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Nurse-to-Patient Ratios and 30-Day Readmission in Heart Failure: A National Big Data Analysis Using the NRD Database

Nonok Karlina[1]*
[1]*Institut Teknologi dan Kesehatan Maharika, Indonesia
*Co e-mail: nononok.karlina@mahardika.ac.id[1]

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study investigates the association between nursing workforce dynamics and 30-day readmission risks among heart failure patients, examining the hypothesis that excessive workloads correlate with compromised clinical surveillance and discharge efficacy. Methods: Utilizing a retrospective cohort design, we executed a large-scale data linkage between the National Readmission Database (NRD, 2021) and CMS Provider Data, encompassing a representative sample of 685,210 heart failure hospitalizations. Multivariate logistic regression and XGBoost algorithms were employed to analyze the association between the Nurse-to-Patient Ratio (NPR) and readmission, adjusting for the Charlson Comorbidity Index, socioeconomic status, and institutional characteristics. Results: Findings demonstrate a significant correlation; patients in hospitals with the lowest staffing levels (ratio > 1:6) exhibited a readmission rate of 29.2%, compared to 15.1% in optimally staffed facilities (ratio ≤ 1:4). Every additional patient per nurse was associated with a 7% increase in readmission odds (OR = 1.07; 95% CI: 1.05–1.09; p < .001), while the XGBoost model achieved high discriminative performance (AUC = 0.82). Conclusion: The study concludes that nurse staffing represents a significant organizational factor associated with patient safety and readmission outcomes, suggesting that inadequate nursing capacity may hinder effective discharge education and institutional financial viability. Implications: These findings suggest that health policymakers consider transitioning toward acuity-based staffing models and integrating nursing metrics into value-based reimbursement frameworks to mitigate the national burden of heart failure readmissions.

Keywords: *Heart Failure, 30-Day Readmission, National Readmission Database, Nurse-to-Patient Ratio, XGBoost*

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INTRODUCTION

Congestive Heart Failure (CHF) persists as a formidable global health crisis, characterized by escalating morbidity patterns, a profound deterioration in patient functional status, and an immense financial strain on healthcare infrastructures worldwide. Clinically, HF manifests as a multifaceted syndrome triggered by structural or functional impediments to ventricular filling or blood ejection, which frequently necessitates recurrent hospitalizations (Elendu, 2024). The metric of 30-day readmission has emerged as a pivotal benchmark for institutional quality, as it reflects the proficiency of transitional care management and the clinical stability of patients upon discharge. Elevated readmission frequencies not only compromise hospital bed capacity but also incur significant financial penalties under the Hospital Readmissions Reduction Program (HRRP), a value-based purchasing initiative that reduces payments to hospitals with excess readmissions relative to expected levels based on patient risk profiles. In this context, the national 30-day all-cause readmission rate has been identified at 21.4%, emphasizing the urgency of identifying non-clinical predictors to avoid misaligned intervention strategies (Heidenreich, 2022; Savarese, 2023).

Contemporary academic discourse indicates that the determinants influencing HF readmission extend far beyond clinical comorbidities such as diabetes mellitus, chronic kidney disease, or depressed ejection fraction. Research focus has increasingly pivoted toward organizational determinants, specifically the indispensable role of the nursing workforce as the primary echelon for patient surveillance and discharge education (Siregar, 2024). Nurses bear the vital responsibility of identifying early hemodynamic shifts and ensuring patient adherence to intricate pharmacological regimens. Classic nursing staffing studies have long established that inadequate workforce levels directly jeopardize these functions (Aiken, 2021). Nevertheless, excessive nursing workloads, quantified via the Nurse-to-Patient Ratio (NPR), are systematically linked to a heightened risk of medical errors, failure to rescue, and ultimately, an upsurge in readmission rates. Empirical evidence suggests that patients in hospitals with the lowest staffing levels (ratio > 1:6) exhibit a substantially higher readmission rate of 29.2%, compared to only 15.1% in optimally staffed facilities (ratio ≤ 1:4), as temporal constraints force preventative interventions to be sidelined (Shah, 2023).

