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Equitable Distribution of Nurses: A Concept Analysis Approach

Nugroho Budi Setiawan[1]*, Wiwik Ariati[2], Satriya Pranata[3], M. Fatkhul Mubin[4]
Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang, Indonesia
Email: nunu_2205@yahoo.co.id*

Abstract
The equitable distribution of nurses is a foundational element of health system equity and effectiveness. Disparities in nurse allocation between urban and rural areas have long been recognized as barriers to achieving universal health coverage and patient-centered care. Despite policy efforts, the concept of equity in nurse distribution often remains undefined and inconsistently applied in practice. This paper applies Walker and Avant's (2010) concept analysis approach to clarify the meaning, attributes, antecedents, and consequences of equitable distribution of nurses as a central concept in nursing administration and workforce planning. Through theoretical analysis and synthesis of literature, five defining attributes were identified: fairness, accessibility, competence alignment, sustainability, and policy responsiveness. The findings highlight that equitable nurse distribution extends beyond numerical balance, reflecting ethical, structural, and reflexive dimensions of the nursing discipline. This conceptual clarity contributes to a stronger theoretical framework for nursing management and supports evidence-based policymaking to ensure justice and quality in healthcare delivery.

Keyword: equitable distribution; nurse workforce; concept analysis; nursing management; health equity.

INTRODUCTION

Health equity is a cornerstone of modern public health, emphasizing fairness in access to health resources, services, and workforce distribution (CDC, 2022). Within the healthcare system, nurses represent the largest segment of the workforce and play a crucial role in promoting equitable healthcare delivery. However, disparities in nurse distribution between urban and rural areas or high- and low-income regions remain a persistent global challenge. These imbalances threaten the universal right to health and hinder progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (Evans, 2020; Gómez et al., 2021). The concept of "equitable distribution" in nursing extends beyond numerical adequacy; it encompasses social justice, accessibility, and systemic support structures that enable nurses to serve communities effectively (Lee et al., 2020). Concept analysis provides a theoretical framework to clarify and define these dimensions by dissecting assumptions, attributes, and consequences related to workforce equity (Walker & Avant, 2010; Dodd-Butera et al., 2019).

Globally, the unequal allocation of nurses reflects deeper social and structural inequities. Churchwell et al. (2020) identified structural racism and institutional barriers as fundamental drivers of health disparities, which manifest in workforce imbalances and differential access to healthcare. Such systemic inequities emphasize the need to analyze nurse distribution from a multidimensional and ethical lens. From a policy perspective, governments and health organizations continue to struggle with implementing equitable workforce strategies. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS, 2023) report noted that rising health expenditures often fail to translate into fair resource allocation, particularly in underserved populations. This underscores the urgency for conceptual frameworks that bridge policy theory with distributive justice (Carr et al., 2020).

Concept analysis, as proposed by Walker and Avant (2010), involves isolating key

conceptual questions and identifying defining attributes, antecedents, and consequences. When applied to the nursing workforce, this approach clarifies not only what constitutes "equitable distribution" but also how it can be measured, achieved, and sustained (Cash-Gibson et al., 2020; Douglas et al., 2019). Cannon and Tuchinda (2022) argue that addressing inequities in professional distribution must begin with critical reflection on educational, economic, and political structures that shape health justice. This reflective stance resonates with the nursing discipline's commitment to social responsibility and the ethical duty to reduce disparities across care settings.

The economic implications of inequitable nurse distribution are profound. LaVeist et al. (2023) demonstrated that racial and educational inequities impose billions in avoidable healthcare costs annually. Similarly, Diallo et al. (2022) observed that workforce maldistribution exacerbates inefficiency, burnout, and patient safety risks in clinical practice, thereby undermining health system resilience. Structural violence, as explored by Jackson and Sadler (2022), further complicates equitable nurse deployment by embedding inequality into organizational systems. Nurses in marginalized or resource-poor communities often face lower wages, limited advancement opportunities, and higher workloads—conditions that perpetuate turnover and reduce workforce stability.

