



Measuring the PHN Workforce

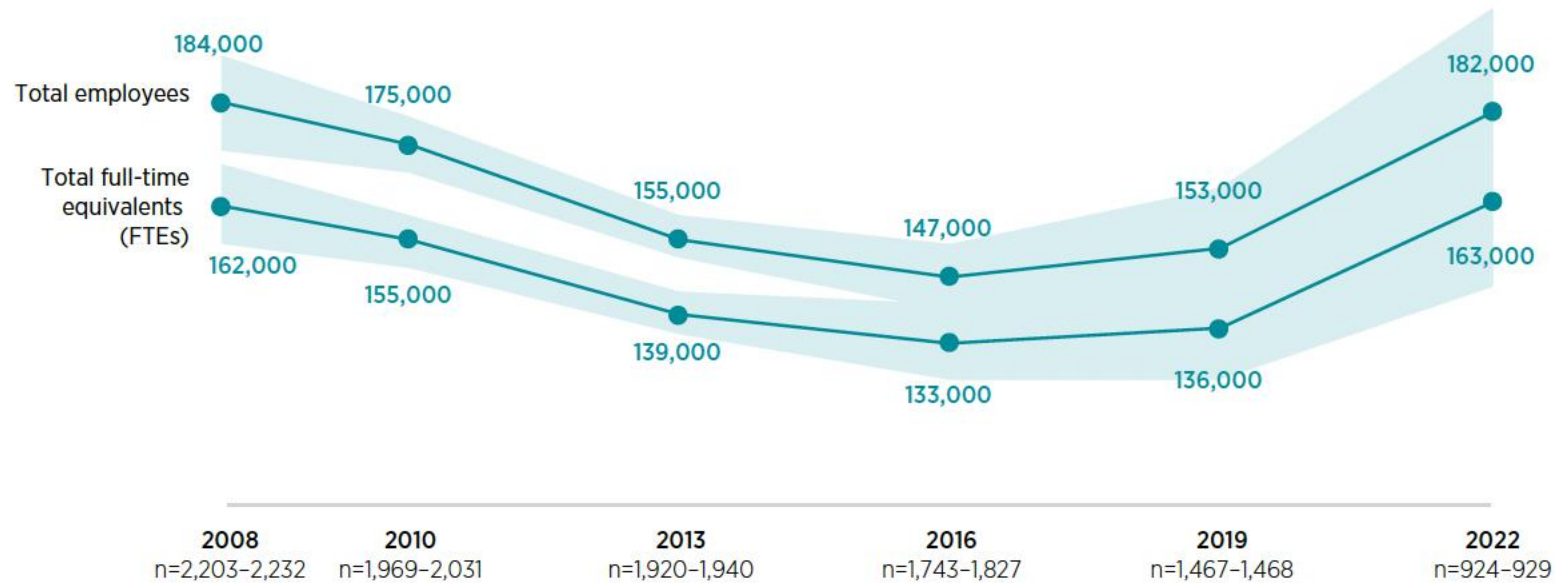
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Local Health Department (LHD) Workforce Changes

Estimated size of LHD workforce, over time



(NACCHO Profile of Local Health Departments, (2022) [NACCHO_2022_Profile_final.pdf](#))

LHD Workforce Changes by Occupation

Figure 2. Estimated size of select occupations over time



(NACCHO Profile of Local Health Departments, (2019) [NACCHO_2019_Profile_final.pdf](#))

Who are they?
Where are they?



Why do they matter?



