

Opportunities for Addressing the Nursing Crisis in Colombia

Análisis de oportunidades frente a la crisis de la enfermería en Colombia

Análise das oportunidades diante da crise da enfermagem na Colômbia

Claudia Marcela Velásquez Jiménez

Universidad de Ciencias Aplicadas y Ambientales
U.D.C.A, Colombia; Asociación Colombiana
de Facultades de Enfermería, Colombia.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8353-0485>
mvelasquez@udca.edu.co

Dedsy Yajaira Berbesi Fernández

Tribunal Departamental Ético de Enfermería
de la Región Noroccidental, Colombia;
Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Colombia.
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1716-957X>
dedsyberbesi@gmail.com

Keywords (Source: DeCS)

Nursing; nursing staff; nursing care; organization and administration.

Palabras clave (Fuente: DeCS)

Enfermería, Personal de Enfermería, Atención de Enfermería, Organización y Administración.

Palavras-chave (Fonte: DeCS)

Enfermagem; pessoal de enfermagem; cuidados de enfermagem; organização e administração.

DOI: 10.5294/aqui.2026.26.2.7

Para citar este artículo / To reference this article / Para citar este artigo

Velásquez CM, Berbesi DY. Opportunities for addressing the nursing crisis in Colombia. Aquichan. 2026;26(2):e2627. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5294/aqui.2026.26.2.7>

Introduction

Colombia entered 2026 amid a healthcare system crisis that, although not always immediately apparent because of its complexity, is reflected across multiple dimensions and affects all stakeholders within the health sector. This situation directly affects not only the population as a whole but also the safety of individual patients (1).

Numerous academic and technical analyses have documented how sustained underfunding, the financial deterioration of multiple health insurers, intermittent shortages of essential medicines, and limited access to healthcare services across different regions have compromised the healthcare system's capacity to provide timely, high-quality care (2).

These structural conditions have led to significant delays in healthcare delivery, persistent barriers to accessing essential services, and disruptions in the continuity of care, thereby substantially increasing patients' clinical risk. These effects are particularly pronounced among vulnerable populations and in regions with limited healthcare infrastructure, further exacerbating health inequities (3, 4).

Within this context, the situation of the health workforce—particularly that of professional nurses—has remained largely overlooked. Employment precarization, widespread contractual instability, particularly under service-based contracting arrangements, recurrent delays in salary payments, limited recognition of postgraduate qualifications, and increasing clinical workloads have significantly undermined professional nursing practice and adversely affected the functioning of the healthcare system as a whole (5, 6). These challenges have been compounded by a marked decline in the availability of nurses across many healthcare institutions, creating gaps in workforce capacity and the delivery of care (7, 8).

This editorial examines these issues with the aim not only of bringing greater visibility to the current state of professional nursing in Colombia and highlighting the profound, persistent, and largely silent crisis affecting this essential component of the healthcare system, but also of reframing these challenges as opportunities to develop strategies that demonstrate nursing's capacity to lead care management, improve clinical outcomes, and support the transition from predominantly treatment-oriented models of care to more innovative, nursing-led models.

Severe Shortage of Nursing Professionals: Implications for the Colombian Healthcare System

Colombia faces a critical shortage of professional nurses, reflected in a workforce density of only 1.5 nurses per 1000 inhabitants—a fig-

ure approximately six times lower than the average among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, estimated at 9.2 nurses per 1000 inhabitants. An even more revealing indicator of the healthcare system's structural weakness is the imbalance in the relative availability of health-care professionals: Colombia has the lowest nurse-to-physician ratio in Ibero-America, with 1.6 nurses for every five physicians, a proportion that reflects a profound imbalance between the two professions (7).

By contrast, Brazil and several neighboring countries report ratios exceeding two nurses per physician, indicating a more balanced distribution of their clinical workforce. This disparity reinforces the OECD's warning that Colombia lags substantially behind both international standards and other Latin American countries in the availability of professional nurses. In this context, nursing in Colombia may be regarded as an endangered profession (7).

This critical situation is further exacerbated by the government's failure to implement its own policy commitments. Although the National Government adopted the National Policy on Human Talent in Nursing through Resolution 755 of 2022 with the aim of improving working conditions for nursing personnel, promoting high-quality undergraduate and postgraduate education, and strengthening professional leadership through incentive mechanisms, these policy objectives have yet to be translated into effective actions. As a result, structural deficiencies persist, directly affecting both nurses' professional development and the overall performance of the Colombian healthcare system (6).

This lack of government action not only discourages the nursing workforce but also accelerates the migration of nurses to Europe and North America, reflecting a broader global trend that has had a particularly marked impact in Latin America, especially Colombia (9-11). Consequently, the Colombian healthcare system has become increasingly dependent on a fragile workforce structure.

