



# Simulation-Based Performance Scenarios for a Health House and Health Post: An Empirical Study

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## Abstract

**Background:** Enhancing the performance of healthcare provider units, such as Health Houses (HHs) and Health Posts (HPs), is vital for improving service delivery. We aimed to develop simulation-based scenarios to optimize performance and minimize risks associated with decision-making.

**Methods:** Conducted in 2021, this empirical study utilized operational research methods at one HH and one HP in southern Tehran. The operational characteristics of these units were modeled using Arena 20 simulation software. Additional performance scenarios were iteratively developed based on expert recommendations. Key performance metrics from the simulations were evaluated and ranked using the nominal group technique and Expert Choice software.

**Results:** Four distinct scenarios were developed for both units. The fourth scenario emerged as the optimal model, receiving the highest expert scores for both the HH (score: 349) and HP (score: 418). This scenario demonstrated significant improvements in key indicators, including the number of patients admitted (HH: 24; HP: 31), patients served (HH: 23; HP: 33), health worker productivity (HH: 95%; HP: 47%), and reduced patient waiting times (HH: 4.45 min; HP: 0 min).

**Conclusion:** The study recommends adopting the fourth scenario as a benchmark for HHs and HPs in suburban areas of major Iranian cities. The employed simulation methodology and evidence-based scenarios can be applied to other healthcare units, aiding in performance forecasting and system optimization.

**Keywords:** Health house; Health post; Simulation-based scenario; Performance scenario



## Introduction

Promoting public health is a global priority, with healthcare networks forming the backbone of healthcare systems. Decision-making in this domain is particularly sensitive due to its direct impact on population well-being. Achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is crucial, as it enhances healthcare indicators and overall health outcomes. However, UHC success relies on improving the performance of healthcare delivery units (1-6).

Urbanization in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including nations in the World Health Organization's Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMRO) such as Iran, has created significant challenges in delivering healthcare services (7-9). These numerous urbanization challenges (10, 11) are particularly pronounced in underserved suburban areas (12-15). Tehran, with a population exceeding 9 million, exemplifies the complexity of addressing urban healthcare needs (16).

In Iran's healthcare system (Fig. 1), Health Houses (HHs) and Health Posts (HPs) are critical units delivering primary care. HHs serve approximately 1,500 rural residents, offering services ranging from family health to disease control and education, delivered by two Village Health Workers (Behvarz) under the supervision of Rural Comprehensive Health Centers (17, 18). In urban areas, HPs provide similar services to around 12,500 residents, staffed by midwives and public health experts under Urban Comprehensive Health Centers (19).

Demographic trends, including aging populations and the rise of chronic diseases, have significantly increased the demand for healthcare services. These factors, combined with improved health literacy, geographical dispersion, and rising costs, have amplified the need for efficient healthcare delivery (20-22). Enhancing the performance of HHs and HPs is essential to improving well-being, raising living standards, and supporting economic growth (1). Studies highlight the pressing need for targeted interventions to optimize

the performance of HHs and HPs (23, 24). In Italy, enhancing healthcare provider performance improves service integration (24). Iraqi Health Houses exhibited low productivity rates (29%), underscoring the importance of addressing workforce efficiency (25). Iranian studies in Qom and Zahedan similarly emphasized the necessity of effective human resource management to increase service delivery and improve the productivity of Behvarz (26, 27).

Simulation tools are invaluable for performance optimization, providing a structured approach to analyze and predict outcomes. They help improve access to healthcare, minimize waiting times, and optimize staff productivity while mitigating risks and costs (28-30). By enabling dynamic system analysis, these tools enhance understanding of operational interrelationships and organizational efficiency (31).