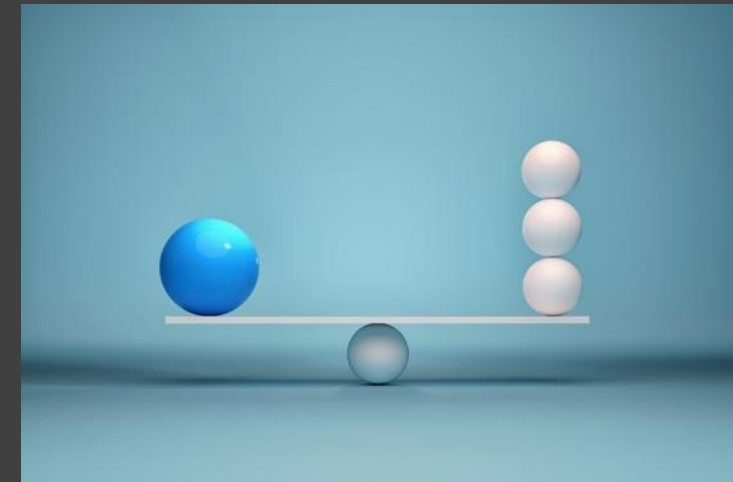
What do THEY need?



What do they do?



How many do we need?



Who/Where are PHNs?

- **Size**

- ~3.7% of the overall RN workforce – including those in public health, school health, corrections⁴

- **Demographics**

- Largely female, White⁴
- Aging - over 1/3rd above 51yo^{1,4}; 15% 60+³
- Most with Bachelors as highest education⁴

- **Where are they?**

- ~ ¼ in rural areas⁵
- North Dakota, Minnesota, Alaska – highest % of PHNs of all the states⁴

What do PHNs do?

- **Roles--varied**
 - LHD directors, nursing directors, frontline PHNs, consultants, researchers, educators, advance practice nurses.^{1,5}
- **Functions--broad focus, leadership**
 - Care coordination, population health strategies, health promotion and prevention.^{5,6}
 - Leadership roles: setting strategic direction and vision, partnership-building, relationships in the community⁷
- **Specialization:**
 - In **PH** surveys, most working in MCH, communicable disease, clinical services, and school health.⁸
 - In **nursing** surveys, most specializing in school health, PH or corrections.⁴

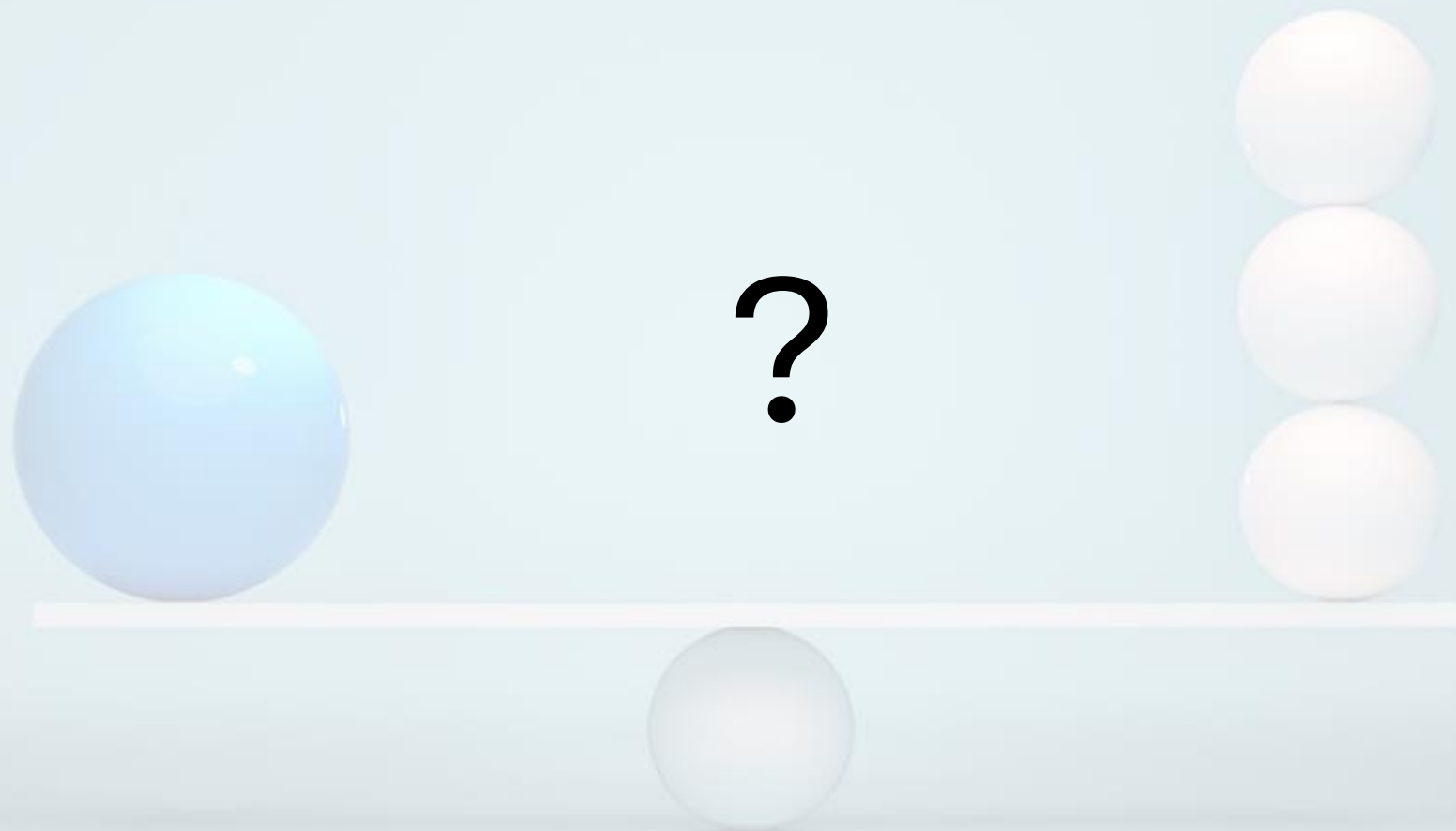
Why do PHNs matter?

