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Executive Summary

Key outcomes from this seventh annual report of diversity in the Arkansas health care workforce include:

The majority of workers in health occupations are male including dentist, physicians, surgeons, optometrists, chiropractors, and podiatrists. Dental assistants (97% female), dental hygienist (99% female), specialty surgeons (92% male), licensed practical nurses (93% female), dieticians (97% female), and speech therapists (95% female) were occupations with less than 10 percent in a gender field. Pharmacists, physical therapists, and optometrists were equitably diverse in terms of gender.

Each profession was predominately white. In fact, there were only seven professions (i.e., physicians, specialty physicians, general surgeons, nurses (LPN, RN, and specialty nurses), pharmacists, podiatrists, and social workers) in which the proportion of white workers was less than 90 percent. Optometrists were 97 percent white, making them the least diverse profession with respect to race, whereas social workers were 75 percent white and 20 percent African American, making them the most diverse group in 2020. Race was not available for dental assistants at the time of reporting.

Geographic distribution followed a similar pattern for most professions. The highest concentration of workers tended to be in the central, northwest, and northeast regions of the state (i.e., the more urban areas of the state). Some professions were absent in a large number of counties. Podiatrists, for example, lacked active professionals in 51 counties, and general surgeons lacked professionals in 40 counties. Other professions enjoyed much greater dispersion. For example, pharmacists and physical therapists appeared to be active in all 75 counties.

Despite the legislative mandate requiring licensing boards to capture and report data on demographic characteristics of those licensed in Arkansas, data were not consistently provided. Of the thirteen ADH licensing boards and commissions, only two did not report.
Introduction

Monitoring the healthcare workforce is necessary to ensure it is large enough and skilled enough to deliver the vital public health services to the population. Observation provides data regarding the impact of investment; advocating for additional resources; evaluating gaps in workforce development; and developing recruitment and retention methods. An adequate supply and distribution of well-prepared health workers is imperative to guarantee health care needs of the population. In accordance with the population of Arkansas, a diverse workforce is extremely important to ensure accessible, affordable, and quality health care. Diversity in healthcare allows for increased cultural competence, and increasing trust and communication between professionals and patients. In addition, because health careers generally provide greater economic benefits in relation to other career paths, greater representation in the field leads to benefits for a wider range of individuals, families, and communities.

In order to understand more clearly where Arkansas stands with regard to diversity in the healthcare workforce, examination of current data is necessary. This examination is made possible by Arkansas Act 1489 of 2009, which requires state agencies, boards, and commissions that license health professionals in the state to provide demographic data on licensees yearly. This report was developed utilizing this information and incorporates the most recent data provided for selected health professionals in Arkansas, with a focus on race, age, gender, and geographic distribution.

All data were obtained from Arkansas’ professional licensing boards through the Arkansas Minority Health Commission.

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2 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, National Center for Health Workforce Analysis. Sex, Race, and Ethnic Diversity of U.S. Health Occupations (2010-2012), Rockville, Maryland; 2014.
In 2020, there were 1,611 dentists licensed in Arkansas.

In 2020, dentists tended to be middle aged, with a majority (25%) reporting age between 30-39.*

In addition, the majority of dentists were white with only 9% being other races or ethnicities.*

Dentists were also more likely to be male than female.

A review of the geographic distribution of dentists indicated that seven counties (highlighted on the map) had no dentist with an address in that county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.
In 2020, there were 3,789 dental assistants practicing in Arkansas.

In general, dental assistants tended to be young – 84% were under the age of 50, with a majority (42%) reporting age between 20–29.*

No race data was provided for dental assistants.

The majority of dental assistants were female.

A review of the geographic distribution of dental assistants in the state revealed there were four counties (indicated in red) that do not have dental assistants listed with an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.
In 2020, there were 1,937 dental hygienists practicing in Arkansas.

In general, dental hygienists tended to be young – 72% were under the age of 50, with a majority (34%) reporting age between 30-39.*

In addition, the majority of dental hygienists were white with only 5% being other races or ethnicities.

The majority of dental hygienists were female.