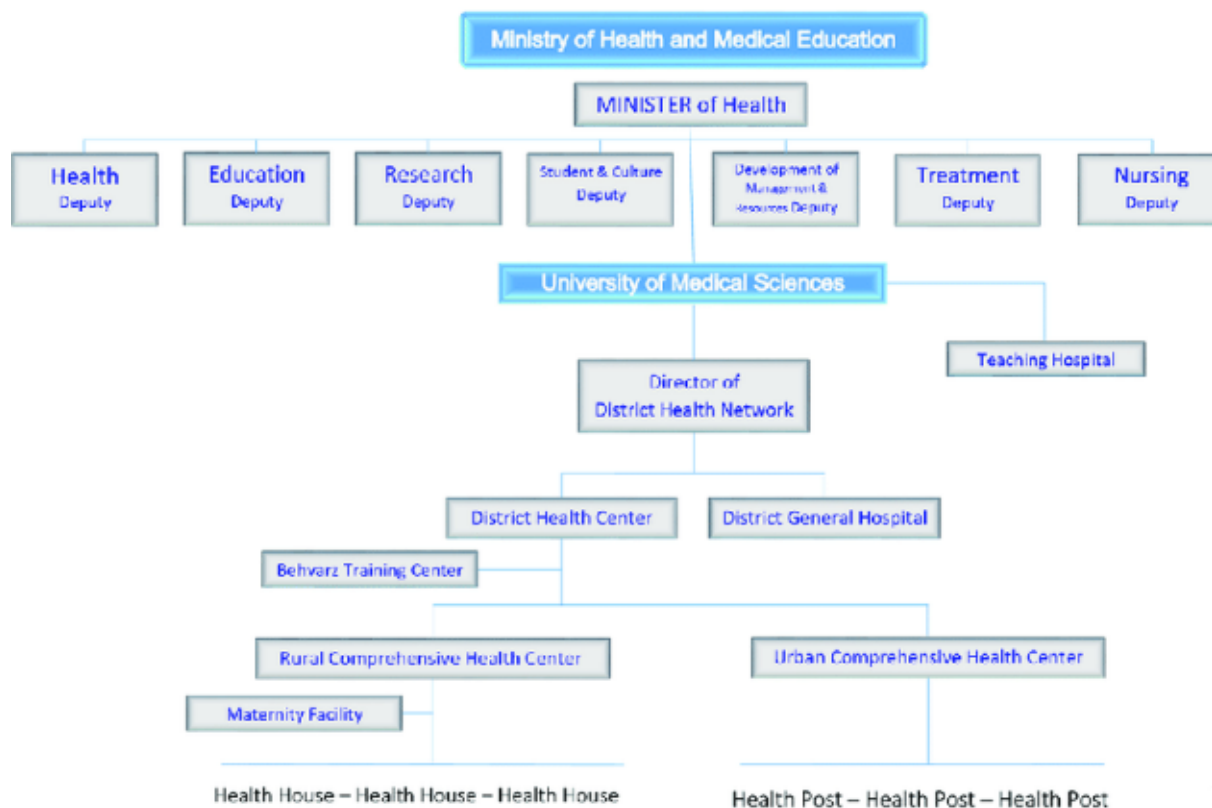
While simulation tools have been extensively applied in hospitals (32-35), clinics (36, 37), and diagnostic facilities (38, 39), their use in primary healthcare (PHC) units like HHs and HPs remains underexplored (40, 41). This knowledge gap highlights the need for research on performance optimization in these settings.

This study addresses the urgent need to enhance the performance of HHs and HPs through simulation-based methodologies. By developing and evaluating various performance scenarios, it provides an evidence-based framework for decision-making with minimal risk. The findings are not only applicable to the studied HHs and HPs but can also serve as benchmarks for similar healthcare units, facilitating broader implementation and improvement.

Optimizing HH and HP performance is vital to addressing the challenges posed by urbanization and increasing healthcare demands. By leveraging simulation tools, healthcare systems can achieve sustainable improvements in service delivery, staff productivity, and patient outcomes, thereby supporting the broader goals of public health. Therefore, the aim of this study was to present

various performance scenarios and to introduce an optimal performance scenario based on simu-

lation for a HH and an HP.



