

## EDITORIAL

# Expanding the Role of Nursing in Community and Population Health

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This edition of the journal provides insights into some nursing roles in community and population health. The health of our communities and the populations within them have long been central to the mission of the nursing profession. Providing direct care to individuals and families is a hallmark of our practice, yet in an era defined by persistent chronic disease, widening health inequities, and evolving workforce demands, our charge continues to expand.

Although the terms “population health” and “community health” are often used interchangeably, they represent distinct but closely related approaches to understanding and improving health outcomes.

**Population health** focuses on the health outcomes of groups of people categorized by geography, demographics, or other shared factors, and the wide range of determinants that influence those outcomes (Wallace et al., 2021). This is a systemic view, taking into consideration how social, economic, environmental, and policy factors affect health at a macro level. For example, population health initiatives might include working on policies to reduce air pollution, improving access to preventive screenings, or addressing income inequality. The goal of population health is to improve health outcomes and reduce disparities across entire populations.

**Community health** is more localized and focuses on the health status, needs, and resources of a defined community. Community health efforts are typically

grounded in direct engagement with community residents and organizations to identify and address specific health concerns. Examples include vaccination drives, or local campaigns to reduce opioid use. Community health professionals work to connect individuals with services and tailor interventions to fit the cultural and social context of the community (Knecht et al., 2023).

In essence, **population health** takes a broader, policy-oriented perspective that examines health trends across large groups, while **community health** operates at the grassroots level, translating those broader strategies into practical, community-specific actions. When aligned, these two approaches reinforce one another. Population-level data can inform targeted community interventions, and community-based successes can, in turn, shape larger-scale health policies.

The nursing profession is uniquely positioned for this work. Nurses are the largest group of healthcare professionals, are trusted, and routinely engage with social, environmental, and clinical factors that determine health outcomes. In nursing education, professional nursing standards now emphasize population health competencies and social determinants of health, placing the nurse in a key position to act upstream. (AACN, 2021; McCarthy et al., 2023) Further, workforce data show that public health registered nurses (RNs) and advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) have distinct knowledge and experiences that should be leveraged for

community/population work (Choi et al., 2023).

Despite this promise, significant challenges persist for nurses navigating these healthcare spaces. Systems where nurses often work are designed to reward acute, individual-focused care rather than population health outcomes. Academic programs and workforce models may not fully prepare nurses for community assessments, policy advocacy, data analytics, or cross-sector collaboration. A national study found that public health nurses had substantial continuing education needs, particularly in mental health topics, patient-centered care, and evidence-based practice, thereby limiting capacity to shift toward population health roles (Castner et al., 2023). Another study identified barriers to caring for socially disadvantaged patients which included insufficient nurse staffing, a profit-focused health system, and cultural biases. In contrast, facilitators included high quality language services and robust health systems community partnerships (Carthon et al., 2025). These findings underscore the significant impediments to meeting community/population health needs.

Given the current landscape, the following initiatives are strategic imperatives that may overcome the challenges, and better meet community and population health needs.

- **Adopt a population-health framework in practice.** Nurses must integrate population-level thinking into daily care. That means shifting from

“What does this one patient need?” to “What will improve the health of this community over time?” Nurses should engage in community health assessments, risk stratification, outreach to vulnerable groups, and data-driven planning. Education literature notes that competencies such as population-health assessment, social determinants of health, and inter-professional collaboration are essential (McCarthy et al., 2023).

- **Build and sustain partnerships beyond the hospital walls.** No nurse can single-handedly solve social determinants of health. Success depends on collaboration—with public health agencies, schools, local government, non-profits, and community leaders. Nurses must serve as bridge-builders, amplifying community voices, fostering trust, and embedding nursing expertise into cross-sector initiatives (Carthon et al., 2025).
- **Invest in nursing education and workforce development aligned with population health.** Educational programs and employers must ensure nurses are prepared for community engagement, health policy, data use, and systems thinking (Castner et al., 2023). Furthermore, nursing curricula must embed social-determinants frameworks and population health outcomes as core competencies (AACN, 2021; McCarthy et al., 2023).
- **Advocate for policy, funding, and structural change.** Nurses

possess expansive knowledge of health systems, care delivery, and the challenges to achieving health outcomes (Smith et al., 2020). Nurses must raise their voices in policy arenas. Whether through professional organizations such as the American Nurses Association (ANA) or direct community engagement, nursing must contribute to policy discussions on resource allocation, health equity, social determinants, and reimbursement models.

In conclusion, the continued migration towards community and population health frameworks represents a necessary evolution in healthcare. Nurses must lead this transformation, leveraging our unique vantage point and professional values to promote health for entire populations. For nursing to meet community and population health needs, we must evolve practice models, foster partnerships, expand education, and engage policy. When we do, we reaffirm the profession’s mission, promoting the health of communities, and honoring the dignity of every person, family, and community we serve. ■

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