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Workforce Retention Strategies in Rural Primary Care: A Health Systems Management Perspective

Horvath Z[1*], Rousseau A[2] and Magi M[3]

[1]*Department of Health Policy and Management, Semmelweis University, Budapest, Hungary*
[2]*Department of Public Health, University of Bordeaux, Bordeaux, France*
[3]*Department of Human Resource Management, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia*

ABSTRACT

Background: Rural and other underserved communities in high-, middle-, and low-income countries face persistent shortages of primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, and allied health professionals, driven less by absolute workforce undersupply than by geographic maldistribution and high rates of early attrition from rural practice. Health systems have tested financial incentives, rural training pipelines, scope-of-practice reform, telehealth-supported practice, and organizational climate interventions, but evidence on how these levers interact from a systems management perspective remains fragmented. Objective: To synthesize the peer-reviewed literature on rural primary care workforce retention across financial, educational, regulatory, digital, and organizational domains, and to draw implications for health systems management. Methods: A narrative review of systematic reviews, scoping reviews, cohort studies, and health-policy analyses addressing rural and underserved primary care workforce recruitment and retention, with each source individually verified against its primary bibliographic record. Findings: Rural-origin admissions combined with extended rural clinical training exposure show the most consistent association with eventual rural practice but require a multi-year implementation horizon. Financial incentives, including loan repayment and scholarship schemes, achieve reported retention rates of roughly 50-100% across evaluated programs but show weaker evidence of durability once service obligations expire, and perform best when bundled with non-financial supports. Scope-of-practice liberalization expands team-based primary care capacity, particularly through nurse practitioners, but its benefits depend on complementary practice-level supervision and deployment structures. Telehealth and telementoring reduce professional isolation and are associated with improved job satisfaction and retention intentions among rural clinicians. Across settings, organizational climate factors such as leadership quality, workload management, and perceived autonomy consistently predict burnout and turnover intention independent of compensation, moderating the effectiveness of every other retention lever. Conclusions: Durable rural primary care workforce retention requires coordinated, multi-domain intervention bundles rather than reliance on any single lever, sequencing near-term financial and telehealth-based supports alongside sustained investment in rural training pipelines and organizational climate reform.

Keywords: *rural primary care; workforce retention; health systems management; scope of practice; telehealth*

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Corresponding Author: *Zoltan Horvath*

E-mail Address: *zoltan.horvath@semmelweisuniversity.edu*

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Introduction

Rural and other underserved communities across high-, middle-, and low-income countries face a persistent and self-reinforcing shortage of primary care clinicians. Physicians, nurse practitioners, and allied health professionals who begin rural careers frequently leave within a few years, producing turnover cycles that erode continuity of care, increase per-capita recruitment costs, and widen rural-urban health disparities [1]. The problem is not primarily one of aggregate workforce supply but of maldistribution: high-income countries can show ratios exceeding ten physicians and nurses per 1,000 population in urban centers while comparable rural districts, and many low- and middle-income countries as a whole, fall below one per 1,000 [1]. Health systems managers, workforce planners, and policymakers have consequently tested a wide range of retention interventions — financial incentives, rural-origin admissions and training pipelines, scope-of-practice liberalization, telehealth-enabled team practice, and organizational climate reform — yet evidence on which combinations of these levers produce durable retention, and under what system conditions, remains fragmented across disciplinary silos.

This narrative review synthesizes the peer-reviewed literature on rural primary care workforce retention from a health systems management perspective. Rather than treating retention as an individual clinician's decision, we frame it as an outcome that health systems management can actively shape through the design of financing arrangements, training and credentialing pathways, scope-of-practice regulation, digital infrastructure, and organizational climate. We synthesize findings across five thematic domains and conclude with an integrative discussion of how these levers interact within a systems-management framework, and what this implies for policy design in rural and underserved primary care.