**Fig. 1:** The organization of health system in Iran (42)

### *Materials and Methods*

This empirical study, conducted in 2021, employed an operational research approach at a HH in a Tehran Province village and a HP in southern Tehran city, both affiliated with Tehran University of Medical Sciences (TUMS). Preliminary explanations were provided to health workers at both sites. The study followed five stages:

#### *1. Data Collection through Structured Interviews*

Interviews were conducted with knowledgeable individuals to collect comprehensive information about the units. Data on internal processes, workflows, services provided, and the number and expertise of employees were systematically documented.

#### *2. Field Observations and Service Measurements*

Patient arrival times and service durations were recorded using a stopwatch and standardized forms. Data from 240 and 230 patients were collected at the HH and HP, respectively, over a working week, accounting for varying activity levels. Patient arrival rates were also documented.

#### *3. Simulation Modeling*

Using Arena20 simulation software, workflows and service delivery processes were modeled. Input parameters included patient arrival rates, service classifications, distribution functions for arrival and service times, sequencing of service delivery, and available resources (e.g., staff expertise and numbers). The current situation was analyzed based on four performance criteria: patients admitted, patients served, waiting times, and employee productivity rates.

**4. Scenario Development**

Recommendations were provided by 12 experts (Table 1) meeting specific inclusion criteria: two years of experience in the Iranian PHC system and Health Network management, and a relevant

educational background in medical or public health sciences. Decision variables were identified from simulation data and incorporated into the software to develop four scenarios.

**Table 1:** Expertise and number of experts participating in the nominal group

Expertise and experiences	Number
Family physician; Head of Comprehensive Health Center	2
Internist; Head of the Health Network	1
Pediatric specialist; Policy-making in children's health and schools	1
Social medicine; Policy-making in health	1
General practitioner; Management, and supervision of health centers, HPs and HHs	1
Medicine and health economics; Budgeting for health operational units, allocation of resources in health	1
Social medicine; Management and policy-making in health insurance	1
Public health; Management and policy-making in health	1
Industrial engineering/health systems; Design and management of health systems	1
Education and health promotion; Policy-making in health and public health	1
Future research in health; Research and education in public health trends	1

**5. Scenario Evaluation and Optimization:**

The scenarios were iteratively reviewed with experts using the nominal group technique. Results were scored and prioritized using Expert Choice software, leading to the identification of the optimal scenario for each unit.

**Ethical approval**

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of TUMS (IR.TUMS.SPH.REC.1396.4209). Data confidentiality was maintained, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

**Results**

At the studied HH, two health workers (one male and one female) operated during specific working hours: weekdays from 8:30 to 14:30 and Thursdays from 8:00 to 13:00. The HH experienced an average of 17 patient arrivals per day (2.4 visitors per hour). The HP, a private facility, was staffed by three health workers, including one midwife and two public health experts, working from 8:00 to 15:00 on weekdays and 8:00 to 13:00 on Thursdays. Patient arrival rates at the HP averaged 16 per day (2.3 visitors per hour). Table 2.

**Table 2:** The services provided and the average service time (in minutes) at the HH and HP

Services	Children	Teen-agers	Youth	Mid-aged	Elderly	Women and mothers,	Health education,	Schools health	Health ambassadors	Diseases control	Environmental health*	Occupational health*
HH	19.1	13.9	16	13.3	14.6	14.4	19	51.4	14	14.2	30	17.9
HP	21.3	30.2	27.4	18.3	24.2	28.2	29.2	51.9	18.8	28.7		

\*Environmental and occupational health, which are among the duties of the male health worker (Behvarz) in the HH and are not related to the HP in the cities

The services provided and the average service time (in minutes) at the HH and HP.

**Simulation and Workflow Mapping**

Data collected on workflows and services enabled the simulation of current conditions for performance evaluation. Four scenarios were developed for each unit based on expert recommendations.