- **Distinct skills**
 - Broad knowledge base of populations, communities¹¹
 - Nurses in PH leadership - Emphasizing SDOH in policies¹²
 - Systems perspective; “managing up” ; strategic in their approach to leadership⁷
 - Skills important for emergency preparedness and response⁸
 - Climate justice work¹⁴
- **Support a competent PH workforce^{7,8}**
- **Health outcomes better in counties where nurses hold PH leadership positions¹³**

What do PHNs need?

- Stronger training and education^{1,8}
- Access to professional development^{5,14}
- Training for using data to inform practice; policy development⁸
- Education of PH leadership about the PHN role⁵
- Opportunities to practice to top of scope⁵

How many PHNs do we need?

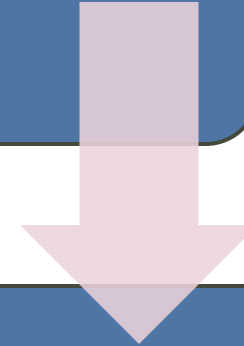


Background

- **Difficulties in assessing** PHN numbers, distribution
 - **Variable measurements** underway of PHNs
 - Public health surveys **limit PHNs to state/local health departments**
 - PHNs typically identified by '**setting**' alone
- Studies rarely include PHNs in **federal agencies**
- Over 1200 PHS nurse officers in the USPHS Commissioned Corps

Aims

1. Describe the PHS nurse officers in the USPHS Commissioned Corps
2. Test PHN function and activity questions



Measure PHNs regarding **WHAT THEY DO**, rather than **WHERE** they practice

Methods

- **Survey development**

- Adapted national nursing survey questions
- Engaged past and current PHS Chief Nurse Officers
- 4 main sections – including **Job Roles and Functions**
- Developed function and activity questions – PHN Scope and Standards, experts in the field, PH taxonomy

