

Physician and Physician Assistant Distribution in Rural and Remote Texas Counties
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Objective

To identify the geographic distribution patterns of physicians and physician assistants (PAs) in remote and rural areas of Texas in order assist with workforce planning and educational strategies to increase access to health care services.

Methods

Data base queries were performed on the Texas Medical Board website and the U.S. Census Bureau County 2006 Population Estimate website. Queries were made of all 254 Texas counties by population, persons per square mile, N and specialty for practicing physicians, and by N of practicing PAs during the January 2007 licensure census.

Outcomes

As of January 2007, there were 43,565 licensed physicians and 3,209 licensed PAs in Texas. According to 2006 population estimates of the 254 Texas counties, 60 counties (24% of the state) were populated with 6 or fewer people per square mile, meeting the federal government criterion for “frontier” designation. On an aggregate state-wide basis, there was 1 PA per 13.6 physicians. However, in the 60 frontier counties there were 32 PAs and 75 primary care physicians, or 1 PA per 2.3 physicians. Fourteen of the 32 PAs (44%) were female. Seventeen Texas counties exceeding the combined total land mass of Connecticut, Vermont, and Rhode Island had no licensed physicians or PAs.

Discussion

Although access to health care services in frontier-designated Texas counties remains inadequate, PAs represent a disproportionately greater share of the provider total when compared to state-wide physician to PA distribution data. The finding that nearly half the frontier PAs were females challenges assumptions that women are not attracted to remote clinical practice sites. Additional research could help identify novel ways to extend health care services to the population of the 17 counties with no licensed providers.