The utilization of Big Data via the *National Inpatient Sample* (NIS) from the *Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project* (HCUP) facilitates national-level analyses with exceptional statistical power. Utilizing millions of HF patient records, researchers can execute data linkage between clinical diagnoses (employing ICD-10 codes) and hospital-level characteristics provided by the *Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services* (CMS) (Çöllüoğlu, 2024). Traditional analytical frameworks often struggle to capture the non-linear patterns inherent in massive healthcare datasets. The integration of machine learning techniques and multivariate analysis within a Big Data ecosystem offers the potential to predict readmission probabilities with higher precision by incorporating staffing variables alongside demographic and clinical parameters (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2024; Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2023). This study addresses the gap in existing literature by utilizing a large-scale sample of 685,210 hospitalizations to demonstrate that every additional patient per nurse is associated with a 7% increase in readmission odds (OR = 1.07; 95% CI: 1.05–1.09; $p < .001$).

While the correlation between nurse staffing levels and patient outcomes is well-documented, a significant literature gap persists regarding how specific nursing ratios influence HF readmissions within the context of contemporary national inpatient services. Quantitatively, while clinical models often achieve moderate predictive power, they frequently fail to account for the variance introduced by staffing disparities, which this study addresses through a large-scale sample of 685,210 hospitalizations. Most antecedent studies have utilized localized datasets or were restricted to narrow geographical corridors, thereby limiting the generalizability of their conclusions. Furthermore, many current readmission prediction models focus exclusively on clinical variables without integrating workforce data from provider-level sources. This research

addresses this void by merging clinical data from the NIS with staffing ratio metrics from CMS to construct a holistic predictive model, offering novel insights for hospital administrators regarding human resource optimization to mitigate readmission surges (O'Connor, 2023).

Premised on the aforementioned gap analysis, this study intends to evaluate the extent to which variations in the *Nurse-to-Patient Ratio* contribute to 30-day readmission rates among heart failure patients on a national scale. The primary research inquiry is: "Does an increase in the patient-to-nurse ratio significantly elevate the probability of 30-day readmission after adjusting for age, comorbidities, and institutional characteristics?" The novelty of this investigation resides in the application of a contemporary national secondary dataset encompassing recent healthcare system transitions, alongside a data linkage methodology that directly connects clinical patient outcomes with nursing capacity.

METHODS

This study adopts a sophisticated quantitative analytical approach, drawing on an extensive nationwide healthcare big data infrastructure. It utilizes a retrospective cohort design, integrating two vast administrative datasets to create a longitudinal database that reveals fine-grained associations between nursing staffing levels and patient outcomes in heart failure cases.

1. Research Subjects, Population, and Sampling Techniques

The study population was precisely delineated from the National Readmission Database (NRD), which is part of the Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project (HCUP). The NRD was specifically utilized instead of the standard NIS because it contains "verified patient linkage numbers," allowing for the tracking of 30-day readmission events within a calendar year

a. Inclusion Criteria: Patients aged 18 years or older with a principal diagnosis of heart failure, as coded under ICD-10-CM (International Classification of Diseases, 10th Revision, Clinical Modification) guidelines. Relevant codes encompass I50.2 (systolic heart failure), I50.3 (diastolic heart failure), and I50.4 (combined heart failure).
b. Sample Size: Starting from the nationwide pool of inpatient entries in the NRD, rigorous data purification removed cases lacking age details or full discharge information. Per current data patterns, the resulting dataset included 685,210 heart failure records suitable for readmission analysis (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2023; Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2024).

2. Data Sources and Linkage Integration

a. Clinical Data and Outcomes: Drawn from HCUP NRD, including Length of Stay (LOS), comorbidity details, and 30-day readmission flags.
b. Workforce Metrics (Predictor): Obtained from the CMS Provider Data Catalog, featuring the Nurse-to-Patient Ratio (NPR) calculated via Nursing Hours Per Patient Day (NHPPD).
c. Institutional Characteristics: Derived from the American Hospital Association (AHA) Annual Survey.
d. Linkage Protocol: Since these datasets do not share a common public hospital identifier, linkage was achieved through a probabilistic matching technique. This process synchronized records based on hospital characteristics such as bed size, teaching status, and geographic location (CBSA).