**HH scenarios**

1. First Scenario: Reduced the number of health workers from two to one due to low productivity.

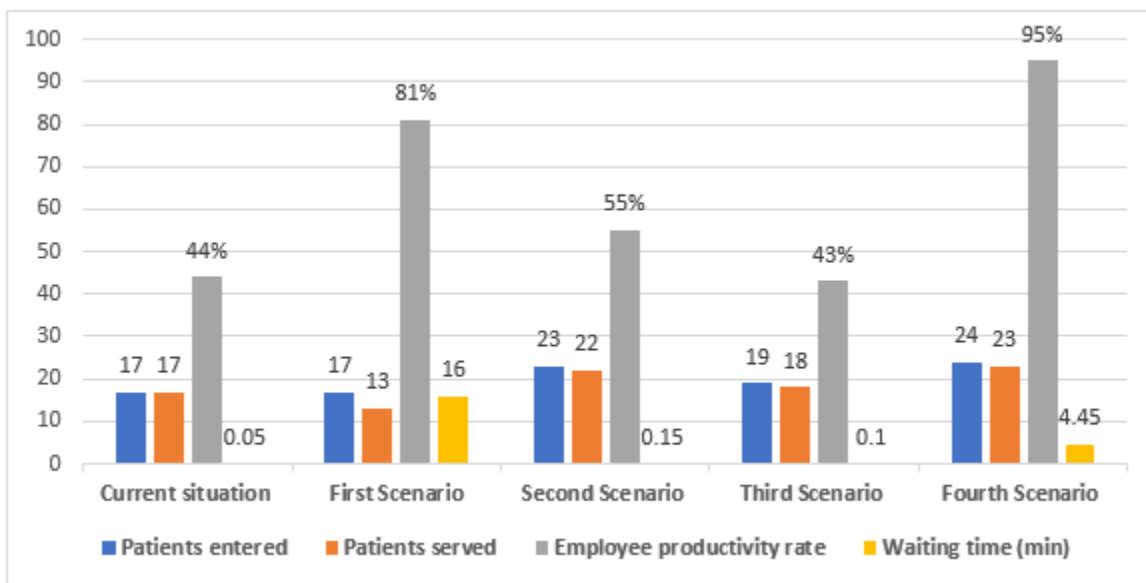
2. Second Scenario: Increased the number of satellite villages covered by the HH from two to three.

3. Third Scenario: Extended working hours by 30 (8:00–15:00).

4. Fourth Scenario: Combined all previous decisions, leading to increased patient admissions (24) and services (23), improved productivity (95%), and reduced waiting times, albeit with some increases in patient volume-related delays (Table 3, Fig. 2).

**Table 3:** The results of the fourth scenario compared to the current situation in the HH

The number of patients entered and served in the current situation		The number of patients entered and served in the fourth scenario		The health workers' productivity rate in the current situation	The health workers' productivity rate in the fourth scenario	Waiting time in the current situation (min)	Waiting time in the fourth scenario (min)
Entered 17	served 17	Entered 24	Served 23	45%	95%	Middle-aged care: 0.6	Child: 6.6 Youth: 6 Middle age: 13.2 Elderly 13.8 Women: 4.2 Health education: 2.4 Diseases control: 7.2