One direct consequence of this situation is the lack of effective retention incentives for professional nurses, prompting many to seek employment abroad while leaving vacancies that health-care institutions increasingly attempt to fill with other categories of health workers. Current data underscore the urgency of this problem. According to the Health Human Resources Observatory (*Observatorio de Talento Humano en Salud* [OTHS]) of the Colombian Ministry of Health, the number of nursing assistants and health technicians increased steadily between 2011 and 2024. Specifically, the number of nursing assistants rose from 166927 in 2011 to 374741 in 2024, an increase of 207814 over the study period (12). These figures highlight the imbalance in the nursing workforce, with only 1.5 professional nurses for every seven nursing assistants per 1000 inhabitants (12). In other words, Colombia faces a profound shortage of professional nurses (13, 14).

Risks Associated with the Shortage of Professional Nurses

The World Health Organization (WHO), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and the International Council of Nurses (ICN) have consistently emphasized that nursing is fundamental to the functioning of healthcare systems and that a workforce with strong scientific and professional preparation is essential to ensuring continuous, safe, humanized, and person-centered care. Consequently, when nursing care is not provided by appropriately qualified professionals, the consequences for patients and healthcare systems can be profound (15).

Ultimately, this shortage directly affects both the quality of healthcare delivery and the realization of the population's right to health. Unless it is addressed through timely and sustained structural interventions, the crisis is likely to deepen, with increasingly serious consequences that could further compromise the health of the population and exacerbate the health inequities that already affect large segments of the country.

Toward a Sustainable Nursing Profession: Proposals and Opportunities to Overcome Current Challenges

Considering this reality, defending the autonomy and professional dignity of nursing provides an opportunity to underscore the profession's essential contribution to society and its fundamental role in ensuring people's right to high-quality healthcare. Achieving this goal requires strengthening the actions already recommended by the International Council of Nurses (ICN) and other international organizations (15, 16):

- Strengthen collaboration among professional nursing organizations, including the National Technical Nursing Council (Consejo Técnico Nacional de Enfermería), the National Association of Nurses of Colombia (ANEC), the Colombian Nursing Association (Organización Colegial de Enfermería, OCE), the National Nursing Ethics Tribunal (Tribunal Nacional de Ética de Enfermería, TNEE), and ACOFAEN, under the leadership of the National Technical Nursing Council. Such collaboration is essential to strengthening the profession's collective voice. Although individual advocacy is valuable, active participation in professional organizations provides the political and social influence needed to promote the structural changes required to ensure safe, high-quality, and dignified nursing care in Colombia. Achieving this goal also requires fostering a culture in which all nursing professionals become active members of and contributors to these organizations, recognizing that only through collective ac-

tion can the profession transform both nursing practice and the work environment.

- Increase the visibility of nursing achievements in Colombia and Latin America through integrated communication and dissemination strategies, including social media, scientific outreach, and policy advocacy targeting both the health sector and decision-makers. This represents a strategic opportunity to strengthen the visibility of nursing's disciplinary development and its contribution to healthcare systems throughout the region. In Colombia, this progress is reflected in the sustained expansion of advanced nursing education through the consolidation of master's and doctoral programs, the growth of nationally recognized research groups, and increasing scientific, social, and technological innovation. These achievements are evidenced by publications in high-impact journals, the development of digital applications, patents, and registered software, as well as advances in nursing-specific theoretical frameworks related to care models, public health, and risk management. Collectively, these developments have strengthened nursing leadership in academic, scientific, social, and policy arenas while expanding the profession's contribution to health policy, innovation in care delivery, and efforts to address social and health inequities.
- Invest in high-quality nursing education. Addressing the current workforce crisis requires expanding investment in the education of professional nurses while strengthening educational pathways for nursing assistants and technicians. These efforts should be accompanied by formal employment opportunities, appropriate professional recognition, and improved working conditions for those responsible for leading nursing care.
- Conduct regular evaluations of the economic impact of high-quality nursing care. Robust evidence is needed to demonstrate that professional nursing care not only improves patients' biopsychosocial well-being but also generates economic value for healthcare institutions. High-quality, efficient, and effective nursing care contributes to better health outcomes while reducing costs associated with preventable adverse events and poor-quality care.
- Strengthen collaboration with government agencies to conduct periodic workforce assessments that support evidence-based planning for the nursing workforce required to meet the healthcare system's current and future needs. This should include implementing public policies that promote nurse retention and enhance the attractiveness of nursing as a career through competitive salaries, fair working conditions, structured career pathways, access to continuing professional development, and comprehensive support for professional well-being.

Conclusion

The shortage of professional nurses, labor precarization, and the migration of qualified nursing personnel pose a direct threat to the sustainability and performance of Colombia's healthcare system and, ultimately, to population health. Nevertheless, Colombia possesses important strengths, including a solid disciplinary foundation, a well-established system of advanced nursing education, and a National Policy on Human Talent in Nursing that must be effectively implemented and translated into meaningful action.

