

The Future of Nursing 2020-2030

Charting a Path to Achieve Health Equity

REPORT BRIEF



Valuing Community and Public Health Nursing

The Challenge

The COVID-19 pandemic and what it has revealed about the effects of poverty, racism, and underinvestment in communities on health have illuminated the consequences of devaluing public health and underestimating the role that nurses can play in improving health and preventing disease. But if adequately valued and funded, community and public health nurses are uniquely positioned and trained to bridge health care and social needs and advance health equity.

For example, school nurses are a lifeline for 56 million students, particularly children from low-income families. They can detect illnesses early, help manage chronic conditions, and contact trace outbreaks during a pandemic. They also provide mental health care, a need that has grown tremendously during the pandemic among young people. Prior to the pandemic, about one-third of student health visits to school nurses were related to mental health. Students of color face more barriers to accessing mental health treatment than others, and structural racism can exacerbate these conditions.

Though school nurses play a vital role in increasing access to health care, advancing health equity, and keeping kids in school, they are vastly underfunded and undervalued. The average school nurse works simultaneously across three schools and funding sometimes must be pieced together. One in four schools in the United States does not employ a

About the Report

For too long, the United States has overinvested in treating illness and underinvested in promoting health and well-being and preventing disease. Even before COVID-19 illuminated disparities and exacerbated inequities in the United States, nurses were advocating for better care and access for individuals, families, and communities. At the request of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a National Academy of Medicine committee conducted a study aimed at charting a path forward for the nursing profession to help ensure that all people have what they need to live their healthiest lives. The report was published in May 2021 and builds on progress nurses have made over the past decade.¹

Why Nurses?

Promoting health and well-being has long been an essential role of nurses—they are bridge builders and collaborators who engage and connect with people, communities, and organizations to ensure people from all backgrounds have what they need to be healthy and well. But they need ongoing support from the systems that educate, train, employ, and enable them to fully deploy their expertise and training so they can help advance health equity for all.

¹ <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/12956/the-future-of-nursing-leading-change-advancing-health>

school nurse at all. Schools with more students from families with low incomes are also less likely to have access to a school nurse. Since 2014, all states have been able to bill Medicaid for school nurse services but only a handful have taken advantage of this, in part due to the complicated billing process.

Public health nurses are embedded in communities and work across settings—from shelters to government agencies to community-based centers to vaccine distribution sites. They manage public health programs, educate the public, craft policies, build coalitions, and more. During the pandemic, public health nurses collaborated with their colleagues working in hospitals to contain and limit infection while caring for people sick with the virus.

As members of the communities they serve, public health nurses build trust and relationships with individuals and local leaders. They also develop a strong understanding of people’s experiences, backgrounds, and the social factors that influence health, helping them to practice cultural humility with empathetic care.

Strengths of community and public health nurses—team-based care, a holistic approach, community-centered care, advocacy, and more—are skills that will be key to ensuring everyone has what they need to be healthy and well. Investments that expand, strengthen, and diversify the community and public health nursing workforce will go a long way in advancing health equity for all.

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The Solution

The committee recommends that by 2023, state and federal government agencies, health care and public health organizations, payers, and foundations initiate substantive actions to enable the nursing workforce to address social determinants of health and health equity more comprehensively, regardless of practice setting.

Community and public health nurses have been pivotal in advancing health equity for years. To expand their reach and impact in communities nationwide, actions need to be taken, including:

- **Investing significant resources and funding to increase the number of community and public health nurses**, particularly those serving communities of color, those with low incomes, rural communities, the LGBTQ community, and others with more complex health needs.
- **Establishing a national nursing workforce commission** or something similar that would track progress on and develop further recommendations for preparing nurses to address the social determinants of health and advance health equity.

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