

Employment Trends and the Class of 2021 New Graduates' Job Search and Transition to Practice in the Post-COVID-19 Workplace

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Following a year of unprecedented disruption in nursing education and healthcare systems, and critically ill COVID-19 patients flooding hospitals, the graduating class of 2021 survived changes in their academic experiences and faced a new job market that seemed to have recovered from its emergency state the year prior. Across the United States in the Spring of 2021, nursing students approached the launch of a nursing career and their impending transition to practice (TTP) with a different portfolio of altered clinical experiences and a healthcare system that was still struggling to make up for having limited opportunities for new graduates in the year prior (Feeg et al., 2021). What seemed to be more pressing for the transition of these new graduates from student to nurse was the existence of programs within hospitals to prepare new nurses for a clinical practice whose clinical learning environments in school to apply theory and skills in real situations were different than the past, including expanded orientations to residencies.

The gap between nursing theory and practice is widely documented. What students learn and what they will experience as professionals are challenged by the increasing demands of hospitals today. TTP is a critical period studied for years but introduced new challenges for the 2021 graduates. Finding the right first job and having the proper preparation for the complexity of the workplace gave the National Student Nurses' Association (NSNA) New Graduate Annual Survey a new set of variables to study and report. The variables included the existence of residency programs, mentoring, and the related stresses new nurses faced.



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Since the early days of 2009, the NSNA annual survey reported on the growth of registered nurse (RN) employment and associated trends over the previous years. The trends for the 2020 class were an anomaly demonstrated in the data (Feeg et al., 2021). As always, the survey's snapshot in time remains relevant to understanding new graduate experiences in the context of previous years. What were the trends in new graduate employment for the class of 2021 when vaccines were available, and the see-saw surges popped up in various areas of the country relative to previous years? Did students report a different job search, change in confidence in their ability to practice, satisfaction of their

education, or having a mentor in their education or residency?

Background: Transition to Practice Post-Pandemic

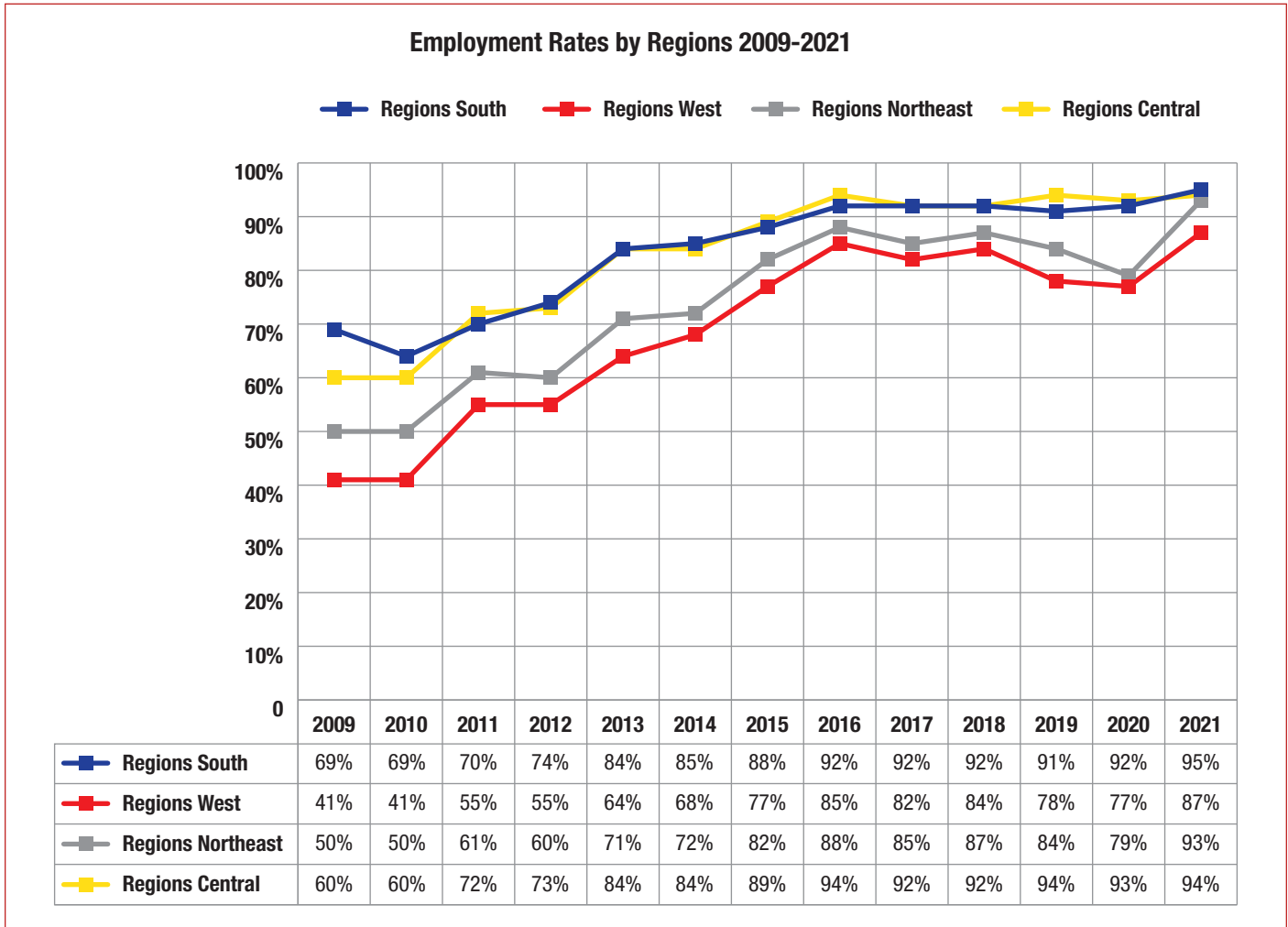
The TTP of new graduate nurses remains a topic of critical interest to healthcare administrators, consumers, and the nursing profession. New graduate nurses leave their first position within a year at a rate of 15.5%-26.8% (Silvestre et al., 2017). The cost of turnover ranges from \$10,000-\$88,000 per new graduate nurse, depending on geography and specialty (Alshawush et al., 2020). Successful TTP of new graduate nurses has become increasingly important due to the aging