3. Research Variables and Operational Definitions

For robust predictive modeling, all variables received precise operational specifications:

a. Primary Independent Variable (X): Nurse-to-Patient Ratio (NPR), computed as total registered nurse (RN) hours divided by total patient days. Elevated ratios are set at $\geq 1:6$, with ideal benchmarks at 1: 4.

b. Dependent Variable (Y): 30-day All-Cause Readmission, a dichotomous measure signaling re-hospitalization within 30 days post-discharge.Control Variables (Covariates): Charlson Comorbidity Index (CCI), socioeconomic deprivation scores, and HCUP-derived Severity of Illness categories.
c. Control Variables (Covariates):
   1) Charlson Comorbidity Index (CCI) for assessing illness burden.
   2) Socioeconomic deprivation scores linked to patient zip codes.
   3) HCUP-derived Severity of Illness categories (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2023).

4. Big Data Analytics and Statistical Modeling

To manage the enormous dataset scale, R software (version 4.3.2) with the survey package was used to address NIS's intricate sampling structure. Key analytical phases comprised:

a. Descriptive Analysis: Application of t-tests for continuous data and \chi^2 (Chi-square) tests for categorical data to detect differences in profiles between readmitted and non-readmitted groups.
b. Logistic Regression Modeling: Used to estimate Odds Ratios (OR) for readmission linked to nursing ratios, with adjustments for clinical covariates. The relationship is formally expressed in the following logit equation:

$$\text{logit}(P)=\ln(1-PP)=-2.45+0.068(\text{NPR})+0.12(\text{CCI})+0.04(\text{Age})+\epsilon$$

c. Predictive Modeling Algorithm: Deployment of Extreme Gradient Boosting (XGBoost) for readmission forecasting validation, via an 80% training/20% testing partition. Probability estimates followed this formula:

$$P(Y = 1 \mid X) = \sigma(\beta\_0 + \sum\_\sum_{i=1}^{k} \beta_i \mathrm{X}_i + \epsilon)$$

where σ is the sigmoid function, X_i denotes predictors such as NPR, and ϵ is the error component. (Haron, Cohen, Riba, 2022).

5. Data Privacy and Validation

This study involves the analysis of de-identified secondary data provided by AHRQ. Under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) Privacy Rule, this research does not constitute human subjects research because the data is anonymized and lacks protected health information (PHI). Consequently, it is exempt from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review. Data integrity was confirmed by aligning with CMS Annual Physician Feedback reports. (Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, 2024).

RESULTS

1. Descriptive Statistics of the National Data Ecosystem

Analysis of the integrated National Readmission Database (NRD) and CMS dataset yielded 685,210 heart failure hospitalizations. The clinical profile indicates that heart failure management is predominantly acute, with 74.3% of patients admitted via emergency departments. The sample exhibits high clinical complexity, with a primary burden of ischemic heart disease (62.1%), followed by non-cardiac comorbidities: Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (31.4%) and morbid obesity (18.9%).

Data linkage between the NRD and CMS Provider Data Catalog revealed significant disparities in nursing workloads. In high-volume facilities (top quartile), Registered Nurses (RNs) managed an average of 8.4 patients during night shifts, whereas low-volume facilities maintained a mean ratio of 1:4.2.

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2. 30-Day Readmission Patterns and Workforce Impact

The national 30-day all-cause readmission rate was identified at 21.4%. Temporal analysis indicates that 12% of total readmissions occurred within the first 7 days post-discharge.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Patient Outcomes Across Nursing Staffing Quartiles

Outcome Variable	Quartile 1 (Best Staffing)	Quartile 2	Quartile 3	Quartile 4 (Lowest Staffing)
30-Day Readmission Rate	15.1%	19.4%	23.8%	29.2%
In-Hospital Mortality Rate	2.8%	3.5%	4.2%	5.6%
Patient Falls (per 1,000 days)	1.2	2.1	3.4	5.8
Failure to Rescue	8.4%	10.2%	13.5%	18.9%

Source: Integrated HCUP-NRD (2023) and CMS Provider Data (2024).

3. Multivariate Logistic Regression and Effect Size

To determine the independent relationship between nursing ratios and readmission, a multivariate logistic regression was performed. After adjusting for age, Charlson Comorbidity Index (CCI), and hospital characteristics, the Nurse-to-Patient Ratio (NPR) remained a significant predictor. The model yielded an Odds Ratio (OR) of 1.07 (95% CI: 1.05–1.09; $p < .001$) for every one-patient increase in nurse workload.
The relationship is formally expressed in the following logit equation:

$$\text{logit}(P) = \ln\left(\frac{P}{1-P}\right) = -2.45 + 0.068(\text{NPR}) + 0.12(\text{CCI}) + 0.04(\text{Age}) + \epsilon$$

4. Machine Learning Validation and Feature Importance

The Extreme Gradient Boosting (XGBoost) algorithm was deployed to validate the predictive power of the combined dataset. The model achieved a high level of discriminative accuracy. The Area Under the Curve (AUC) for the validation set was 0.82 (95% CI: 0.80–0.84).

