



# Post-Pandemic Onset Public School Counselor Retention and Mobility in Virginia

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## Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on public education worldwide as well as here in Virginia. In the years since the pandemic's onset, students' test-based performance dropped dramatically and has not yet fully bounced back (Fahle et al., 2024), chronic absenteeism increased (Malkus, 2024), mental health worsened (Elharake et al., 2023), and incidences of student misbehavior rose (Prothero, 2023). School counselors, through the services they provide to students, are playing a vital role in helping students recover from and cope with the changes brought on by the pandemic. Counselors, however, experienced the same pandemic which altered the demands of their job and the resources they had available to them to meet those demands (Alexander et al., 2022; Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). In this brief, we examined how the pandemic may have altered the composition of Virginia's public school counselor workforce and their retention and mobility patterns. We found the following:

- *Composition:* Counselors, in SY 2021-22, were majority female (85%) and White (66%). They were most likely to hold a Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) license (62%). Almost a quarter were in their first through third year as a counselor.
- *Composition:* Since SY 2011-12, the number of

school counselors increased 23%, the percentage of White counselors decreased by 5.3 percentage points, and the percentage with a PPS license increased 9.8 percentage points.

- *Retention and Mobility:* The retention rate increased 0.6 percentage points between spring 2019 and spring 2020 (the pandemic's first year) but decreased 2.9 percentage points to 80.9% in spring 2021 (the pandemic's second year). The departure rate decreased 0.5 percentage points in spring 2020 and increased 1.6 percentage points to 8.5% in spring 2021. The direction and magnitude of these changes differed with counselor gender, race/ethnicity, license type, and years of experience.
- *Retention and Mobility:* The patterns of how counselors' retention and mobility changed with the pandemic were similar to the changes among teachers but were less pronounced.
- *Persistence:* Almost half of first-time counselors left the first school in which they worked within 3 years. Slightly more than half had stopped working as a counselor after 7 years. Counselors who held a Postgraduate Professional license in their first year persisted longer than counselors with an initial PPS or Provisional license.

These findings reveal some of the ways the pandemic impacted Virginia's public school counselors. Our hope is that more research will be conducted to support the important work they do.

## Virginia's School Counselors

Through a comprehensive school counseling program, school counselors provide students with services in three broad areas: academic guidance, college and career counseling, and social-emotional development (8VAC20-620-10). The COVID-19 pandemic had negative impacts on all these areas. Students' test-based performance dropped dramatically and has not yet fully bounced back (Fahle et al., 2024), chronic absenteeism increased (Malkus, 2024), mental health worsened (Elharake et al., 2023), and incidences of student misbehavior rose (Prothero, 2023). Combined, these changes have increased the need for the services school counselors provide (Alexander et al., 2022; Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). Recognizing this, the 2023 General Assembly passed Senate Bill 1043 to require that at least 80% of counselors' time is dedicated to direct counseling services and no more than 20% of their time is spent on program planning and school support.

Counselors, of course, were not immune from the pandemic's effects. In partnership with the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), we examined whether the pandemic altered the composition of Virginia's public school counselor workforce and their retention and mobility patterns. We analyzed statewide administrative data that allowed us to track public school counselors over time among the Commonwealth of Virginia's county, city, and town divisions, of which there were 132 during the years analyzed here. These data contained an observation for each school a counselor worked at each year. Our sample included 43,736 counselor-by-school-by-year observations over eleven years (SY 2011-12 to SY 2021-22) on 6,841 unique counselors. The data available for this analysis did not enable us to examine retention and mobility past SY 2020-21.

### Research Questions

The three research questions that guided our analysis focused on the composition, retention and

mobility, and persistence of Virginia's school counselors between SY 2011-12 and SY 2021-22.

1. *Composition*: How has the composition of counselors changed over time?
2. *Retention & Mobility*: How has mobility of counselors changed after the pandemic's onset?
3. *Persistence*: How many years do first-time counselors work in their initial school and how long is it until they stop working as a school counselor?