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Figure 1.
Employment Trends by Regions of the Country



nursing workforce, the projected shortage of nurses, and the increasing complexity of the healthcare system (Halfer & Benedetto, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the TTP. New graduate nurses who completed schooling during the pandemic have experienced reductions in clinical opportunities and increased virtual learning activities (Smith et al., 2021). The new graduate nurses of 2021 entered a job market that had changed.

New Nurses: New 2021 Graduates

The NSNA New Graduate Annual Survey was sent via SurveyMonkey® – as done in previous years – to the list of nursing students from the NSNA membership who indicated Spring 2021 as their graduation date. The questions varied to focus on current job search

success, past educational experiences, having a mentor, future plans, and personal reflections of confidence in their practice as they enter the job market.

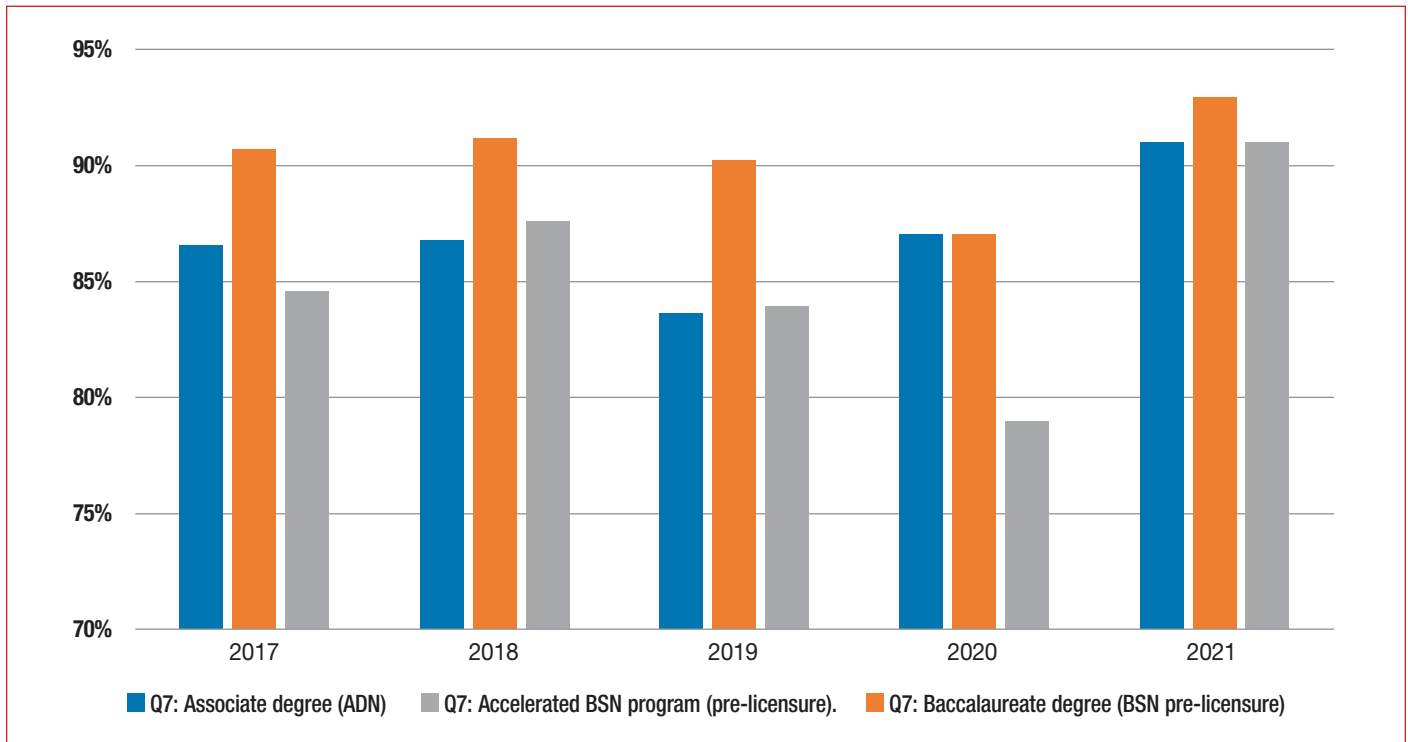
Consecutive data collection of new graduate nurses from the survey reported over the past years provided insight into the RN workforce and trends in new graduate nurses' job search and preparation for their role transition from student to nurse. The class of 2021 responses to the survey shed light on this cohort's TTP relative to past years and the economic health of the country described in previous years (Feeg & Mancino, 2019; 2020; Feeg et al., 2021). Trends have bounced back significantly since the anomaly of 2020 (see Figure 1).