- **Descriptive analysis**

- Compared “primarily clinical” and “primarily non-clinical” groups

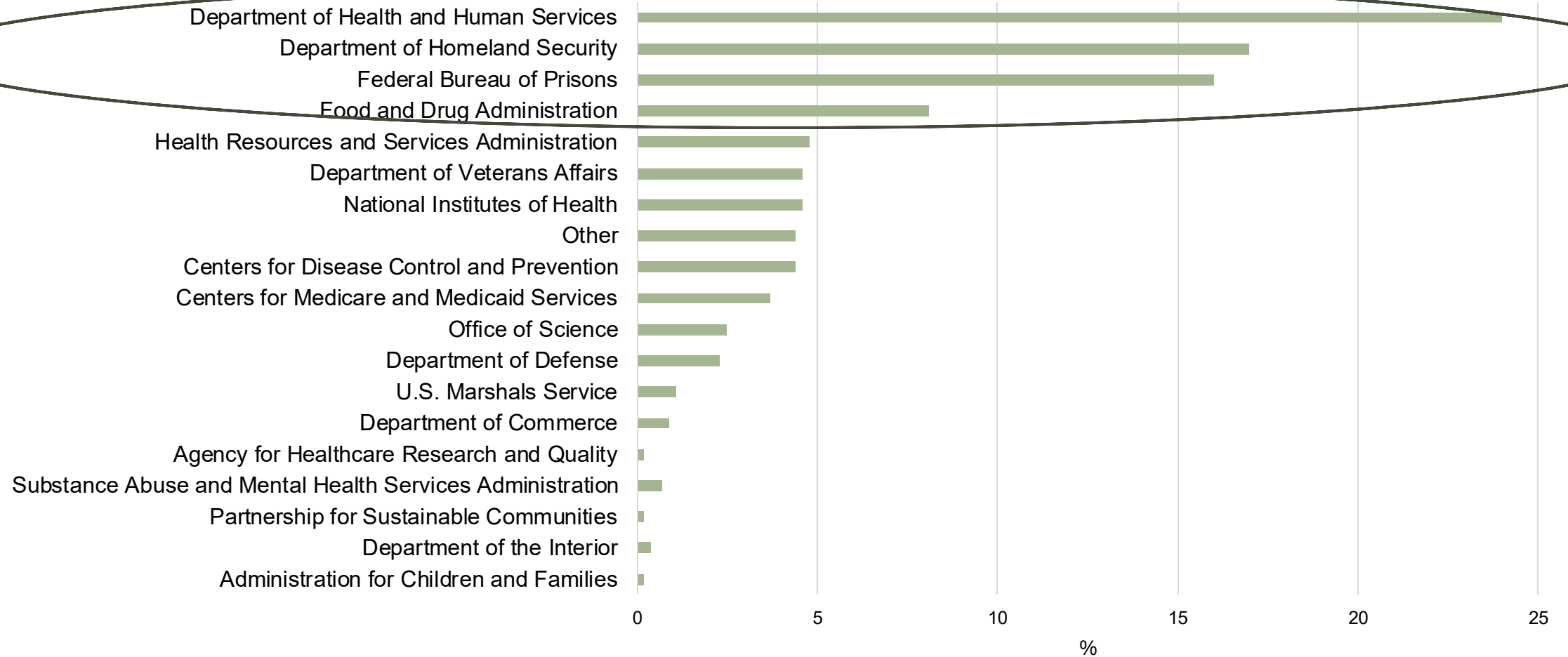
Findings

47% response rate

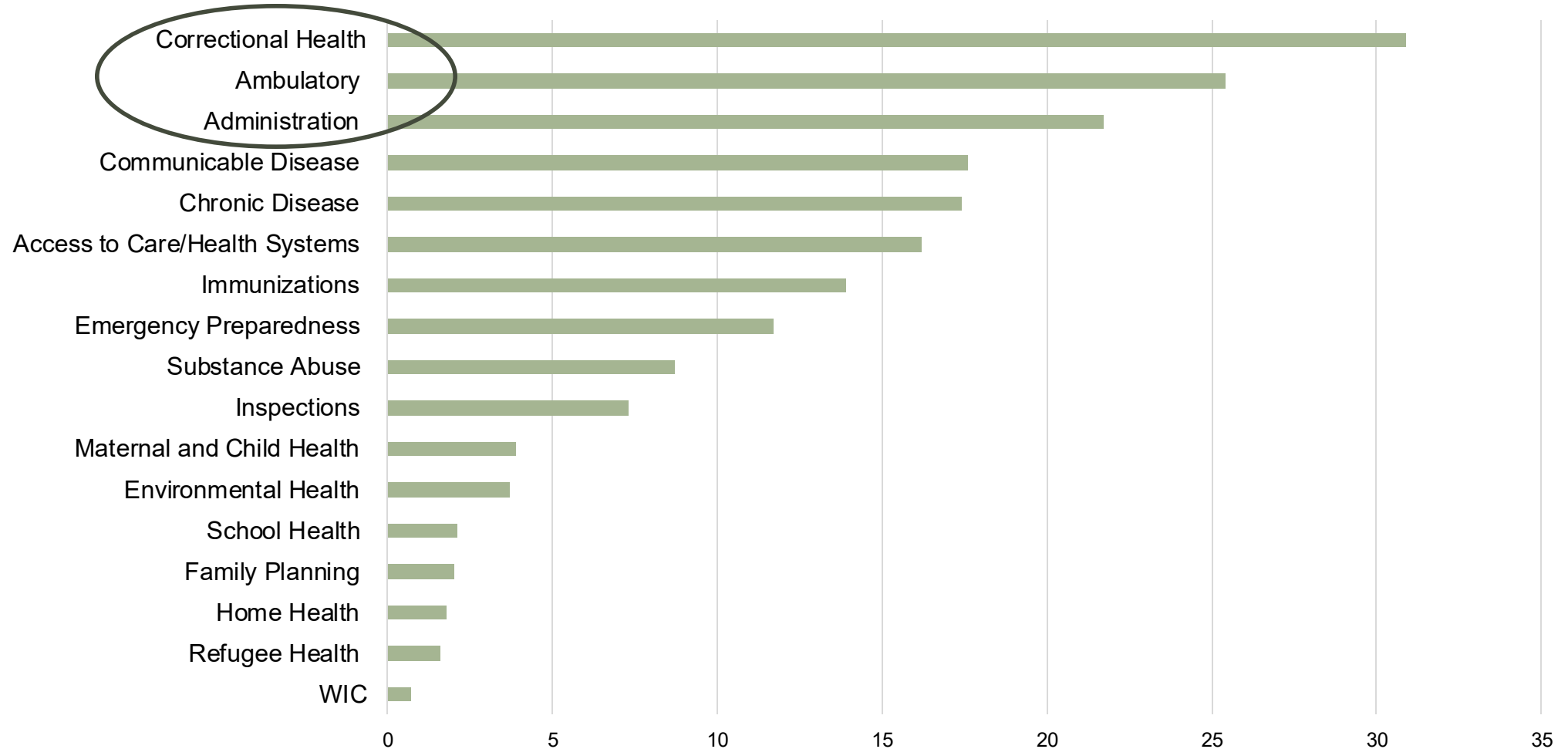
Sample Description

- Majority **female** identifying (70%) and **>40y old** (76%)
- **Racial identity**
 - 45% identified as white
 - 29% as African American or Black
 - 14% as American Indian or Alaska Native
- **Highest nursing degree**
 - 47% Master's in Nursing, 11.9% PhD or DNP