The challenge is to transform the structural conditions that enable nurses to exercise their professional autonomy and fully apply their scientific knowledge and expertise. To achieve this, the healthcare system must capitalize on the high level of preparation of its nursing workforce to redesign a model of care that is more humane, safer, and more sustainable. Nursing represents the intellectual, ethical, and integrative force at the core of the care model that Colombia needs.

References

1. Así Vamos en Salud. Breve contexto del estado de sistema de salud 2026. Boletín 11; 2026. <https://www.asivamosensalud.org/publicaciones/boletines-virtuales/boletin-011-breve-contexto-del-estado-de-sistema-de-salud-2026>
2. Yepes CE, Marín YA. Desafíos del análisis de la situación de salud en Colombia. *Revista Biomédica*. 2018;38(2):162-167. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7705/biomedica.v38io.3594>
3. Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social. Dirección de Epidemiología y Demografía. Análisis de Situación de Salud. Colombia 2024. Bogotá D.C.: Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social; 2024. <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/sites/rid/Lists/BibliotecaDigital/RIDE/VS/ED/PSP/asis-colombia-2024.pdf>
4. Instituto Nacional de Salud. Observatorio Nacional de Salud. Panorama de eventos en salud pública. Décimo cuarto Informe Técnico Especial. Bogotá, D.C.: Instituto Nacional de Salud; 2022.
5. Guerrero Espinel JE, Vélez Álvarez C, Cerezo Correa MDP, Cifuentes Aguirre OL, Padilla Díaz M, Vargas Jaramillo J, et al. Desafíos en recursos humanos para implementar las funciones esenciales en salud pública en Colombia, 2023. *Revista panamericana de salud pública*. 2025;49:e74. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26633/RPSP.2025.74>
6. Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social. Resolución 755 de 2022, por la cual se adopta la Política Nacional de Enfermería. Bogotá: Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social; 2022. https://www.minsalud.gov.co/Normatividad_Nuevo/Resoluci%C3%B3n%20No.%20755%20de%202022.pdf
7. Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económicos (OCDE). Panorama de la salud 2025: Colombia. OECD Publishing; 2025. https://www.oecd.org/es/publications/panorama-de-la-salud-2025_5345f1bd-es/colombia_69cc7719-es.html
8. Colegio Oficial de Enfermería de Madrid (CODEM). El CODEM pone en marcha una campaña contra el intrusismo profesional en Enfermería [Internet]. Madrid: CODEM; s. f. <https://www.codem.es/Adjuntos/CODEM/Documentos/Informaciones/Publico/1eaf185c-c3b7-467d-9a19-d99d421ce778/F43A61BD-oD10-4D99-8491-68739D915684/a11c9066-b43b-4dc4-bc9c-06fb-6060f8b4/a11c9066-b43b-4dc4-bc9c-06fb6060f8b4.pdf>
9. Vargas Rojas SA. Migración de enfermeros colombianos a Alemania, un fenómeno que va en aumento. *Periódico UNAL*. 31 de octubre de 2023. <https://periodico.unal.edu.co/articulos/migracion-de-enfermeros-colombianos-a-alemania-un-fenomeno-que-va-en-aumento>
10. Hughes F. Nursing shortage and migration: the benefits and responsibilities. CGFNS International; 2020. <https://www.cgfns.org/nursing-shortage-and-migration-the-benefits-and-responsibilities/>
11. International Council of Nurses (ICN). Movilidad profesional internacional y contratación ética de enfermeras [Internet]. Ginebra: ICN; 2023. https://www.icn.ch/sites/default/files/2023-04/PS_C_International%20career%20mobility%20and%20ethical%20nurse%20recruitment_Sp.pdf
12. Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social. Demografía. Análisis de Situación de Salud. Colombia, 2022 [Internet]. Bogotá D.C.: Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social; 2023. <https://www.minsalud.gov.co/sites/rid/Lists/BibliotecaDigital/RIDE/VS/ED/PSP/asis-colombia-2022.pdf>
13. Congreso de Colombia. Ley 911 de 2004. Diario Oficial No. 45.693, 6 de octubre de 2004. http://secretariassenado.gov.co/senado/basedoc/ley_0911_2004.html
14. Aiken LH, Sloane DM, Bruyneel L, Van den Heede K, Griffiths P, Busse R, et al. RN4CAST consortium. Nurse staffing and education and hospital mortality in nine European countries: a retrospective observational study. *Lancet*. 2014;383(9931):1824-30. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(13\)62631-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)62631-8)
15. International Council of Nurses. Recover to Rebuild: Investing in the Nursing Workforce for Health System Effectiveness [Internet]. Geneva: ICN; March 2023. https://www.icn.ch/sites/default/files/2023-07/ICN_Recover-to-Rebuild_report_EN.pdf
16. All Party-Parliamentary Group on Global Health. Triple Impact: How developing nursing will improve health, promote gender equality and support economic growth [Internet]. 2016. <https://www.globalhealthpartnerships.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/DIGITAL-APPG-Triple-Impact-3.pdf>