Results about employment for the class of 2021 confirmed the job market had greatly improved over the previous year to almost record levels for all regions since 2009. Overall, the employment of

new graduate nurses in 2021 was 92% compared to 85% in 2020. Employment trends across the country have demonstrated a continuation of differences in the regional aspects of the job market, but all reports were higher than the previous year. The lowest employment remained in the West (87%) and the Northeast (93%); however, the most gains in the Northeast (14%) from the previous year reflected the job recovery from areas hit hardest by the surges of COVID-19 cases in 2020. New graduate nurses reported 83% found jobs in their communities and for those who had jobs, 85% were hired within 3 months and 97% within 6 months. Employment by type of program was higher than in previous years (see Figure 2).

Over the years, the survey has asked the same questions about how new graduates reported the job market. This year, the results were positive for job

Figure 2.
Employment Trends by Types of Programs



seekers as employer trends were facing workforce shortages in 2021. The perceptions of new graduate nurses ($n = 2,691$) on employment trends during their job search are below:

- Hospitals are hiring travel and agency nurses (91%).
- Nurses are leaving the profession (88%).
- RNs currently employed are working harder (80%).
- Most acute-care hospitals are hiring new graduates (79%).
- RNs are resigning from their positions (79%).
- There are ample jobs for new graduates (69%).
- RNs are retiring from their positions (63%).
- Hospitals are creating residency programs (59%).
- RNs working full-time are also working in other RN positions part-time (56%).

Their perceptions indicated a change from 2020 that employers are hiring new graduate nurses in all areas, including home and community, sub-acute care, long-term care, and especially acute-care hospitals (see Figure 3). In the jobs they took, 66% reported their orientation was a ‘residency program,’ although the majority reported these programs varied

from less than 1 month to 3 months, and less than 25% reported 4-12 months. The survey did not define what is called a residency, and the range of residencies reported by new graduates suggests these experiences may not meet the standards set by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing (Spector, 2012).