A review of the geographic distribution of dental hygienists in the state revealed there were six counties (indicated in red) that did not have dental hygienists listed with an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.
In 2020, there were 96 general physicians practicing in Arkansas.

The majority of general physicians tended to be in the 60-69 age range (33%).

In addition, the majority of general physicians were white with only 19% being other races or ethnicities.

General physicians were more likely male (77%) than female.

A review of the geographic distribution of general physicians in the state revealed there were thirty-six counties (indicated in red) that did not have general physicians listed with an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.
Specialty Physicians

Source: Arkansas Medical Board

In 2020, there were 6,048 specialty physicians practicing in Arkansas.

The majority of specialty physicians were 30+ in age (99%). Only 1 percent of specialty physicians were in their twenties.

In addition, the majority of specialty physicians were white with only 19% being other races or ethnicities. *

The majority of specialty physicians were male.

A review of the geographic distribution of specialty physicians in the state revealed there were only two counties (indicated in red on the map) that did not have specialty physicians listed with an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding
In 2020, there were 266 general surgeons practicing in Arkansas.

The majority of general surgeons tended to be under the age of 80. Only 4% were between the age of 80-89.

In addition, the majority of general surgeons were white with only 14% being other races or ethnicities.

The majority of general surgeons were male.

A review of the geographic distribution of general surgeons in the state revealed there were thirty-five counties (indicated in red) that did not have general surgeons listed with an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding
In 2020, there were 370 specialty surgeons practicing in Arkansas.

In general, specialty surgeons tended to be between the age of 60-69 (26%) with only 4% between the age of 80-89. *

The majority of specialty surgeons were white, with only 9% being of other races and ethnicities. *

The majority of specialty surgeons were male.

A review of the geographic distribution of specialty surgeons in the state revealed there were thirty-one counties (indicated in red) that did not have specialty surgeons listed with an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding
In 2020, there were 14,564 licensed practical nurses practicing in Arkansas.

In general, licensed practical nurses (97%) were under the age of 70.

The majority of licensed practical nurses were white, with only 20% being of other races and ethnicities.

The majority of licensed practical nurses were female.

Geographic data was not provided by the licensing agency.
In 2020, the number of registered nurses practicing in Arkansas was 45,220.

Registered nurses, below the age of 70, account for 96% of the total practicing in Arkansas.

The majority race of registered nurses is white, with only 14% being of other race and ethnicities.

The majority of registered nurses were female.

Geographic data was not provided by the licensing agency.
In 2020, the number of specialty nurses practicing in Arkansas was 5,667.

Specialty nurses, between the age of 30-39, account for 35% of the total practicing in Arkansas. Those between 70-79 years of age account for 2%.

The majority race of specialty nurses is white, with only 13% being of other race and ethnicities.

The majority of specialty nurses (83%) were female.

Geographic data was not provided by the licensing agency.
Optometrists

Source: Arkansas Optometry Licensing Board

In 2020, the number of optometrists practicing in Arkansas was 533.

Optometrists, between the age of 30-39, account for 26% of the total practicing in Arkansas. Those between 80-89 years of age account for 1%.

The majority race of optometrists is white, with only 2% being of other race and ethnicities.

The majority of optometrists (64%) were male.

A review of the geographic distribution of optometrists in the state revealed there were seventeen counties (indicated in red) that did not have an optometrist listed with an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.*
In 2020, the number of pharmacists practicing in Arkansas was 7,040.

Pharmacists, between the age of 30-39, account for 30% of the total practicing in Arkansas. Those between 80-89 years of age account for 1%

The majority race of pharmacists is white, with only 13% being of other race and ethnicities.

The majority of pharmacists (55%) were female.

A review of the geographic distribution of pharmacists in the state revealed there was only one county (indicated in red) that did not have pharmacists listing an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.*
Podiatrists
Source: Arkansas State Board of Podiatry Examiners

In 2020, the number of podiatrists practicing in Arkansas was 119.

Podiatrists, between the age of 50-59, account for 35% of the total practicing in Arkansas.*

The majority race of podiatrists is white, with only 15% being of other race and ethnicities.*

The majority of podiatrists (76%) were male.