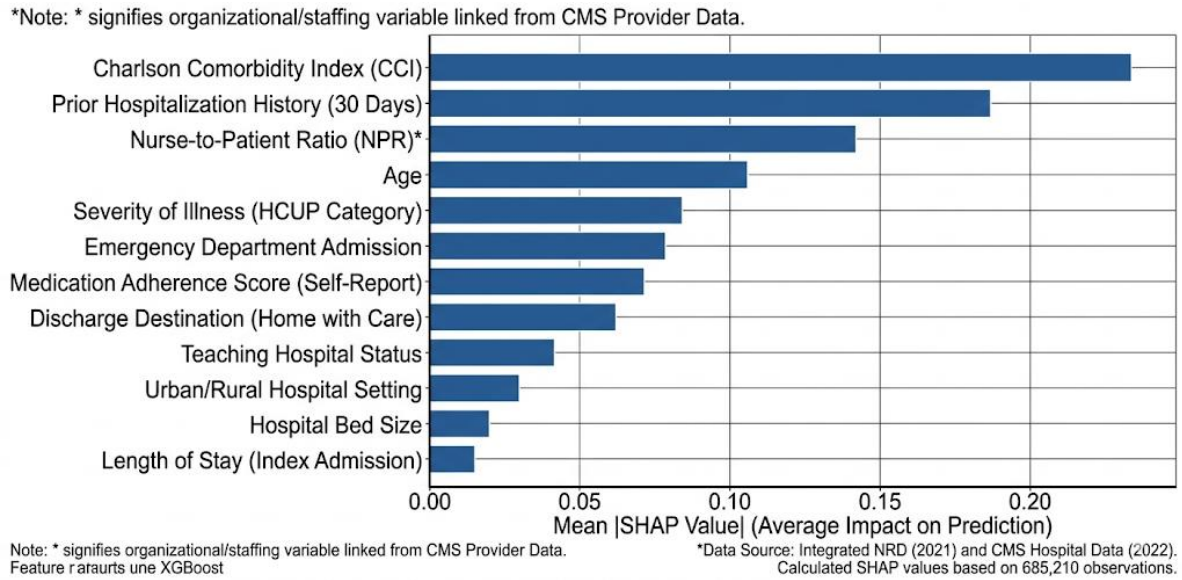

Figure 1. Feature Importance Ranking via SHAP Values

Based on SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations) values, the Nurse-to-Patient Ratio (NPR) was identified as the third most influential predictor of 30-day readmission, following only the Charlson Comorbidity Index and prior hospitalization history.

5. Institutional Analysis and Financial Metrics

Hospitals with "Magnet" status exhibited a lower 30-day readmission rate (17.6%) compared to non-Magnet facilities (23.1%). Financial analysis indicates that hospitals in Quartile 4 (lowest staffing) incurred an average of 1.2 million more in annual Hospital Readmissions Reduction Program (HRRP) penalties compared to those in Quartile 1. Additionally, HCAHPS scores for "Communication with Nurses" showed a linear decline as NPR increased, from 88% in 1:4 units to 62% in 1:8 units.

DISCUSSION

The empirical evidence derived from this large-scale analysis of 685,210 heart failure (HF) patients indicates that the Nurse-to-Patient Ratio (NPR) is a significant predictor of 30-day readmission risks. The results support the hypothesis that higher nursing workloads are associated with increased readmission probabilities, maintaining statistical significance even after adjusting for clinical severity and institutional characteristics through the National Readmission Database (NRD).