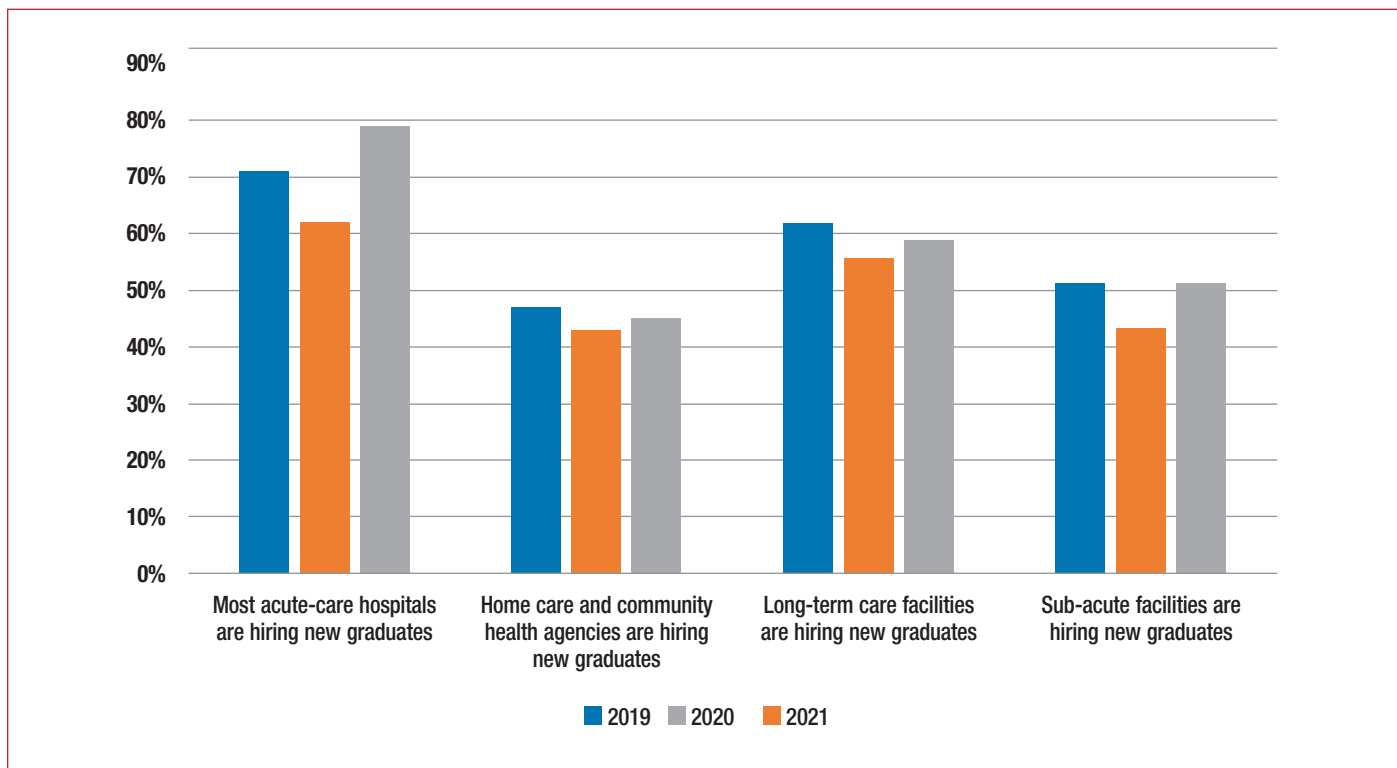
The Impact of Changed Pre-Graduation Learning on TTP Confidence and Stress

The class of 2021 was different than the previous class since the spring of 2020 saw closures of schools and limited in-person patient contact for some regions of the country, as reported by Feeg and colleagues (2021). The class of 2021 reported a direct impact of lowered confidence and higher stress related to the amount of simulation and discontinued clinical. While the final year of clinical learning was changed in 2020, the pivot in nursing schools also produced sustained changes. The 2021 graduates may have had some limitations on their third-year experiences but had also improved in the spring before graduation. Nonetheless, these new graduate nurses faced their TTP – described in the literature as “transition shock” (Duchscher, 2009, p. 1,104) – with the

added changes in clinical learning experiences for schools who increased their reliance on simulation and alternative clinical modes.

There were four areas of significant changes and concern over the past years in new graduate nurses’ responses to survey questions. For the question, “Do you feel that your nursing education adequately prepared you for what to expect in your first nursing position?” 56% of the 2021 graduates reported “Yes,” compared to 67% in 2020 and 68% in 2019. For the visual analog scale of 1-100 on “How confident are you in your new position?” the mean score for 2021 decreased from 61 compared to the mean score of 63 for 2020. Extended statistical analyses for confidence by having a residency program – which was not defined in the survey by length or program objectives – were not significant when sorted by hospital size. “Having a mentor,” continued to decrease, with only 29% of the new graduates in 2021 reported having one, compared to 31% in 2020 and 35% in 2019. With additional statistical analyses, “having a mentor” was significantly related to being employed (94% versus 91%), “being in a leadership position now or in the past” (29% versus 21%), “nursing education adequately prepared me”

Figure 3.
Employment Trends in Hospitals, Home Care, Long-Term Care, and Sub-Acute Facilities



(60% versus 54%), and stresses lower related to being bullied, unit staffing ratios, and working night shift ($p < 0.05$). Having a mentor made a profound impact on new nurses' TTP and the low and decreasing reports of having a mentor are troubling, as described in Vance's article, "Where Have All the Mentors Gone?" (2022). These data need further study.