Methods

We conducted a narrative review of the peer-reviewed and gray literature addressing recruitment and retention of primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, and allied health professionals in rural, remote, and underserved settings. Structured searches were performed of PubMed/MEDLINE and related bibliographic databases using combinations of the terms "rural," "retention," "recruitment," "primary care," "financial incentive," "loan repayment," "pipeline," "pathway," "scope of practice," "nurse practitioner," "telehealth," "burnout," "isolation," and "health workforce," supplemented by citation tracking from identified systematic and scoping reviews. Eligible sources included systematic reviews, scoping reviews, mixed-methods studies, large cohort and administrative-data analyses, and health-policy analyses published in English in indexed journals; conference abstracts, non-peer-reviewed reports, and sources whose bibliographic details could not be independently verified against a publisher, PubMed, Crossref, or OpenAlex record were excluded. Each retained source was individually verified against its primary bibliographic record before inclusion. Given the heterogeneity of study designs, interventions, and outcome measures across the retrieved literature, we synthesized findings narratively within five thematic domains rather than attempting meta-analytic pooling, consistent with established practice for policy-oriented reviews of heterogeneous health workforce evidence [2].

The Global Burden of Rural Primary Care Workforce Shortages

Rural workforce shortage is best understood as a maldistribution problem layered on top of, and interacting with, absolute undersupply in many settings. Chen's editorial framing for the World Health Organization situates retention failure as a matter of health equity and universal coverage rather than a technical staffing inconvenience, and argues that sustainable solutions require harmonizing supply-side education policy with demand-side regulatory and financial architecture rather than relying on short-term emergency deployments [1]. Systematic reviews confirm that this is a genuinely international phenomenon rather than a feature of any single health system: interventions and challenges recur across Australia, Canada, the United States, China, India, and numerous other national contexts, even as the specific policy instruments available differ by system financing and regulatory structure [2,3,4]. In India, critical interpretative synthesis of retention initiatives found that compulsory rural service requirements alone showed weak and inconsistent effects, whereas bundled interventions addressing infrastructure, career progression, and family considerations performed better, though the evidence base remained heterogeneous and often poorly evaluated [3]. A mixed-methods systematic review spanning 24 studies and over 11,000 rural and regional physicians across ten countries similarly found burnout to be the most prevalent adverse outcome associated with excessive workload, limited autonomy, and geographic isolation, underscoring that workforce loss in rural primary care is driven as much by the conditions of practice as by its location [4]. Together, this literature establishes that rural retention is a multi-causal, cross-nationally recurring management problem that resists single-lever solutions.

Financial Incentive Schemes for Rural Recruitment and Retention

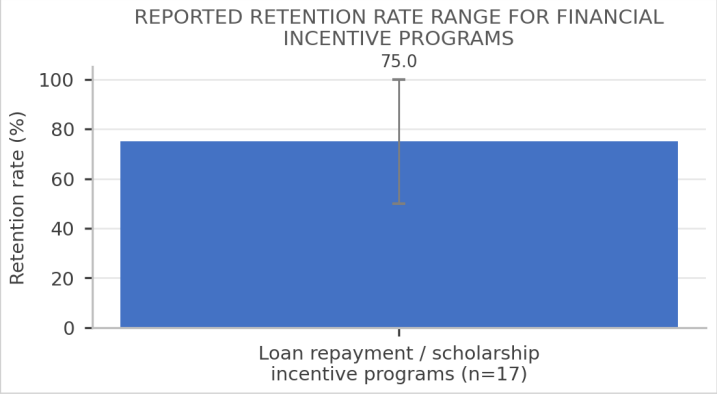
Financial incentives — loan repayment, scholarships tied to return-of-service obligations, salary premiums, and relocation or hardship payments — represent the most extensively evaluated category of rural retention intervention. Early systematic review evidence from Canada found that return-of-service programs linked to financial support could achieve meaningful short-term placement in underserviced areas, but that completion and subsequent long-term retention after the service obligation ended were far less well documented and often disappointing, raising questions about whether such schemes retain clinicians or merely defer attrition [5]. A later systematic review synthesizing the international evidence on retention incentives concluded that financial incentives are more effective when combined with non-financial supports such as professional development opportunities, adequate infrastructure, and family and lifestyle considerations, rather than deployed as stand-alone payments [6]. Consistent with this, a 2026 scoping review of 17 rural primary care physician recruitment and retention programs found that financial incentive programs — loan repayment and scholarship initiatives in particular — achieved higher reported retention rates than rural education and residency programs evaluated in isolation, with retention rates for loan repayment and scholarship schemes ranging from roughly 50% to 100% across programs, although the authors cautioned that small samples and inconsistent follow-up periods limit the precision of these estimates [7]. From a health systems management perspective, the recurring lesson across this literature is that financial incentives function best as one component of a bundled retention strategy rather than as a substitute for addressing the underlying working conditions, professional isolation, and career-development constraints that independently drive attrition [6,7].

Rural Training Pipelines and Pathway Programs

A second major lever operates upstream of practice location decisions: selecting and training clinicians in ways that increase the likelihood of eventual rural practice. The strongest and most consistent predictor identified across this literature is rural origin combined with substantial rural clinical training exposure during undergraduate or postgraduate education. A systematic review of 34 studies covering more than 58,000 participants found that preferential admission of students from rural backgrounds, combined with extended rural training placements, was associated with materially higher rates of eventual rural practice, and that these educational "pipeline" interventions generally outperformed coercive regulatory mechanisms such as mandatory service obligations [2]. Complementary evidence from U.S. medical schools with explicit rural-pathway missions demonstrates that institutional commitment — dedicated rural tracks, rural clinical campuses, and admissions preferences — can be operationalized as a measurable, trackable "pipeline-to-pathway" strategy that produces disproportionate

numbers of rural physicians relative to peer institutions without such programs [8]. The pipeline logic extends beyond medicine: a review of allied health professional recruitment and retention found that structured rural pipeline programs, including rural clinical placements and rural-origin recruitment into allied health training, similarly improved subsequent rural workforce retention, suggesting the mechanism generalizes across professional groups rather than being specific to physicians [9]. More recent Australian evidence reinforces that this effect persists into early-career transitions: graduates who trained substantially in rural settings and who developed local professional and social networks during training were more likely to establish rural careers, an effect partly mediated through the social capital accumulated during rural placements [10,11]. Collectively, this body of evidence positions training pipeline design not as a peripheral educational policy but as a core lever of health systems workforce management, given its consistent association with durable rather than transient rural placement.

Reported retention rate range for loan repayment and scholarship-based financial incentive programs across 17 rural primary care physician recruitment and retention programs identified in a scoping review (bar shows midpoint of the reported 50-100% range; whiskers show the full reported range) (Arredondo et al., 2026).



Scope-of-Practice Policy and Team-Based Primary Care

Expanding the scope of practice of non-physician clinicians, particularly nurse practitioners, has been proposed as a mechanism for increasing rural primary care capacity independent of physician recruitment and retention. Evidence on the magnitude of this effect is mixed. Analysis of the interaction between geography and state-level nurse practitioner scope-of-practice laws found that removing restrictive regulations modestly increased the overall capacity of the primary care workforce, but that geographic maldistribution of both physicians and nurse practitioners limited the extent to which scope liberalization alone closed rural access gaps [12]. A subsequent national analysis using variation in the timing of state scope-of-practice reforms found that nurse practitioners practiced more autonomously following liberalization, but that overall patient-panel allocation patterns between physicians and nurse practitioners remained relatively stable, implying that scope reform changes practice patterns more than it redistributes overall workforce supply [13]. At the practice level, administrative-data analysis of U.S. primary care practices found that rural practices increased their reliance on nurse practitioners over time at a faster rate than non-rural practices, consistent with nurse practitioners partially substituting for physician shortages in rural settings [14]. Complementing these system-level findings, practice-level research on nurse practitioner autonomy found that rural nurse practitioners managed a case mix of comparable or greater complexity than their urban counterparts, particularly in states with expanded scope-of-practice authority, suggesting that rural nurse practitioners are frequently functioning at the top of an expanded scope rather than in a narrowly circumscribed role [15]. From a management standpoint, these findings jointly indicate that scope-of-practice policy is a necessary but not sufficient lever: it expands what rural teams can deliver, but its retention and access benefits are realized only when paired with organizational structures — supervision arrangements, compensation models, and team design — that actually deploy expanded-scope clinicians into underserved locations.

