

# The Health Workforce Minimum Data Set (MDS): What You Need to Know

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## What is the MDS?

Consistent data collection is needed for effective health workforce planning at both the state and national level. Basic health workforce supply data can be used to: describe the supply and distribution of health care professionals; build better supply and demand forecast models; and inform the development of health workforce programs and policies and evaluate their effectiveness.

The quality of current health workforce supply data is variable, however. There are substantial differences in the data being collected and there are issues of timeliness, completeness, and accuracy of the data. While many organizations collect data, “fundamental” questions are often asked differently; this lack of standardization limits comparability. To address these issues, NCHWA established the MDS which provides basic, minimum, consistent *guidelines* for fundamental health workforce survey questions. These questions are for use by all groups who collect data on the supply of health workers.

## What are the MDS Questions?

The MDS questions focus on characteristics in three key areas: demographics, education and practice.

### Demographic Questions:

*Birth date*  
*Gender*  
*Race/Ethnicity*

### Optional Demographic Questions:

*State or Country of Birth*  
*Languages Spoken Fluently*

### Education Questions:

*Professional education, entry level, including degree, year and state/county*  
*Professional education, highest level, including degree, year and state/county (includes residency training)*  
*Licensure – type, initial year and state*  
*Specialty (as applicable)*  
*Certifications (as applicable)*

### Optional Education Questions:

*Name and location of educational institution(s)*

### Practice Questions:

*Employment status*  
*Number of positions*  
*Hours by activity*  
*Patient Care*  
*Research*  
*Teaching*  
*Administration*  
*Practice setting*  
*Practice location*  
*Clinical hours by location*  
*Title*

### Optional Practice Questions:

*Patients served (e.g., Medicaid, Medicare, etc.)*  
*Practice capacity*  
*Retirement plans*

## How can MDS data be used?

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An important question for policy makers is how MDS data can be used to support health workforce planning efforts. MDS data can play a crucial role in health workforce planning if used effectively. It can help answer several important policy related questions including:

- What is the supply and distribution of the health workforce by setting and location?
- What is the primary care provider capacity in the state?
- What is the racial/ethnic diversity of a health profession in relation to the diversity of the population served?
- What are the characteristics of health professionals who practice in underserved communities?

## Before collecting data...

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Before beginning data collection it is important to identify the research questions that the data must answer. HRSA's MDS questions are designed to provide the fundamental information needed for effective health workforce analysis. The MDS is not designed to answer every health workforce question posed. More detailed data are often needed for more complex health workforce analyses. Hence, it is imperative to identify key research questions that will be answered using these data and then design the data collection instruments with the workforce analysis plan in mind.

## Useful Links

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HRSA's MDS Webpage:

<http://bhpr.hrsa.gov/healthworkforce/data/minimumdataset/index.html>

Boulton, Matthew L., et al. "Public health workforce taxonomy." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 47.5 (2014): S314-S323. [http://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(14\)00382-1/pdf](http://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(14)00382-1/pdf)

2013 Statistical Profile of Certified Physician Assistants, An Annual Report of the National Commission on Certification of Physician Assistants <http://www.nccpa.net/Upload/PDFs/2013StatisticalProfileofCertifiedPhysicianAssistants-AnAnnualReportoftheNCCPA.pdf>

## About

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The primary objective of the Health Workforce Technical Assistance Center (HWTAC) is to support the efforts of the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis (NCHWA) by providing technical assistance to states and organizations engaged in health workforce planning. An important goal of NCHWA is to expand and improve health workforce data collection. NCHWA established the Health Professions Minimum Data Set (MDS) to facilitate this effort.

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