A review of the geographic distribution of podiatrists in the state revealed there were fifty-one counties (indicated in red) that did not have podiatrists listing an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.
In 2020, the number of chiropractors practicing in Arkansas was 698.

The majority age range (87%) of chiropractors practicing in Arkansas was between 30-69.

The majority race of chiropractors is white, with only 5% being of other race and ethnicities.

The majority of chiropractors (72%) were male.

A review of the geographic distribution of chiropractors in the state revealed there were fifteen counties (indicated in red) that did not have chiropractors listing an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.*
In 2020, the number of dieticians practicing in Arkansas was 883.

The majority age range (30%) of dieticians practicing in Arkansas was between 30-39.

The majority race of dieticians is white, with only 5% being of other race and ethnicities.

The majority of dieticians (97%) were female.

A review of the geographic distribution of dieticians in the state revealed there were twelve counties (indicated in red) that did not have dieticians listing an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.
Physical Therapists

Source: Arkansas Board of Physical Therapy

In 2020, the number of physical therapists practicing in Arkansas was 4,197.

The majority age range (32%) of physical therapists practicing in Arkansas was between 30-39.

The majority race of physical therapists is white, with only 9% being of other race and ethnicities.

The majority of physical therapists (67%) were female.

A review of the geographic distribution of physical therapists in the state revealed each county had one listed or practicing in the that county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.
In 2020, the number of social workers practicing in Arkansas was 6,445.

The majority age range (48%) of social workers practicing in Arkansas was between 30-49.

The majority race of social workers is white, with only 25% being of other race and ethnicities.

The majority of social workers (86%) were female.

A review of the geographic distribution of social workers in the state revealed there were eleven counties (indicated in red) that did not have social workers listing an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Arkansas Social Work Licensing Board
Speech Therapists

Source: Arkansas Speech Pathology and Audiology Board

In 2020, the number of speech therapists practicing in Arkansas was 6,134.

The majority age range (70%) of speech therapists practicing in Arkansas was between 50-59.

The majority race of speech therapists is white, with only 24% being of other race and ethnicities.

The majority of speech therapists (95%) were female.

A review of the geographic distribution of speech therapists in the state revealed there were two counties (indicated in red) that did not have speech therapists listing an address living or working in the county.

*Note: Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.
Conclusions

Increased diversity in the state’s healthcare workforce could have positive effects on both the health of minority populations and the quality of care in Arkansas. This report examines demographic data provided by the state’s various healthcare workforce licensing boards to the Arkansas Department of Health, and seeks to illustrate age, race, gender, and geographic disparities found within various segments of the workforce. This report was made possible by the Arkansas General Assembly’s 2009 mandate that required all licensing boards to provide this information on its licensees.

Despite Act 1489, some 2020 data were missing, preventing a complete analysis of workforce characteristics. Of the 13 professions contacted to report data for examination, only two were missing race and gender data, which is an improvement from the previous year.

Racial disparities are a reality in Arkansas’ workforce. The racial and ethnic diversity found in the state’s population is not necessarily reflected in the healthcare system. Gender and age disparities are evident, as well.

Healthcare professionals are not, in many cases, equitably distributed throughout the state. While it is not unexpected that professionals would be clustered in the population centers found in the central and northwestern parts of the state, it is of some concern that some counties (for example, Montgomery and Calhoun counties) were consistently lacking active professionals. Such geographic disparities can be harmful when they prevent an individual or family from accessing needed care.

Few differences were evident between the data obtained this year and those obtained last year. While some professions may have improved or declined in terms of diversity, any differences were slight and possibly due to chance. To see true development and improvement (or decline) over time, frequent and complete reporting is required over a long period to allow for policy changes to manifest in workforce improvements.

This report highlights important issues in workforce diversity in Arkansas. While awareness is important in the early stages of demographic data collection and can form the basis of future development, systematic and ongoing demographic data collection, it is imperative to maintain momentum in understanding our changing workforce.

2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, National Center for Health Workforce Analysis. Sex, Race, and Ethnic Diversity of U.S. Health Occupations (2010-2012), Rockville, Maryland; 2014


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