A final and most interesting change from the class of 2022 new graduate nurses is the response to the question, "What one area of nursing are you most interested as your future career goal?" The most frequently selected answer was "Travel Nursing," which increased to 15% from 4% in 2020, 2019, and 2018. This suggests several new questions related to the new graduate nurses' future aspirations and a statement on the economic questions related to pay expectations for nurses to be discussed in classrooms and boardrooms.

Discussion

The travel nursing trend that emerged last year from the demand standpoint was noted by the 2021 graduates as a desirable future career goal. This will be worth exploring as the short-

age of nurses continues to grow. Is it higher compensation or the toxic work environment with inadequate staffing, bullying, and lack of support for new graduates' TTP driving nurses to travel? It is a job seeker's market with most students finding positions and all areas of nursing hiring. The confluence of nurse retirements, nurse faculty shortages, increasing compensation for all health-care workers, challenges created by the pandemic, and higher patient acuity merging with broader economic trends like inflation create a complex threat to access to health care. HCA Healthcare, Inc. and Universal Health Services, Inc. are among the hospitals asking health plans to pay more for care to offset mounting nurse costs (Evans, 2022). Until the nurse faculty shortage and access to clinical sites for supervised student nurse practice is addressed, the nursing workforce numbers will not increase, and rising costs will not abate.

It is with caution we celebrate the class of 2022 with the hope that adequate mentorship and onboarding await them. This new generation of RNs will not tolerate bullying, staffing shortages, or toxic work environments. "Thirty-two percent of registered nurses (RNs) surveyed in the United States in November

said they may leave their current direct-patient-care role, according to McKinsey's latest research" (Berlin et al., 2022, para. 1). Stemming the tide of nurses leaving the profession with new recruits will not be successful unless the culture of nursing practice settings is transformed.

Essential to this challenge is creating an educational environment that values nursing students, supports their formation of professional identity, offers mentors and role models, and builds confidence in leadership and interprofessional relationships. Beyond the basic requirements of beginning nursing practice, new graduates must be prepared for what they will face in the work setting. Career guidance prior to graduation can influence decisions about the all-important first RN position.

The NSNA is a barometer for what is happening at the grassroots level in the nursing workforce. In 2008, an impending oversupply of new graduates was identified when employers no longer exhibited at NSNA meetings, and NSNA board members reported difficulty finding new graduate employment. The excess of new graduates lasted throughout the recession and began to abate in 2013. In 2021, NSNA noted a marked

“The data generated from the NSNA New Graduate surveys is the ground-level view of what is happening in the nursing workforce. Please pay attention.”

increase in exhibitors at its virtual meetings with employment opportunities for new graduates.

Interest in recruiting new graduates has grown in 2022, as evidenced by – not only increased employer exhibitors at the 2022 NSNA Annual Convention in Salt Lake City, UT – the number of targeted employment advertisements NSNA is receiving. One noticeable difference is the number of healthcare systems recruiting new graduates. While the transition from individual hospitals to healthcare systems reduces the number of exhibitors and advertisers, the volume of positions for new graduates is growing exponentially. For example, one healthcare system that exhibited at the 2022 NSNA Annual Convention had to fill 1,700 positions by this past June.

As noted in the 2021 survey data, new graduates from all types of nursing programs are securing employment. The accessibility of online RN to BSN/MSN programs, along with employer tuition support, has a positive impact on reaching the profession’s goal of an all-BSN workforce. The data generated from the NSNA New Graduate surveys is the ground-level view of what is happening in the nursing workforce. Please pay attention. **DN**

Authors’ Note: Percentages are rounded to the nearest percent. The convenience sample of nursing students who are members of NSNA and indicated spring 2021 was their graduation date were sent the survey via SurveyMonkey® yielding responses from n = 3,601 filtered by “graduation spring/summer and winter 2020, and spring/summer 2021.” Although there was attrition in the survey, there were at least 2,644 responses for most of the variables. Using an estimated date of the survey returned between October and December 2021, the results represent approximately 4 months to 1-year post graduation.

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Note: An expanded version of this article will appear in the July/August 2022 issue of *Nursing Economic\$*. To learn more, please visit nursingeconomics.net

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Volume 44, No. 1 • Summer 2022

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DEAN'S Notes is indexed in Cumulative Index to Nursing & Allied Health Literature.

DEAN'S Notes is published four times a year (winter, spring, summer, and fall) by Anthony J. Jannetti Inc., East Holly Avenue, Box 56, Pitman, New Jersey 08071-0056. Telephone 856.256.2300. FAX 856.589.7463. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the express written permission of the publisher. Address changes should include mailing label and be forwarded to the publisher.

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