We answered these questions for all counselors as well as by counselors' gender, race/ethnicity (White, Black, and Hispanic), license type (Pupil Personnel Services, Postgraduate Professional, and Provisional) [1], and years of experience as a school counselor.

**Imputing Years of Experience.** Unlike the other three counselor characteristics, the data did not include an annual measure of a counselor's years of experience. We, therefore, imputed experience by identifying the first year an individual was employed as a school counselor and added one year of experience for every year observed as a counselor thereafter. This approach allowed us to impute experience only for those individuals for whom we were reasonably confident we observed their first year as a counselor. SY 2005-06 was the first year we observed counselors, but most would have worked as a counselor in a prior year. Among the new counselors observed in SY 2006-07, some unknown portion would have been returning from a hiatus. Our analysis of the length of counselors' hiatuses (i.e., the time between non-consecutive years employed as a counselor) found that very few hiatuses last longer than two years. SY 2008-09, therefore, was the first year we were reasonably confident we observed individuals in their first year as a counselor in Virginia's public schools. Moving forward to SY 2011-12 (the first year of our analysis), this meant we only observed counselors in their first through fourth year (only 26% of all counselors that year). With each subsequent school year, we

observed counselors with another year of experience such that in SY 2021-22 we observed counselors with up to 14 years of experience (67% of all counselors that year). Due to the relatively small number of new counselors each year (roughly 300), we grouped experience into 1-3 years, 4-6 years, and 7-10 years. We observed counselors in these experience bands both before and after the pandemic's onset.

**Defining Retention & Mobility.** We defined counselor *retention* at the school level. Counselors were retained each year if they were employed as a counselor at the same school the following year. All counselors who were not retained exhibited mobility (also known as turnover). We examined three primary mobility outcomes: **departures**, **transfers**, and **role changes**.

**Departing** counselors were those who were not observed working in any Virginia public school (VPS) the following year. Most of these were counselors who *left* the VPS workforce altogether to work in another state's public schools, a private school, or another industry, retired, or exited the labor force. Some departing counselors may still have worked in a VPS but held a position not captured by the Master Schedule Collection (i.e., any division-level or specialized school-level position). Departing counselors may also have taken positions at a public school not overseen by a division (e.g., Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind, regional technical

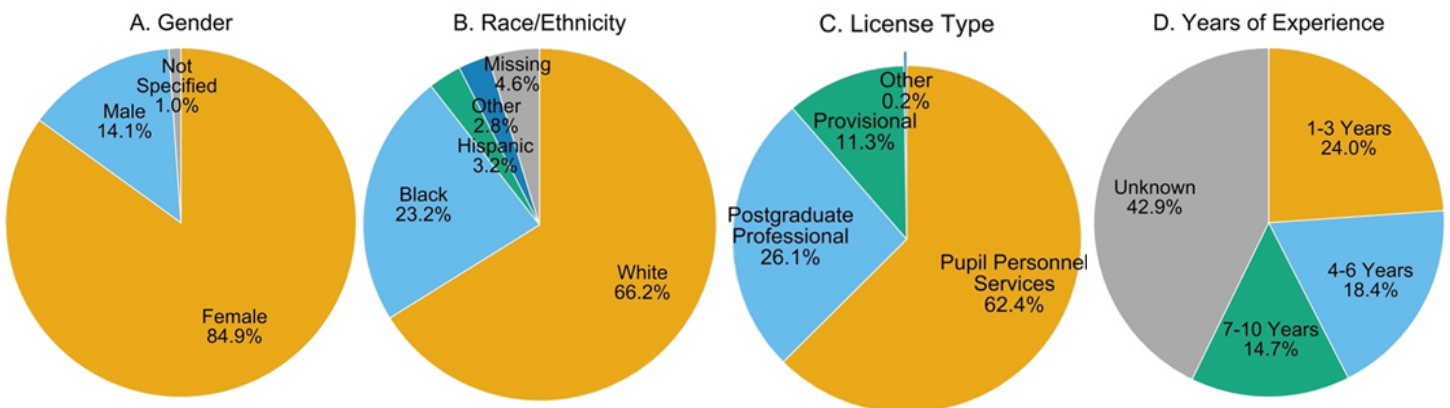
schools, governor's schools, etc.) which we could not include in our analysis due to inconsistent data collection in the years we analyzed. We could not distinguish among these types of departures.

