

Health Workforce Projections: Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy

KEY FINDINGS

Between 2012 and 2025:

- Supply is estimated to grow by 46 percent for occupational therapists and 33 percent for physical therapists.
- Demand is estimated to grow by 20 percent for occupational therapists and 23 percent for physical therapists.
- The projected supply of individuals in each occupation exceeds the projected growth in service demand for occupational therapists and physical therapists.

This fact sheet presents the national supply and demand for occupational and physical therapists between 2012 and 2025 using HRSA's Health Workforce Simulation Model (HWSM).¹ While the nuances of modeling supply and demand differ for individual health professions, the basic framework remains the same. The HWSM assumes that demand equals supply in the base year. For supply modeling, the major components (beyond common labor-market factors like unemployment) include characteristics of the existing workforce in a given occupation, new entrants to the workforce (e.g., newly trained workers), and workforce decisions (e.g., retirement and hours worked patterns). For demand modeling, the major components include population demographics, health care use patterns (including the influence of the Affordable Care Act insurance coverage), and demand for health care services (translated into requirements for Full-Time Equivalents). Over the period studied, the model assumes that current national patterns of labor supply and service demand remain unchanged within each demographic group.² These projections do not account for the geographical distribution of providers which may impact access to care in certain areas/communities.

BACKGROUND

Occupational therapy is a health, wellness, and rehabilitation profession that helps individuals maximize their performance and functioning throughout the lifespan. Occupational therapists are prepared at the Master's or Doctoral level. They assess and treat people who are injured, ill, or disabled and help them to recover, improve, and develop skills needed for daily living and working. Examples of common occupational therapy interventions include: helping people recovering from strokes to regain life skills, supporting elderly individuals with cognitive-behavioral or physical impairments to improve their functionality, and helping children born with disabilities to fully participate in daily activities.

Physical therapists are professionals providing rehabilitation, habilitation, preventive, and risk reduction services for patients. New physical therapists are now prepared at the doctoral level. Physical therapists help assess, maintain, restore, and improve movement, activity, and health to enable individuals to enjoy optimal physical function.

¹ This model uses a micro-simulation approach where supply is projected based on the simulation of career choices of individual health workers. Demand for health care services is simulated for a representative sample of the current and future U.S. population based on each person's demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, health-related behavior, and health risk factors that affect their health care utilization patterns. For more information on data and methods, please see <http://bhwa.hrsa.gov/healthworkforce/supplydemand/simulationmodeldocumentation.pdf>.

² Ono T, Lafortune G, Schoenstein M. "Health workforce planning in OECD countries: a review of 26 projection models from 18 countries." *OECD Health Working Papers*, No. 62. France: OECD Publishing; 2013:8-11.

FINDINGS

Between 2012 and 2025, supply is estimated to grow by 46 percent for occupational therapists and 33 percent for physical therapists (Exhibit 1). The demand for occupational therapists is projected to grow by 20 percent and demand for physical therapists is projected to grow by 23 percent. Thus, the projected growth in supply exceeds the projected growth in demand for services for both occupational therapists and physical therapists. These projections suggest that the U.S. should have a more than sufficient supply of occupational therapists and physical therapists to meet the projected growth in demand for services by 2025.

EXHIBIT 1. Estimated Supply and Demand for Rehabilitation/Habilitation Services in the U.S., 2012-2025

	Occupational therapists	Physical therapists
<i>Supply</i>		
Estimated supply, 2012	86,300	191,600
Total supply growth, 2012-2025:	39,900 (46%)	62,600 (33%)
New entrants	58,200	96,500
Changing work patterns(e.g., part time to full time hours)	(2,510)	(1,030)
Attrition (e.g. retirements, mortality)	(15,790)	(32,870)
Projected supply, 2025	126,200	254,200
<i>Demand</i>		
Estimated demand, 2012	86,300	191,600
Total demand growth, 2012-2025	17,600 (20%)	43,500 (23%)
Changing demographics impact	17,200 (20%)	40,800 (21%)
ACA insurance coverage impact	400 (0%)	2,700 (1%)
Projected demand, 2025	103,900	235,100
<i>Adequacy of supply, 2025</i>		
Projected supply (minus) projected demand	22,300	19,100

Several factors that influence demand are included in the HWSM. The aging and growth of the U.S. population, the Affordable Care Act's emphasis on wellness and prevention, and current initiatives to better manage chronic illness—including diabetes and heart disease—suggest that demand for occupational and physical therapy services will remain high, and were factored into the projections discussed here. A limitation of the model is that it does not account for other factors that might influence demand, such as the increasing recognition of the needs of disabled Americans, including veterans and those returning from foreign wars.

[About the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis](#)

The National Center for Health Workforce Analysis informs public and private-sector decision-making related to the health workforce by expanding and improving health workforce data, disseminating workforce data to the public, improving and updating projections of the supply and demand for health workers. For more information about the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis please visit our website at <http://bhw.hrsa.gov/healthworkforce/index.html>.