher education institutions could result in closures of LPN education programs, which could disrupt students' education and reduce the number of completions per year. Policymakers should also explore why non-White students are more likely to enroll in for-profit LPN education programs than Whites, even in regions with large numbers of public LPN education programs.

Charts/Tables

Figure 1. 64% Increase in LPN Program Completions, 1998-2013

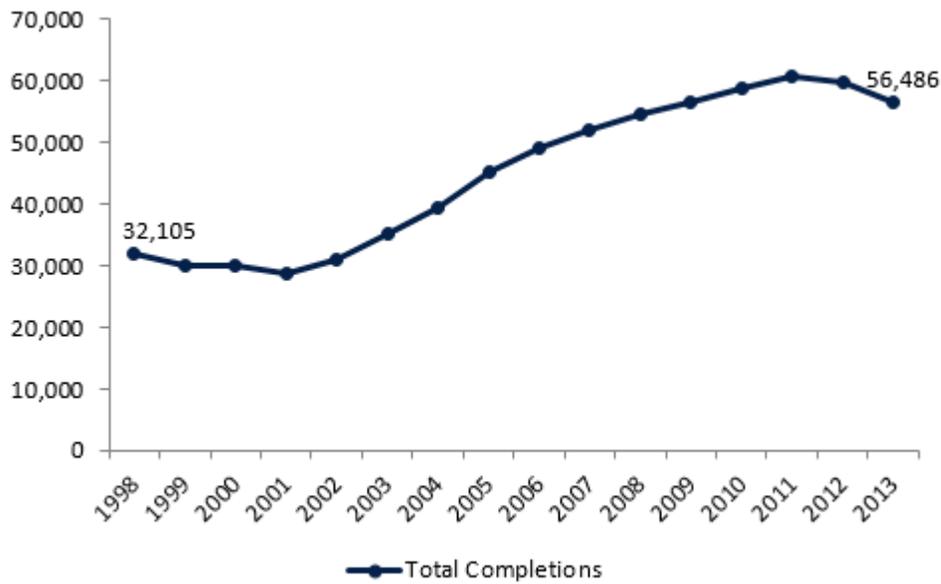
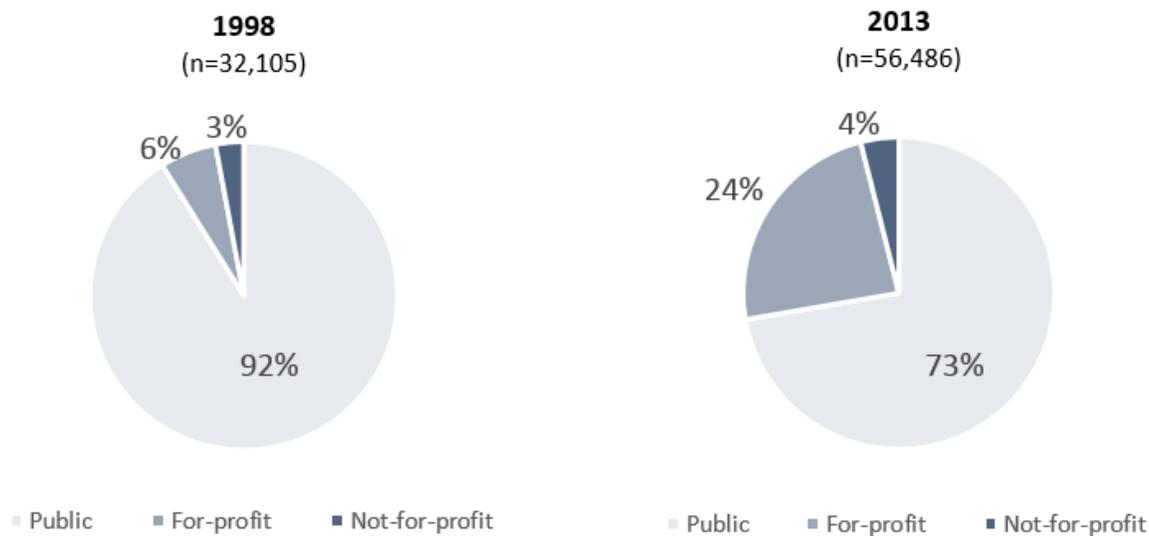


Figure 2. Four-fold Increase in the Proportion of LPN Completions from For-profit Programs, 1998 and 2013



*Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding