



### POLICY PERSPECTIVE

AMERICANS PERCEIVE A NATIONAL NURSING SHORTAGE AND MOST BELIEVE THAT THE SHORTAGE CONTRIBUTES TO POOR-QUALITY CARE IN HOSPITALS. A MAJORITY OF THE PUBLIC ALSO BELIEVES THAT THE PRESENCE OF NURSES WHO ARE OVERWORKED, STRESSED OR FATIGUED LOWERS THE QUALITY OF CARE IN HOSPITALS. THIS SUGGESTS THAT AMERICANS MAY BE RECEPTIVE TO EFFORTS THAT ADDRESS THE NURSING SHORTAGE AND THE QUALITY OF CARE DELIVERED BY NURSES.

The United States is facing a prolonged nursing shortage that threatens to undermine the care provided in the nation's hospitals.<sup>1</sup> Improving the quality of nursing care is integral to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's mission to improve the health and health care of all Americans. The Foundation is committed to reducing the shortage in nurse staffing and improving the quality of hospital care by transforming the way care is delivered at the bedside. In September 2005, the Foundation and researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health conducted a public opinion survey that explored Americans' perceptions of the quality of hospital care and their knowledge of the nursing shortage.

### Key Findings

- **Most Americans (72%) believe that there is a nursing shortage in the United States.**  
Sixty percent of respondents believe that a shortage of nurses is a major factor contributing to poor-quality health care in hospitals.
- **Two-thirds of respondents consider overwork, stress or fatigue of nurses a major reason for poor-quality care.**  
In contrast, only 39 percent think that poorly trained nurses are a major cause of poor-quality care.
- **Although respondents perceived a shortage, only 34 percent of those with a hospital experience—their own or a family member's—in the past two years reported too few nurses in the hospital in which they were treated.**  
A large majority (81%) of respondents who had experienced a hospitalization rated the nursing care that they or a family member received as excellent, very good or good.
- **Americans consider nursing a vital component of quality health care.**  
Eighty percent of respondents report that the quality of nursing is a very or somewhat important consideration for them when choosing a hospital.

—Edith Burbank-Schmitt

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## Methodology

This study and survey instrument were jointly developed by the staff of the Harvard School of Public Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The study was analyzed by researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health under the direction of Robert J. Blendon of the Harvard School of Public Health. The research team includes Catherine M. DesRoches, John M. Benson, Kathleen Weldon and Channal Fleischfresser of the Harvard School of Public Health and Melissa J. Herrmann of ICR/International Communications Research. Fieldwork was conducted via telephone by ICR/International Communications Research of Media (PA) from September 21–September 25, 2005. The survey was conducted with a nationally representative sample of 1,128 adults age 18 and over. Of those, a total of 108 were African-American respondents and a total of 131 were Hispanic-American respondents.

Possible sources of nonsampling error include nonresponse bias, as well as question wording and ordering effects. Nonresponse in telephone surveys produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population. To compensate for these known biases, sample data are weighted to the most recent Census data available from the Current Population Survey for gender, age, race, education, as well as number of adults and number of telephone lines in the household. Other techniques, including random-digit dialing, replicate subsamples, callbacks staggered over times of day and days of the week and systematic respondent selection within households, are used to ensure that the sample is representative.

## Resources

About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's work in nursing:

<http://www.rwjf.org/portfolios/approach.jsp?iaid=137>

Nursing research sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation:

<http://www.rwjf.org/research/researchlist.jsp?ia=137>

Nursing Shortage Interactive Map:

[http://www.rwjf.org/files/newsroom/interactives/nursing/nursing\\_shortages.html](http://www.rwjf.org/files/newsroom/interactives/nursing/nursing_shortages.html)

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1 Buerhaus PI, Staiger DO and Auerbach DI. "Is The Current Shortage Of Hospital Nurses Ending?" *Health Affairs*, 22(6): 191-198, 2003.