Findings – Agency



Findings – Program Area



Findings

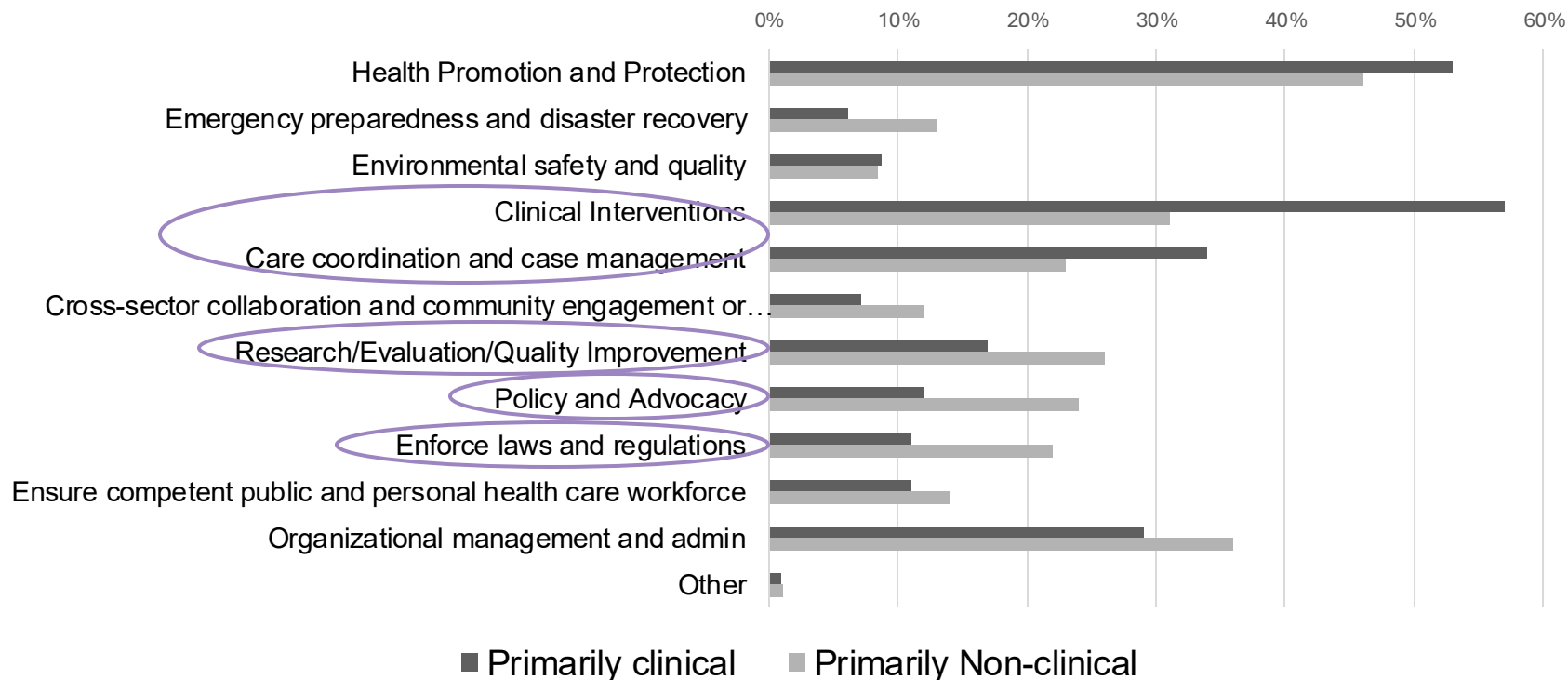
Majority reported functions in the following areas:

- Health Promotion and Protection (49%)
- Clinical Interventions (40%)
- Care Coordination and Case Management (27%)
- Policy and Advocacy (20%)
- Research/Evaluation/Quality Improvement (22%)

A majority of respondents (88%) agreed that the **function and activity questions accurately described their work.**

Findings

PHS nurse officers in primarily non-clinical settings – significantly higher % reported policy, enforcement, and research functions



Conclusions and Implications

PHS nurse officers – **more diverse, more educated** than general nursing population

Overall, proposed function and activity questions **accurately captured the responsibilities** of PHS nurse officers

Testing of these questions also identified **areas of needed clarification or expansion**

Recommendations

Use questions piloted in this study for future assessments of the PHN workforce in conjunction with surveys assessing the larger public health workforce.

Modify or add questions specific to respondents work functions when measuring the broader nursing workforce to better understand the role of nurses and better capture smaller specialties.

Thank you!

- Thank you to our team and our USPHS colleagues and the nurse officers who contributed!
- Read the paper which provides more detail on this study, published in Nursing Outlook:

Kett P.M., Whitman G. Edmonds J.K., Moon J.R., Brooks A.K., Strong M., & Bekemeier B.
The Demographics, Training, and Job Functions of the United States Public Health Service Commissioned Corps Nursing Workforce. Nursing Outlook. 2025;73(3):102385.
doi:/10.1016/j.outlook.2025.102385



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