**Transferring** counselors were those who were observed as a counselor the following year but at a different VPS. We identified two types of transfers: (1) *within-division transfers* which occurred when counselors moved to a different school within the same division the following year, and (2) *across-division transfers* which occurred when counselors transferred to a different division the following year.

**Role changing** occurred when counselors continued to work in a VPS but not as school counselors. Each year we observed some counselors switching to teaching and other non-teaching roles (e.g., assistant principals and principals). These new roles into which counselors transferred could be at the same school, a different school in the same division, or a different division.

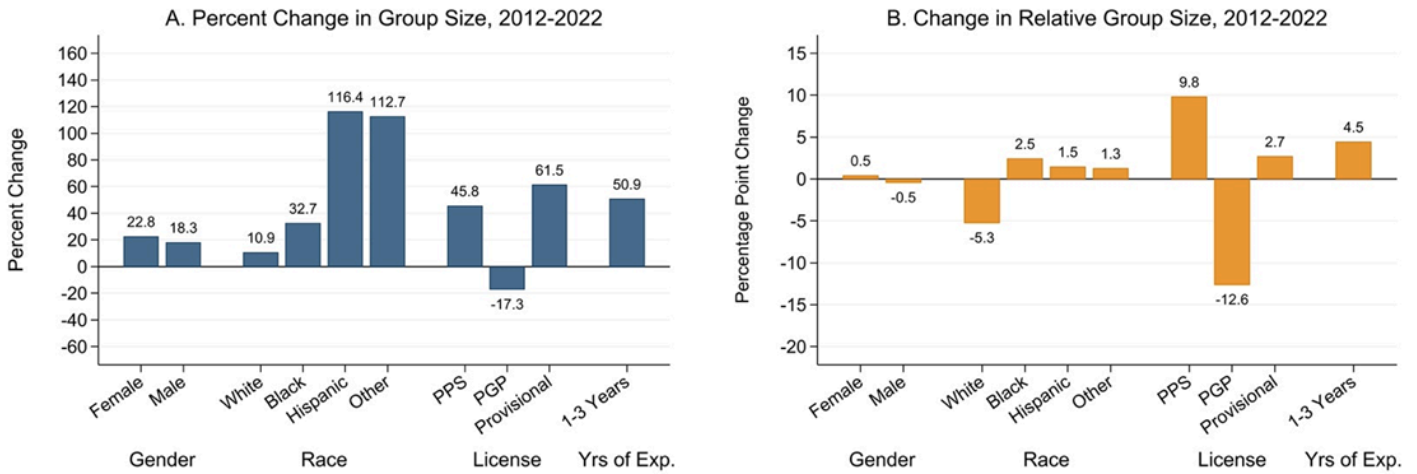
### Composition: Now and Then

There were 4,150 school counselors working across Virginia's regular public schools in 2022. Similar to Virginia's teacher workforce, Virginia's school counselors were mostly female and White (**Figure 1**). Counselors were more likely than teachers to be female but less likely than teachers to be White. In 2022, 85% of counselors and 78% of teachers were



**Figure 1.** Characteristics of School Counselors, 2022

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**Figure 2.** Change in Characteristics of School Counselors between 2012 and 2022

*How to interpret:* Between SY 2011-12 and SY 2021-22, the number of female counselors increased 22.8% (panel A) while, as a percentage of all counselors, the percent who were female increased 0.5 percentage points (panel B).

female while 66% of counselors and 80% of teachers were White. Counselors were almost twice as likely as teachers to be Black (23% versus 12%) and roughly equally likely to be Hispanic (3.2% and 3.6%). Most counselors held a Pupil Personnel Services license (62%), slightly more than a quarter held a Postgraduate Professional license (26%), and over a tenth held a Provisional license (11%). Finally, a little under a quarter were in their first, second, or third year as a school counselor in Virginia (24%).