Representative evidence on rural training pipeline and pathway strategies and their reported association with eventual rural practice or retention.

Strategy	Study population/design	Reported association with rural retention	Key reference
Rural-origin admissions + extended rural training exposure	Systematic review, 34 studies, >58,000 participants, high-income countries	Consistently associated with higher rural practice rates; outperformed coercive service mandates	Russell et al. 2021
Institutional rural-pathway mission (rural tracks, admissions preference)	U.S. medical schools with explicit rural workforce mission	Disproportionately higher production of rural physicians relative to peer institutions	Longenecker et al. 2020
Rural clinical placements in allied health training	Narrative/scoping synthesis, allied health professions	Improved subsequent rural recruitment and retention across allied health disciplines	Durey et al. 2015
Extended rural training + local social network formation	Australian medical graduate cohort	Rural career establishment partly mediated by social capital built during training	Van Schaik et al. 2026; Eggleton and Goodyear-Smith 2025

Telehealth-Supported Practice and Professional Connectivity

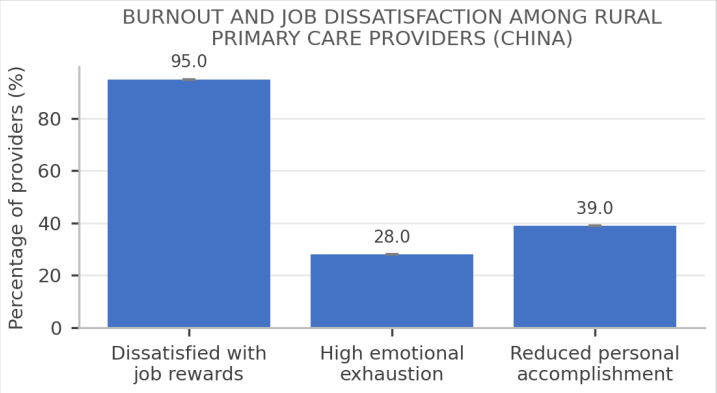
Telehealth has emerged as a distinct retention lever operating through a different mechanism than financial or educational interventions: reducing the professional and clinical isolation that makes rural practice unsustainable for many clinicians. A narrative review of telehealth interventions across U.S. rural communities found consistent evidence that telehealth expands access to specialty consultation and chronic disease management support for rural primary care teams, although the review also noted persistent barriers related to broadband infrastructure, reimbursement policy, and clinician workflow integration that limit telehealth's realized impact [16]. More directly relevant to retention outcomes, a 2025 analysis of telehealth integration among rural health care professionals found that access to telehealth-supported consultation and mentorship was associated with improved job satisfaction and retention intentions, operating in part by giving isolated rural clinicians ongoing access to specialist input and peer support that would otherwise require relocation or referral [17]. Telementoring models illustrate this

mechanism concretely: a case report on a Project ECHO telementoring program delivered to rural primary care clinicians found statistically significant knowledge gains across the large majority of sessions, with the large majority of participants reporting improved ability to manage the conditions addressed and a substantial proportion reporting decreased professional isolation, despite modest sample size and low survey response rates that limit generalizability [18]. Taken together, this evidence positions telehealth and telementoring not merely as clinical-access tools but as organizational interventions that health systems managers can deploy specifically to counteract the isolation component of rural attrition, complementing rather than substituting for the financial and training-pipeline levers discussed above.