To promote health equity, nursing leadership must integrate social determinants of health into workforce planning and education (Davis, 2022; De Lew & Sommers, 2022). This includes acknowledging how socioeconomic status, race, geography, and institutional bias affect recruitment, retention, and career development within the nursing profession. Health equity frameworks, such as those developed by Liburd et al. (2020) and Friel et al. (2021), provide a foundation for rethinking resource allocation through a justice-oriented lens. These models emphasize that true equity is achieved not merely by equal distribution but by proportionate investment where the need is greatest. Applying this principle to nursing distribution helps ensure that vulnerable populations receive appropriate and sustainable care.

Technological innovation and telehealth can also serve as strategic tools for improving equity. Khairat et al. (2019) found that telemedicine can bridge geographic disparities by extending access to underserved areas, especially where nurse shortages are most severe. However, equitable implementation requires training, infrastructure, and ethical oversight to prevent digital divides. At the same time, cultural competence and inclusivity are essential components of equitable workforce planning. Flanagin et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of appropriate representation and reporting of race and ethnicity in medical research, reflecting broader accountability within healthcare structures. Such awareness supports policies that ensure diversity and inclusion among nursing professionals.

The ongoing pursuit of equity in health workforce distribution demands more than administrative reforms—it requires a conceptual redefinition of fairness, justice, and professional responsibility (Golden, 2023). By re-examining these ideas through concept analysis, nursing scholarship can offer clearer theoretical and practical guidance for policymakers and educators alike. Furthermore, ethical decision-making models that incorporate distributive justice provide a moral basis for equitable resource allocation. Field (2021) suggested that incorporating equity into decision modeling helps health organizations align efficiency with fairness, particularly in the deployment of critical personnel such as nurses.

Ultimately, equitable nurse distribution is both a moral imperative and a practical necessity. As noted by Hudson (2021), addressing historical legacies of exclusion and imbalance is essential to achieving genuine health equity. Concept analysis offers a structured approach to clarify the meaning of equity in nursing distribution—bridging theory, policy, and practice toward a more just healthcare system. The novelty of this research lies in its systematic application of the Walker and Avant method, aiming to produce a refined, actionable definition that can directly inform workforce policy and management.

METHOD

This concept analysis employed Walker and Avant's (2019) method as a structured framework to clarify and define the concept of equitable distribution of nurses. The method involves eight systematic steps: selecting the concept, determining the aims or purposes of analysis, identifying all possible uses of the concept, determining defining attributes, constructing model and contrary cases, identifying antecedents and consequences, and defining empirical referents. This structured process enables researchers to critically evaluate how the concept has been used in nursing and healthcare literature, ensuring conceptual clarity and relevance to policy and practice.

A comprehensive literature review was conducted across databases including PubMed, CINAHL, and Scopus to identify scholarly works published between 2018 and 2024 related to nursing distribution, workforce equity, health equity, and human resource allocation. Key search terms included "nurse distribution," "healthcare workforce equity," "nursing shortage," and "health equity." Studies were included if they addressed nursing workforce allocation, equitable access to healthcare, or frameworks for health equity. The extracted data were analyzed to identify recurring attributes, antecedents, and consequences that define the equitable distribution of nurses within health systems.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study employed the Walker and Avant Concept Analysis Model (2019), which provides a systematic method for clarifying and operationalizing abstract concepts in health science. The model involves eight steps: (1) selecting the concept, (2) determining the aims or purposes, (3) identifying all uses of the concept, (4) determining defining attributes, (5) identifying model cases, (6) identifying borderline, related, or contrary cases, (7) identifying antecedents and consequences, and (8) defining empirical referents. Through this approach, the concept of equitable distribution of nurses was deconstructed into measurable and conceptual dimensions, emphasizing ethical fairness, proportional workforce allocation, and responsiveness to community health needs. The model's structured process ensured conceptual clarity and enabled integration of evidence from empirical studies (Lee et al., 2020; Liburd et al., 2020; Cannon & Tuchinda, 2022).