**Fig. 2:** The results of proposed scenarios in the Health House

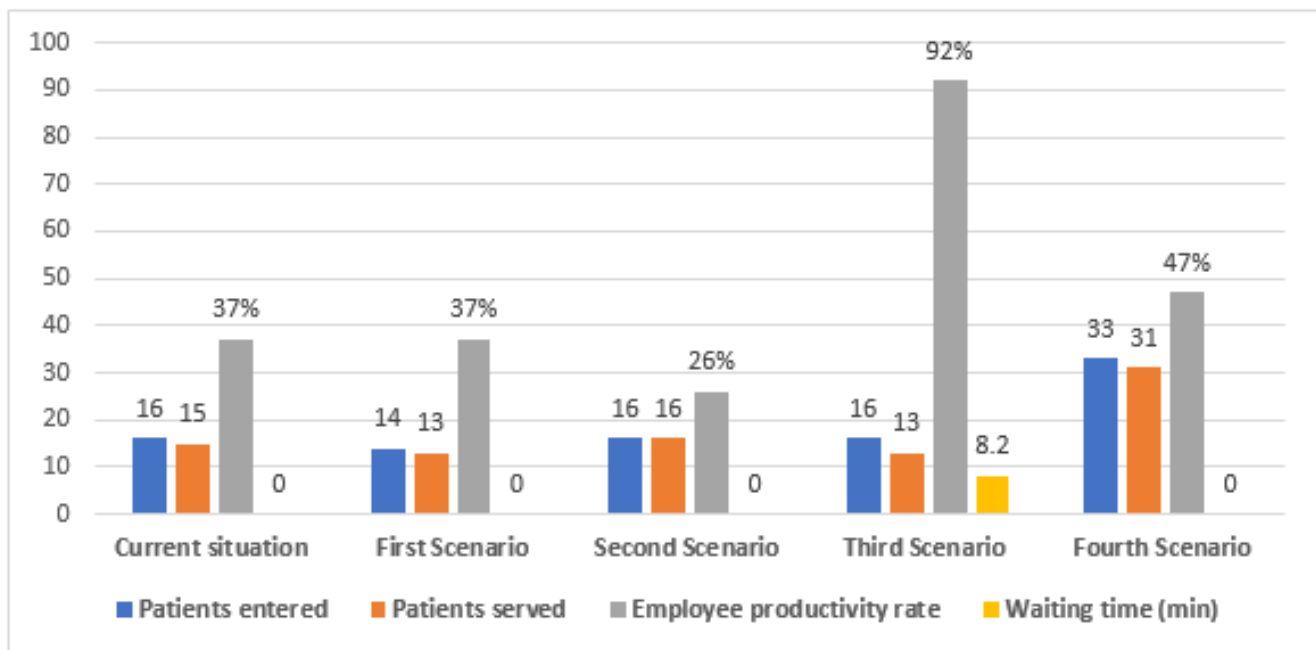
**HP Scenarios**

1. First Scenario: Reduced working hours by one hour (8:00–14:00).
2. Second Scenario: Shifted from a multi-professional to an individual-specialized service delivery model.
3. Third Scenario: Reduced staff from three to one (midwife) due to low productivity.

4. Fourth Scenario: Merged the HP with an adjacent unit, increasing staff to four (two midwives, two public health experts). This doubled patient admissions and services, improved productivity, and maintained zero waiting times (Table 4, Fig. 3).

**Table 4:** The results of the fourth scenario compared to the current situation in the HP

The number of patients entered and served in the current situation		The number of patients entered and served in the fourth scenario		The health workers' productivity rate in the current situation	The health workers' productivity rate in the fourth scenario	Waiting time in the current situation (min)	Waiting time in the fourth scenario (min)
Entered 16	Exited 15	Entered 33	Exited 31	Health workers (public health): 19% / Health worker (midwife): 56%	Health workers (public health): 32% / Health worker (midwife): 62%	There is no waiting time	There is no waiting time



**Fig. 3:** The results of proposed scenarios in the Health Post



### Outcome Evaluation

The scenarios were scored and prioritized using the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) through Expert Choice software. The fourth scenario was identified as the optimal model for both the HH

and HP. It demonstrated significant improvements in patient throughput, worker productivity, and service efficiency without compromising waiting times (Figs. 4 and 5).



Fig. 4: Expert Choice scores of the proposed scenarios for the HH

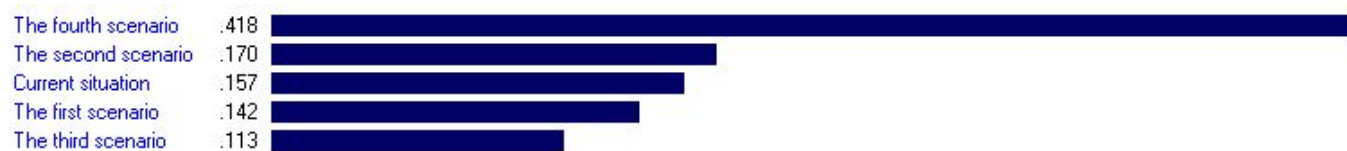


Fig. 5: Expert Choice scores of the proposed scenarios for the HP

### Discussion

This study evaluated the performance of a HH and a HP in Iran. Service times varied based on patients' needs and workers' allocated time. For example, in school health services, health workers' time was divided among school visits, health education sessions, and direct services to students. At the HH, health worker productivity was 47%, 12% lower than reported in comparable studies (43). Although patient waiting times were minimal, increasing service delivery and access remains essential. Similarly, at the HP, productivity was only 38%, and while no waiting times were observed, its capacity needs expansion to meet regional demands (23, 29).