Professional Isolation, Burnout, and Organizational Climate

A recurring finding across the reviewed literature is that structural and financial interventions are necessary but insufficient unless the day-to-day organizational climate of rural practice is also addressed. The mixed-methods systematic review of stress and retention challenges among rural and regional physicians found burnout to be the most prevalent outcome across the 24 included studies, driven by excessive workload, limited professional autonomy, and geographic and professional isolation, while protective factors included professional autonomy, recognition, and task diversity; the authors proposed a multi-domain framework spanning safety and stability, belonging and connection, competence and mastery, purpose and meaning, and psychological resilience, each requiring distinct organizational and policy supports [4]. Quantitative confirmation of this dynamic comes from a large structural equation modeling study of primary care providers in rural China, in which approximately 95% of the 1,148 surveyed providers reported dissatisfaction with job rewards, roughly 28% reported high emotional exhaustion, and about 39% reported reduced personal accomplishment; job satisfaction was found to reduce burnout and turnover intention directly, while burnout partially mediated the relationship between low job satisfaction and turnover intention, with dissatisfaction with organizational management identified as a specific predictor of turnover intention [19]. A recent scoping review of organizational climate factors in rural health care workplaces across upper-middle-income and high-income countries similarly concluded that leadership quality, supportive supervision, workload management, and perceived organizational fairness were consistently associated with job satisfaction independent of remuneration level, reinforcing that organizational climate operates as a retention lever distinct from compensation [20]. These findings collectively indicate that burnout and isolation are not simply individual clinician vulnerabilities but predictable outputs of specific, modifiable organizational conditions — workload distribution, supervisory quality, and perceived autonomy — that fall squarely within the remit of health systems management.

Burnout and job-reward dissatisfaction indicators among 1,148 primary care providers in rural township health centers in Shandong Province, China, based on structural equation modeling of survey data (Wang et al., 2020).



Health Systems Management Strategies: Toward Integrated Retention Bundles

The thematic findings above converge on a central management implication: no single intervention category reliably achieves durable rural retention on its own, and the most consistently favorable outcomes are reported where interventions are deliberately bundled and coordinated at the systems level. Rural-origin admissions and extended rural training exposure show the strongest and most consistent association with eventual rural retention among the levers reviewed, but require a decade-long educational pipeline that health systems and ministries of health must resource well in advance of workforce need [2,8]. Financial incentives can accelerate initial placement and address the up-front economic disincentives of rural practice, but the evidence on their durability after service obligations expire remains equivocal, and their effectiveness is consistently reported as greater when paired with non-financial supports [5,6,7]. Scope-of-practice liberalization expands the effective supply of primary care capacity in rural settings, particularly through nurse practitioners, but its benefits are contingent on complementary practice-level deployment and supervision structures rather than regulatory change alone [12,13,14,15]. Telehealth and telementoring directly target the isolation component of burnout and can be implemented relatively quickly relative to training-pipeline reform, functioning as a bridging strategy while longer-horizon interventions mature [16,17,18]. Finally, organizational climate — leadership, workload management, and perceived autonomy — functions as a cross-cutting moderator that can either potentiate or undermine the effectiveness of every other lever, since even well-compensated, well-trained, digitally connected clinicians report high turnover intention when embedded in poorly managed practice environments [4,19,20]. This pattern suggests that health systems managers should treat retention not as a recruitment problem to be solved once, but as an ongoing portfolio-management task requiring coordinated investment across financial, educational, regulatory, digital, and organizational domains simultaneously.