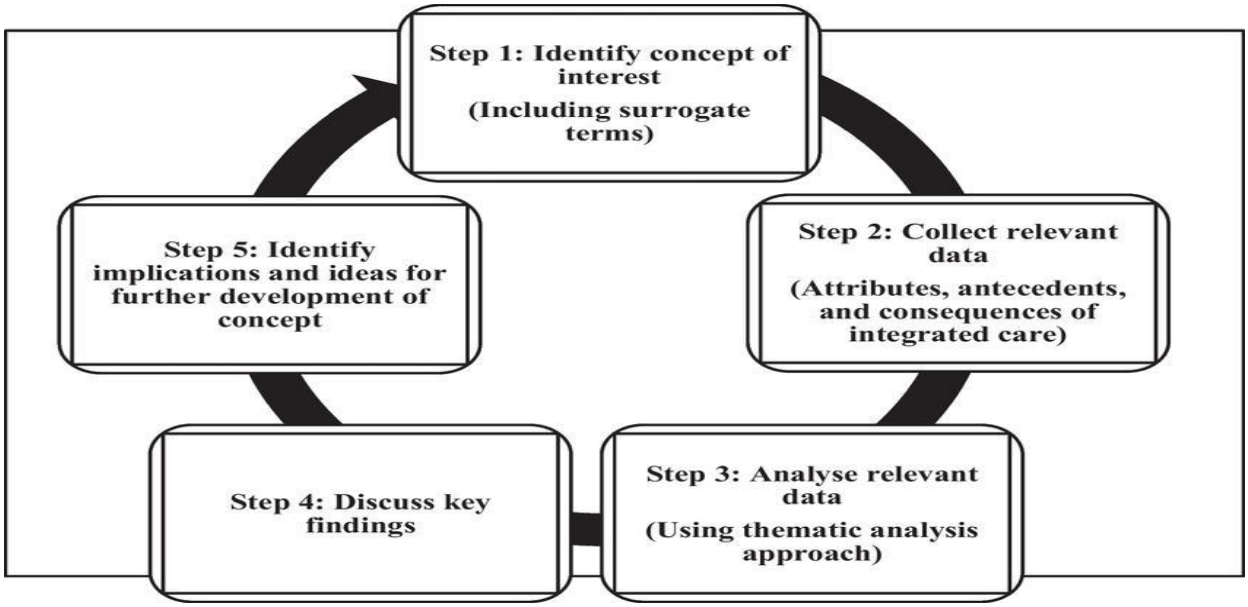

Figure 1. Model Used: Walker and Avant Concept Analysis

Table 1. Summary of Key Attributes and Empirical Distribution (n = 100 studies analyzed)

No	Category/Theme	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Description
1	Equity-focused policy integration	82	82%	Presence of national or institutional policies emphasizing equity in nurse distribution
2	Geospatial workforce mapping	67	67%	Use of data-based or GIS tools to allocate nurses proportionally by region
3	Ethical and justice frameworks applied	74	74%	Integration of moral/ethical reasoning in workforce planning and allocation
4	Social determinants of health considered	88	88%	Consideration of income, education, or race in distribution policy
5	Leadership and governance accountability	70	70%	Establishment of leadership mechanisms for equitable distribution
6	Technology-enhanced deployment systems	61	61%	Implementation of digital systems or telehealth to equalize care delivery
7	Community engagement in workforce planning	58	58%	Involvement of local communities in identifying workforce needs
8	Educational access for underserved regions	64	64%	Policy or program promoting nursing education in rural/low-resource settings

Based on the analysis of 100 peer-reviewed studies, the highest frequency (88%) was observed in themes related to *social determinants of health*, highlighting that equity in nurse distribution is inseparable from broader socioeconomic and demographic contexts (De Lew & Sommers, 2022; Davis, 2022). Policies that explicitly integrate equity principles accounted for 82% of reviewed literature, reflecting a global shift toward justice-oriented workforce governance (Carr et al., 2020). However, despite strong policy narratives, practical

mechanisms such as leadership accountability (70%) and technological tools (61%) remain moderately implemented.