The pandemic caused no noticeable deviations from pre-pandemic trends in the composition of the Virginia public school counselor workforce. Between 2012 and 2022, the total number of school counselors increased 23%, driven in part by the state lowering the counselor-to-student ratio to 1:325 (§ 22.1-253.13:2). All groups increased in size, except one (Figure 2, panel A). The percentage increase in the number of female counselors was more than that for male counselors (23% versus 18%). The number of Hispanic and Black counselors increased at a higher rate compared to White counselors (116, 33, and 11%, respectively). The only group to decrease in size between 2012 and 2022 were the counselors with a Postgraduate Professional license. This group shrank by 17% while those holding a Pupil Personnel Services license

increased 56% and the number with a Provisional license increased 62%. Finally, there was a 51% increase in the number of early career counselors. Combining all these changes resulted in the school counselors in 2022 compared to those in 2012 being slightly more likely to be female (less likely to be male), more likely to be Black or Hispanic (less likely to be White), more likely to hold either a Pupil Personnel Services or Provisional license (less likely to hold a Postgraduate Professional license), and more likely to be in their early career (Figure 2, panel B).

### Retention and Mobility Patterns

Overall counselor retention and mobility in the first two years since the pandemic's onset deviated from pre-pandemic trends (see Figure 3 on the next page). [2] At the end of first year of the pandemic (spring 2020), counselor retention increased slightly (0.6 percentage points) with 83.8% of counselors returning to their same school in fall 2020 (panel A). With more counselors remaining at their same school, fewer counselors transferred to a new division or departed (each rate decreased 0.5 percentage points; panel B). More counselors, however, moved to new schools in the same division (a 0.4 percentage point increase).

