

Scarcity of Primary Care Positions may Divert Physician Assistants into Specialty Practice

P. A. Morgan¹, K. Himmerick², B. Leach³, P. Dieter³, C. Everett³,

¹Duke University, Durham, NC;

²Center for the Health Professions, University of California, San Francisco, San Francisco, CA;

³Duke University Medical School, Physician Assistant Program, Durham, NC;

OBJECTIVES: The purpose of this study is to examine the distribution and characteristics of primary care and specialty job openings in the US for physician assistants (PAs). Physician assistants (PAs) are often suggested as a partial solution to predicted primary care workforce shortages, but a declining proportion of PAs are entering primary care practice. Policy efforts have focused on increasing primary care PA supply, but low labor market demand might be constricting the primary care PA pipeline.

POPULATION STUDIED: The population of interest is physician assistants in the United States in 2014.

METHODS: In this descriptive, cross sectional study, we use a novel data source, online job postings, to compare primary care and specialty job postings to each other and to occupied PA positions. Job postings data for PAs in 2014 were purchased from Burning Glass Technologies (BGT), a leading labor market analytics firm. We examined 42,768 job postings that advertised PA jobs and excluded postings that advertised non-clinical jobs (336), postings for jobs in Guam and Puerto Rico (5), and postings for which we could not identify a specialty (8290), resulting in a final sample of 34,137 PA job postings. Two trained coders assigned specific practice specialties to each posting. Other variables (including employment location and requirement for experience) were assigned by BGT using text analytics. Information on existing occupied PA positions is from the National Commission on the Certification of Physician Assistants' (NCCPA) statistical profile of recently certified PAs. The analysis incorporates geographic information system methods for analysis and presentation.

KEY FINDINGS: In 2014 the overwhelming majority (82%) of PA job postings were for positions in specialties (n=28,047), while only 18% of PA job postings were for primary care positions (n=6,091). Of approximately 100,000 PA positions occupied in 2014, 73% were in specialty care and 27% were in primary care. The proportion of postings that were for primary care varied widely by state (9-40%) and were highest in the West.

Information about strengths, limitations, and usefulness of online job postings data for workforce research will also be presented.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: We have demonstrated the use of job postings data for workforce research and identified job availability as a potential barrier to PAs practicing in primary care. Our findings suggest that the stronger employment market for specialty PAs may contribute to the continued trend of PAs entering specialty practice. Geographic limitations, requirements for experience, and competition from nurse practitioners may also limit PAs from securing primary care positions. Since it would be inefficient to invest scarce resources in training PAs for the primary care workforce if those graduates are unable to secure primary care employment, strategies to bolster the primary care job market for PAs may be needed.