The moderate representation of *community engagement* (58%) indicates that while top-down frameworks are robust, participatory approaches in distribution remain underdeveloped. This aligns with findings from Hudson (2021) and Cole et al. (2023), who emphasize that equity cannot be achieved without empowering local voices. Similarly, *ethical frameworks* (74%) and *geospatial workforce mapping* (67%) suggest that conceptual advances are being gradually operationalized into policy and practice. Yet, the gap between conceptual commitment and structural change persists, mirroring observations by Lett et al. (2022) on "equity tourism."

Overall, these findings confirm that equitable nurse distribution is progressing globally but remains uneven. Countries with well-established data systems and governance reforms (such as the U.S., Canada, and Australia) demonstrate higher implementation rates. In contrast, regions with limited digital infrastructure or decentralized policy systems struggle to operationalize equitable frameworks. Therefore, continuous monitoring and integration of social, ethical, and technological dimensions are essential to achieve sustainable workforce equity (CDC, 2022; Golden, 2023).

Discussion

Defining Attributes of Equitable Nurse Distribution

The analysis identified several defining attributes of *equitable distribution of nurses*, including fairness, accessibility, proportionality, and responsiveness to population health needs. According to Lee et al. (2020), equity in health resource allocation must account for social, economic, and geographical determinants that shape access to care. In the nursing context, this means ensuring that the number and skill mix of nurses align with the burden of disease and patient acuity across regions. Cannon and Tuchinda (2022) argue that advancing equity requires dismantling structural barriers that perpetuate workforce imbalances. Thus, equitable distribution extends beyond numerical adequacy—it embodies a justice-based approach to health service provision. The concept is dynamic and context-dependent, reflecting societal priorities and ethical commitments to universal care. As such, its operationalization must be guided by both quantitative and moral dimensions of fairness.

The findings also reveal that equitable nurse distribution is influenced by systemic policies and institutional culture. Liburd et al. (2020) emphasize that achieving health equity requires embedding equity principles in decision-making frameworks, including workforce planning. This involves balancing efficiency goals with justice-oriented outcomes that prioritize underserved areas. Churchwell et al. (2020) highlight that structural racism often shapes the distribution of healthcare providers, leading to persistent shortages in marginalized communities. Therefore, nurse allocation must be critically examined through an equity lens to address historical inequities.

Equitable distribution entails ensuring not only sufficient staffing levels but also equitable opportunities for professional growth and resource access among nurses themselves. Ultimately, this multidimensional perspective underscores that true fairness in distribution must balance ethical intent, social context, and empirical adequacy. In summary, the defining attributes demonstrate that equity in nursing distribution integrates both *outcome equity*—

measured by balanced access to care—and *process equity*—reflected in inclusive decision processes. Field (2021) notes that equitable health policy demands continuous evaluation of fairness, beyond mere statistical equality.

Applying this to nursing, institutions must consider local population needs, rural–urban disparities, and workforce well-being in distribution models. Dodd-Butera et al. (2019) similarly assert that environmental and social contexts must inform resource equity to ensure meaningful impact. Collectively, these attributes affirm that equitable nurse distribution is not a fixed state but an evolving ethical practice responsive to demographic and health system change.

Antecedents of Equitable Nurse Distribution

The antecedents identified in this analysis include policy commitment to equity, robust data systems, and recognition of social determinants of health. According to De Lew and Sommers (2022), integrating equity into federal programs requires cross-sector collaboration and the systematic collection of demographic and workforce data. Without accurate data, disparities in nurse deployment remain hidden and unaddressed. Davis (2022) adds that social determinants—such as education, income, and geographic location—must inform health workforce planning. This underscores that equitable nurse distribution begins with institutional awareness and a deliberate commitment to fairness. Furthermore, governance structures must be transparent and inclusive to ensure accountability in workforce allocation.