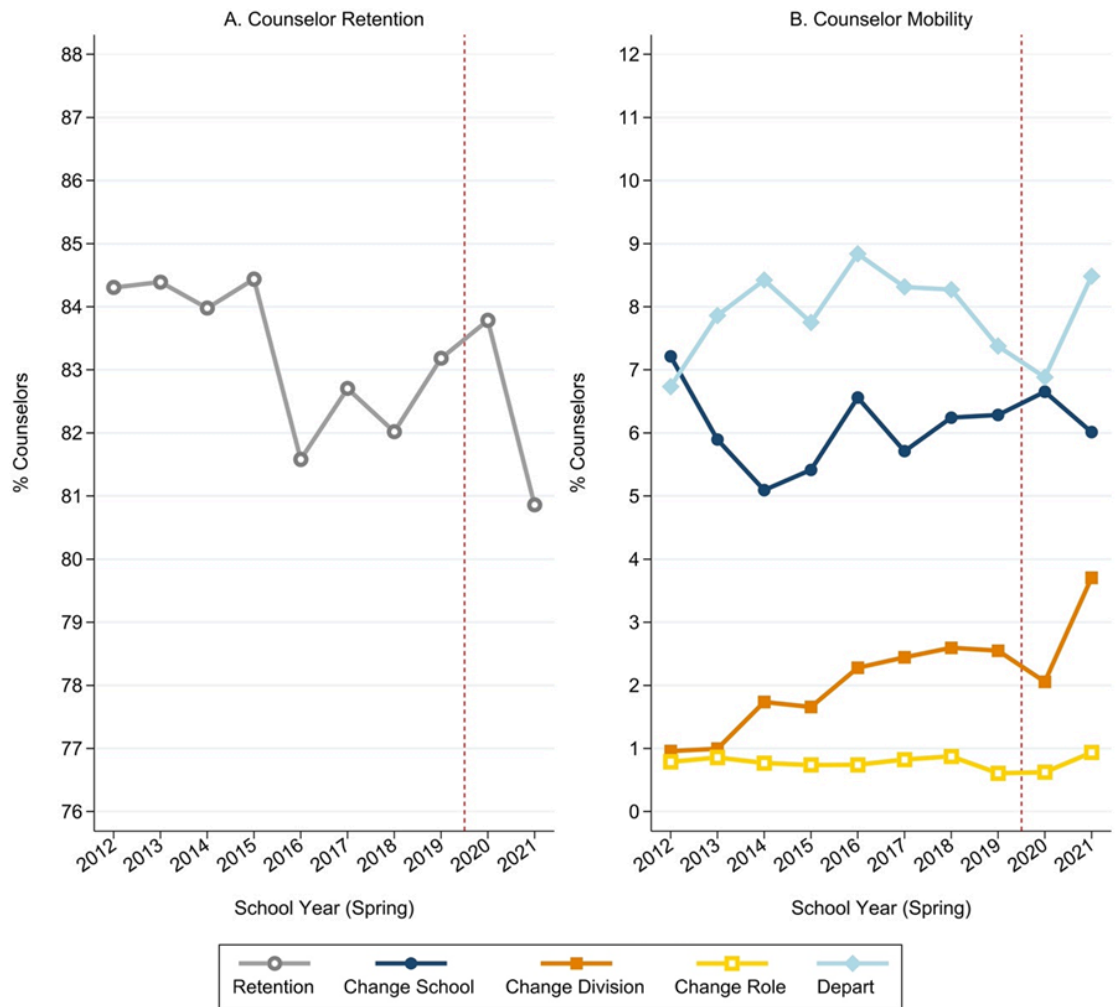
Retention decreased substantially at the end of the pandemic's second year (spring 2022) when 80.9% of counselors returned to their same school in fall 2022. This was the lowest retention rate over the period we analyzed, and this 2.9 percentage point decrease in the retention rate was the largest year-over-year change. The share of counselors who transferred to a new division increased by 1.6 percentage points to 3.7%. This was also the highest rate and year-over-year change since 2012. The departure rate also increased by 1.6 percentage points to 8.5%. As in the prior year, the share of counselors moving within the same division moved in the opposite direction of the other forms of mobility, decreasing 0.6 percentage points to 6.0%.

The pattern of these post-pandemic onset changes was similar the changes we previously found among teachers (Katz & Miller, 2023). The changes in counselor retention and mobility, however, were less pronounced. For example, teacher retention increased by 1.4 percentage points in the first year, a change 2.3 times as large as the change for counselors. In the second year, teacher retention dropped 3.7 percentage points, 1.3 times as large as

for counselors.