The findings underscore the broader necessity to enhance healthcare system performance. Urbanization, rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and limited primary healthcare (PHC) coverage in suburban areas have exacerbated gaps in service delivery. Concurrent challenges such as re-emerging communicable diseases

and inadequate preventive care further emphasize the need for improvements (44).

Human resource management is a critical determinant of healthcare efficiency (45, 46). Effective workload management, task organization, and supervision can significantly enhance worker productivity (47, 48). A studies also highlights the role of optimized workforce management in reducing waiting times and improving service outcomes (28).

Four scenarios were developed to improve HH performance: Scenario 1: Reduced health workers from two to one, addressing low productivity. Scenario 2: Increased satellite villages covered by the HH from two to three, expanding service reach. Scenario 3: Extended working hours by 30 (8:00–15:00). Scenario 4: Combined all prior changes, resulting in a 41% increase in patient admissions, a 31% increase in services delivered, and a rise in worker productivity to 95%.

Scenario 4 aligns with research suggesting that reducing redundant staff can enhance performance in low-traffic facilities (49-51). It also emphasizes aligning service volumes with popula-

tion density, leveraging mobile health units, and reforming organizational structures to improve coverage (52). However, the findings of another study were contradictory; it reported that, despite the number and variety of services rendered by health workers and the referrals to covered villages, the productivity rate exceeded 80% (27).

Similarly, four scenarios were designed to optimize HP performance: Scenario 1: Reduced working hours from 8:00–15:00 to 8:00–14:00. Scenario 2: Shifted service delivery from a multi-professional, rotating model to an individual-specialized approach. Scenario 3: Reduced the number of staff from three to one (midwife), addressing low productivity. Scenario 4: Merged the HP with an adjacent unit, increasing staff to four (two midwives, two public health experts). This scenario doubled patient admissions and services, improved worker productivity by 10%, and maintained zero waiting times.

Scenario 4 highlights the importance of restructuring workforce arrangements to match patient needs. Consistent with previous research, changes in staffing configurations significantly impacted outcomes (28, 53, 54). Enhanced group performance and supervision further contributed to higher productivity and service quality (46, 47, 55, 56).

### **Recommendations**

The study recommends regular supervisory visits and progress reporting to enhance productivity at HHs and HPs. For units with low referrals and productivity, integrating and restructuring personnel is crucial. Additionally, the PHC Directorate under the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (MoHME) should consider revising service packages to better align with local needs and resources.

While quantitative criteria informed scenario evaluations, future studies should incorporate qualitative assessments for a more comprehensive analysis. Simulation tools, Nominal Group Technique (NGT), and Expert Choice methods provided effective frameworks for developing evidence-based scenarios, but qualitative inputs could enhance these methodologies.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The study offers a benchmarking methodology applicable to LMICs and countries within the WHO EMRO. It addresses gaps in research on PHC optimization, especially in underserved areas. However, limitations include reliance on expert consensus for scoring, potential variability in results across contexts, and limited generalizability due to the study's experimental nature.

### **Conclusion**

Optimal performance at HHs and HPs requires increasing worker productivity and patient referrals. Implementing the proposed scenarios with managerial oversight can enhance service delivery and efficiency. The findings provide practical benchmarks for similar units in Iran and other LMICs. Simulation tools, NGT, and expert evaluation methods represent valuable tools for healthcare performance optimization and decision-making.

### **Journalism Ethics considerations**

Ethical issues (Including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, redundancy, etc.) have been completely observed by the authors.

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### **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.



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