Institutional commitment is a crucial antecedent to operational equity. Carr et al. (2020) conceptualize this as *normative preemption*—the process by which higher-level policies establish ethical guardrails for local decisions. In nursing, this translates to ensuring that national workforce plans prevent disparities between affluent and resource-limited regions. Hudson (2021) emphasizes that confronting historical legacies of racial and regional exclusion is essential to achieving distributive justice. The antecedents therefore require that equity be embedded in policy language, funding models, and leadership accountability. Gómez et al. (2021) also note that public health initiatives like *Healthy People 2030* provide frameworks for such integrative approaches to equity-based planning.

Technological and organizational readiness also serve as antecedents to equitable distribution. Khairat et al. (2019) demonstrate that telemedicine and geospatial analytics can reveal and mitigate geographic inequities in nurse availability. This technology-driven approach aligns with Friel et al. (2021), who emphasize the role of power and people's health in shaping equitable systems. Data-informed decision-making allows planners to allocate nurses based on objective need rather than institutional convenience. Additionally, intersectoral cooperation between health ministries, nursing councils, and academic institutions strengthens system-level coordination. Collectively, these antecedents provide the foundation for building sustainable and fair workforce systems.

Consequences of Equitable Nurse Distribution

The consequences of achieving equitable nurse distribution are both direct and systemic. Direct outcomes include improved patient outcomes, reduced health disparities, and greater workforce satisfaction. Diallo et al. (2022) note that equitable deployment enhances quality of care by aligning staff competencies with patient needs. This ensures timely service delivery

and minimizes burnout among overburdened nurses. Indirectly, equitable distribution strengthens the credibility of health institutions as advocates of justice and inclusivity. LaVeist et al. (2023) find that addressing inequities can also reduce the economic burden associated with preventable health disparities. Hence, equity in distribution contributes to both ethical and economic sustainability.

Furthermore, equitable nurse allocation fosters social trust and institutional legitimacy. Griffith et al. (2021) argue that mistrust in healthcare institutions often stems from perceived inequities in treatment and service access. By ensuring that nursing resources are fairly distributed, healthcare systems can rebuild confidence among underserved populations. Evans (2020) emphasizes that health equity marks a new frontier in public health—one grounded in justice and community partnership. When nurses are equitably placed, communities experience not only improved care access but also a sense of being valued within the health system. Thus, equitable distribution acts as both a moral and practical mechanism for strengthening health equity.

On a systemic level, equitable nurse distribution catalyzes broader reforms in workforce governance and interprofessional collaboration. Cole et al. (2023) suggest that preventing inequitable workforce gentrification—where affluent areas attract most skilled providers—requires proactive structural interventions. Golden (2023) adds that innovations in workforce planning, supported by equitable policies, can disrupt long-standing hierarchies in healthcare delivery. These outcomes illustrate that equitable distribution transcends staffing—it redefines power, opportunity, and justice within healthcare. Ultimately, the consequences affirm that workforce equity is essential to achieving sustainable health outcomes for all populations.

Barriers to Equitable Distribution

Despite its ethical appeal, several barriers impede the realization of equitable nurse distribution. Churchwell et al. (2020) and Gee & Ford (2011) identify structural racism and institutional inertia as major impediments to reform. These structures perpetuate unequal resource allocation and reinforce geographic or racial disparities in access. Financial limitations, policy fragmentation, and lack of standardized workforce data further exacerbate the issue. Lett et al. (2022) describe this phenomenon as *health equity tourism*—where institutions rhetorically embrace equity without substantive policy change. As a result, the principle of fairness is often overshadowed by political and economic interests.

Another significant barrier is the unequal distribution of educational and professional development opportunities. Grant and Cole (2022) argue that racial and regional disparities in nursing education perpetuate workforce imbalances. When training centers are concentrated in urban or affluent areas, rural regions remain perpetually understaffed. Chomilo (2023) cautions that market-driven health systems, while innovative, may inadvertently reinforce inequities by prioritizing profit over justice. Consequently, without policy correction, the nurse distribution problem risks deepening structural inequality. Equitable distribution thus requires both policy redesign and cultural transformation within health institutions.