Discussion

This synthesis has several implications for health policy and health systems management. First, the evidence base is strongest for interventions with the longest implementation horizon — rural-origin selection and extended rural training exposure — which creates a structural tension for policymakers facing

immediate rural staffing crises, since these interventions cannot generate near-term relief. This argues for explicitly sequencing interventions: near-term financial incentives and telehealth-enabled support to stabilize current rural practices, alongside sustained investment in rural training pipelines to reduce structural dependence on incentive payments over the following decade [7,8,17]. Second, the consistent finding that financial incentives alone show weaker long-term retention than bundled interventions [5,6] implies that program evaluation frameworks used by health ministries and payers should track post-obligation retention, not only completion of service commitments, since the latter substantially overstates program success. Third, scope-of-practice reform illustrates a broader principle in this literature: regulatory change is frequently necessary but rarely sufficient, and its workforce-capacity benefits depend on complementary organizational investment in supervision, team structure, and compensation design at the practice level [12,15]. Fourth, the organizational-climate literature suggests that health systems management interventions targeting leadership development, workload distribution, and practice-level autonomy may offer comparatively low-cost, high-leverage improvements to retention relative to large-scale financial or infrastructure investments, and merit greater attention in rural workforce policy relative to their current share of intervention funding [4,19,20].

Health systems management levers for rural primary care workforce retention, their principal mechanism of action, and reported constraints on effectiveness.

Management lever	Principal mechanism	Reported constraint or contingency	Key reference(s)
Financial incentives (loan repayment, scholarships, salary premiums)	Reduces up-front economic disincentive to rural placement	Uncertain durability after service obligation ends; strongest when bundled with non-financial supports	Sempowski 2004; Buykx et al. 2010; Arredondo et al. 2026
Rural training pipelines and pathway programs	Selects and trains clinicians with pre-existing rural affinity and networks	Long implementation horizon (years to decade); requires sustained institutional investment	Russell et al. 2021; Longenecker et al. 2020
Scope-of-practice liberalization (nurse practitioners)	Expands effective primary care capacity independent of physician supply	Benefit contingent on complementary supervision and team-deployment structures	Graves et al. 2015; Smith 2021; Barnes et al. 2018; Neprash et al. 2020
Telehealth and telementoring	Reduces clinical and professional isolation via remote specialist access and mentorship	Limited by broadband infrastructure, reimbursement policy, and workflow integration	Butzner and Cuffee 2021; Kaushik et al. 2025; Kraschnewski et al. 2025
Organizational climate (leadership, workload, autonomy)	Moderates the effectiveness of every other retention lever	Frequently under-resourced relative to financial and infrastructure investment	Coumans and Ciller 2026; Wang et al. 2020; Minahan and Thompson 2026

This review has limitations inherent to narrative synthesis of heterogeneous international literature: study designs, outcome definitions of "retention," and follow-up durations vary substantially across the reviewed sources, precluding quantitative pooling, and publication bias toward positive program evaluations cannot be excluded. Several included studies are themselves systematic or scoping reviews, meaning some primary evidence is represented indirectly. Rapidly evolving policy contexts, particularly for telehealth reimbursement and scope-of-practice regulation, mean that specific quantitative findings may date quickly even where the underlying management principles remain durable.

Conclusions

Rural primary care workforce retention is best understood, and best managed, as a multi-domain systems problem rather than a single-intervention target. The reviewed evidence indicates that rural-origin selection and extended rural training exposure produce the most consistent long-term retention effect but operate on a multi-year horizon; financial incentives can accelerate short-term placement but show uncertain durability when deployed alone; scope-of-practice liberalization expands team-based capacity but requires complementary practice-level implementation to translate into retention gains; telehealth and telementoring directly counteract professional isolation and can be deployed relatively quickly; and organizational climate functions as a cross-cutting moderator of every other intervention's effectiveness. Health systems managers and policymakers seeking durable improvements in rural primary care retention should therefore design coordinated, multi-domain retention bundles rather than relying on any single lever, and should invest in monitoring systems capable of tracking retention well beyond the completion of any single program's formal service or funding obligations.

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