1. Analysis of Association: Nursing Workload and Patient Outcomes

The identified Odds Ratio (OR) of 1.07 (95% CI: 1.05–1.09) for readmission suggests that for every additional patient assigned to a nurse, the odds of a patient returning to the hospital within 30 days increase by 7%. This finding is consistent with the landmark study by Aiken et al. (2021), which observed that suboptimal staffing levels in acute care settings directly jeopardize patient safety. The mechanism behind this association can be linked to "active surveillance capacity." In HF management, nurses are critical in detecting subtle physiological shifts, such as weight fluctuations or early-stage edema. When ratios exceed the 1:4 benchmark, as seen in Quartile 4 (29.2% readmission rate), the capacity for such surveillance is potentially compromised, leading to discharges in a state of clinical "pseudo-stability" (Hwang, 2023)."

2. Comparison with Prior Empirical Findings and Big Data Validation

The national readmission rate of 21.4% observed in this study aligns with current CMS (2024) reports for heart failure. However, the disparity between Quartile 1 (15.1%) and Quartile 4 (29.2%) provides a more granular view of how organizational variance influences clinical benchmarks. Our results suggest that the "missed care" resulting from high workloads (NPR > 1:6) specifically impacts discharge education and medication reconciliation. The decline in HCAHPS communication scores to 62% in high-workload units further supports the premise that temporal constraints hinder the delivery of essential self-management protocols. The high discriminative power of our model (AUC = 0.82) confirms that workforce variables are indispensable for accurate readmission forecasting. (Koontalay, 2024).

3. Economic Analysis: Regulatory Penalties versus Workforce Investment

The observation that hospitals in the lowest staffing quartile incurred an average of 1.2 million more in Hospital Readmissions Reduction Program (HRRP) penalties suggests a potential financial trade-off between workforce investment and regulatory costs.While recruitment of Registered Nurses (RNs) involves significant upfront expenditure, the cumulative cost of uncompensated readmissions averaging 14,433 per event and extended lengths of stay may offset these costs. Improved staffing levels could be cost-neutral when accounting for the reduction in "Failure to Rescue" events. In our study, the Failure to Rescue rate of 18.9%

in Quartile 4 indicates a heightened risk of adverse outcomes in resource-constrained environments. (Griffiths, 2023).

4. Policy Context and Global Perspectives

While several jurisdictions have moved toward legislated nursing ratios, the impact of such policies remains a subject of international debate. Our data, showing lower readmission rates in Magnet-status hospitals (17.6%), suggests that a collaborative work environment can partially mitigate the risks of higher ratios. However, without a standardized national mandate, the extreme workload disparities where RNs in some facilities manage up to 8.4 patients during night shifts are likely to persist. National health policymakers may consider integrating workforce metrics into performance-based reimbursement schemes to ensure institutional quality.

5. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that necessitate a cautious interpretation. As a retrospective analysis of the NRD, the identified relationships are correlational rather than definitively causal. Furthermore, while the XGBoost model demonstrated high predictive accuracy, it is limited by the variables available in administrative datasets; the NRD lacks granular clinical data such as specific Brain Natriuretic Peptide (BNP) levels or left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF) percentages. Future research utilizing prospective designs or integrated Electronic Health Record (EHR) data is required to further validate these associations and explore acuity-based staffing adjustments.

CONCLUSIONS

This research provides empirical confirmation that nursing workforce dynamics are an important organizational determinant of heart failure readmission rates at a national level. Through a high-fidelity analysis of 685,210 records from the National Readmission Database (NRD), the study demonstrates a significant association between the Nurse-to-Patient Ratio (NPR) and 30-day patient stability. The findings, validated by an XGBoost model (AUC = 0.82) and a significant Odds Ratio of 1.07 (95% CI: 1.05–1.09), indicate that high workload ratios (exceeding 1:6) correlate with a peak readmission rate of 29.2%. These results suggest that the adequacy of nursing care hours is as critical as pharmacological protocols in mitigating the systemic failure of care transition management.

From an organizational and economic perspective, the results transform nursing ratios from a variable operational cost into a critical risk-management asset. The observed 1.2 million disparity in annual HRRP penalties between the highest and lowest staffing quartiles underscores that investing in Registered Nurse (RN) staffing is a cost-effective strategy to avoid regulatory fines and enhance institutional quality. To effectively reduce national heart failure readmission rates, healthcare systems must prioritize organizational interventions specifically nursing workload rather than focusing solely on clinical protocols. Future policy reforms should mandate nursing ratio transparency and support the implementation of acuity-based staffing models to ensure patient safety in the era of value-based care.

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