Policy misalignment and inadequate leadership commitment also constrain progress. Douglas et al. (2019) emphasize that applying a health equity lens to policy evaluation is essential for ensuring alignment between goals and practice. However, Epstein (2022) notes that even with mandates for equity, implementation often falters due to bureaucratic

inefficiency and political resistance. This gap between intent and execution reflects a deeper challenge—transforming equity from a moral aspiration into an operational standard. Overcoming these barriers requires institutional accountability, community engagement, and transparent performance metrics.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this concept analysis reinforces the interconnection between justice, ethics, and health systems governance. Jackson and Sadler (2022) frame structural violence as an evolutionary concept deeply embedded in health inequities, emphasizing the moral duty of nursing leadership to confront systemic injustice. In this light, equitable nurse distribution embodies an applied form of distributive justice, grounded in both ethical and practical considerations. Fawcett's (2020) population health model supports the integration of social, political, and environmental factors into workforce planning. Thus, theory and practice converge in viewing equitable nurse allocation as an ethical imperative and strategic necessity.

Practically, achieving equitable distribution demands data-driven workforce policies and collaborative leadership. Hahn et al. (2018) suggest that civil rights enforcement in healthcare acts as a determinant of equity, linking justice frameworks to operational standards. Implementing equity-based planning tools, such as geospatial workforce mapping and needs-based budgeting, can guide fair deployment. Cash-Gibson et al. (2020) propose heuristic models that enhance institutional capacity to understand and address health inequalities effectively. Through such frameworks, nursing leaders can identify inequities, monitor progress, and enact responsive interventions.

Finally, the pursuit of equitable nurse distribution represents a transformative movement toward health justice. As CDC (2022) defines, health equity exists when every individual has a fair and just opportunity to attain optimal health. Translating this definition into nursing means ensuring that no community lacks access to skilled, compassionate caregivers. Carr et al. (2020) remind that equity must precede efficiency in health governance—justice must not be a byproduct but the foundation of policy. The equitable distribution of nurses, therefore, is both a human right and a professional responsibility that lies at the heart of ethical nursing practice.

Limitation of Study

One limitation of this concept analysis lies in its reliance on secondary data derived primarily from peer-reviewed literature and policy documents. While this approach allows for broad theoretical exploration, it does not capture the lived experiences of nurses or the contextual variations across different healthcare systems. Consequently, the findings may reflect conceptual interpretations rather than empirical validation, which limits generalizability to real-world settings (Dodd-Butera et al., 2019; Walker & Avant, 2019).

A second limitation concerns potential publication bias within the reviewed literature. Most of the analyzed studies originated from high-income countries with well-developed health systems, which may overrepresent perspectives from Western contexts and underrepresent the realities of low-resource environments. As noted by Liburd et al. (2020) and Gómez et al. (2021), disparities in research capacity can skew conceptual understanding,

particularly when issues such as workforce equity are deeply influenced by socioeconomic and cultural differences.

Lastly, the concept of equitable distribution of nurses remains dynamic and context-dependent. Continuous shifts in health policy, global migration trends, and technological advances reshape how equity is understood and practiced within the nursing profession. This analysis therefore represents a snapshot in time rather than a definitive model. Future studies employing mixed-method designs and cross-regional comparisons are needed to test, refine, and empirically validate the attributes and antecedents identified in this conceptual framework (Golden, 2023; Davis, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This concept analysis, employing the Walker and Avant framework, elucidates the multidimensional nature of equitable nurse distribution, identifying key attributes—fairness, accessibility, ethical governance, and responsiveness to social determinants of health—while revealing how structural, educational, and policy factors influence nursing resource balance across regions. The findings stress that true equity transcends numerical parity, necessitating moral commitment, evidence-based planning, and justice-oriented policy reflection to provide a theoretical foundation for national and institutional strategies. Recommendations urge nursing leaders, policymakers, and educators to foster collaboration via geospatial mapping, data-driven allocation, and targeted education for underserved areas. For future research, empirical testing of this model through cross-country comparisons and longitudinal policy evaluations would validate its applicability and refine equity principles for global health systems.

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