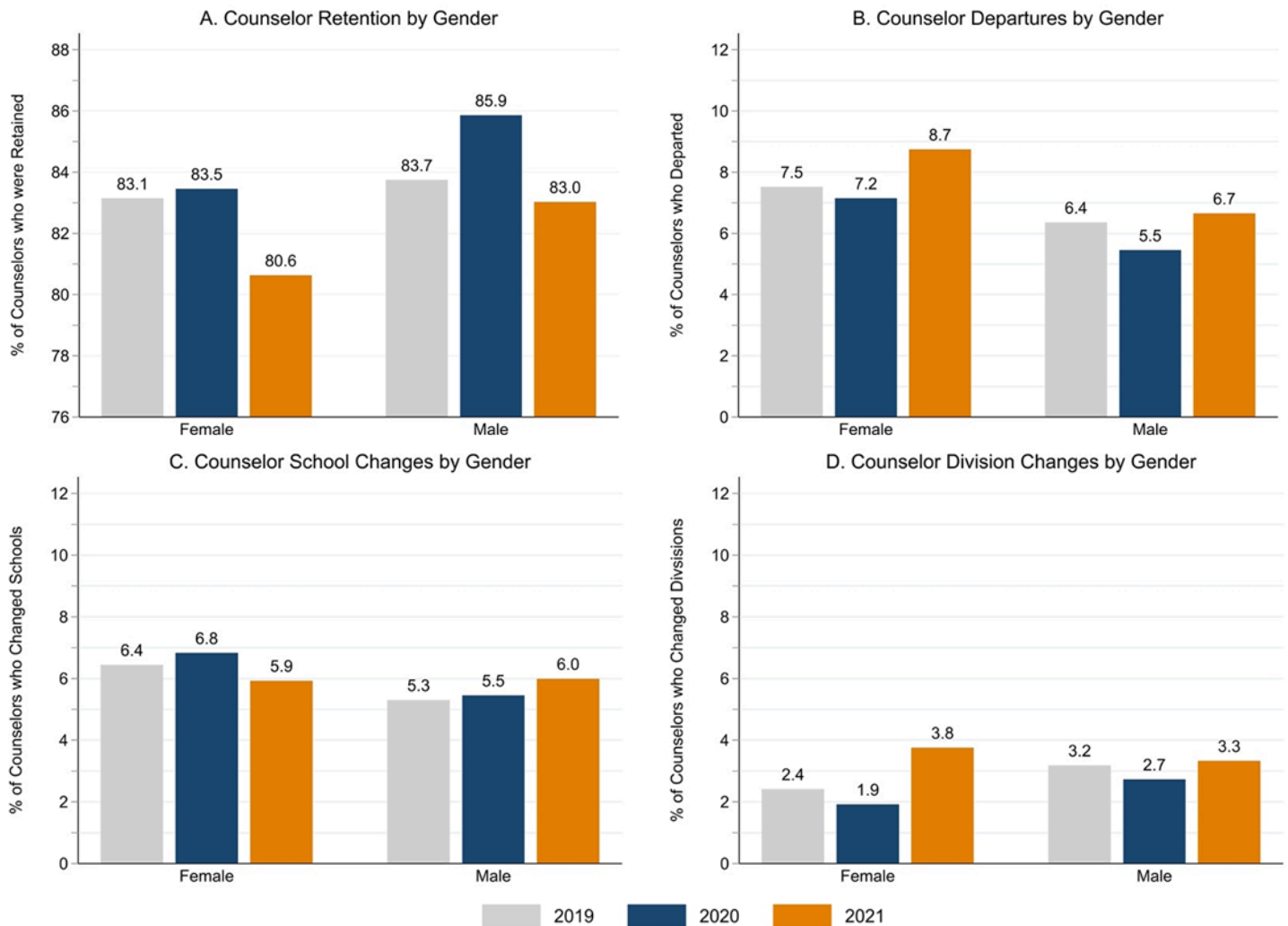
### Variation in Retention and Mobility Patterns by Counselor Characteristics

We have shown how the changes in counselor retention and mobility over the first two years of the pandemic differed across counselors' gender, race/ethnicity, license type, and years of experience in Figures 4 through 7, respectively. We focused our narrative below on the retention and departure rates due to space constraints but have presented rates for moving within and transferring across



**Figure 3.** School Counselor Retention and Mobility Rates, 2012 to 2021

*How to interpret:* Of the school counselors working in Spring 2021, 80.9% continued as a counselor in the same school in Fall 2022 (panel A) while 8.5% were not working in the Virginia public school system, 6.0% continued as a counselor but changed to a different school in the same division, 3.7% continued as a counselor but changed divisions, and 0.9% changed to a different role (panel B).



**Figure 4. School Counselor Retention and Mobility Rates by Gender, 2019 to 2021**

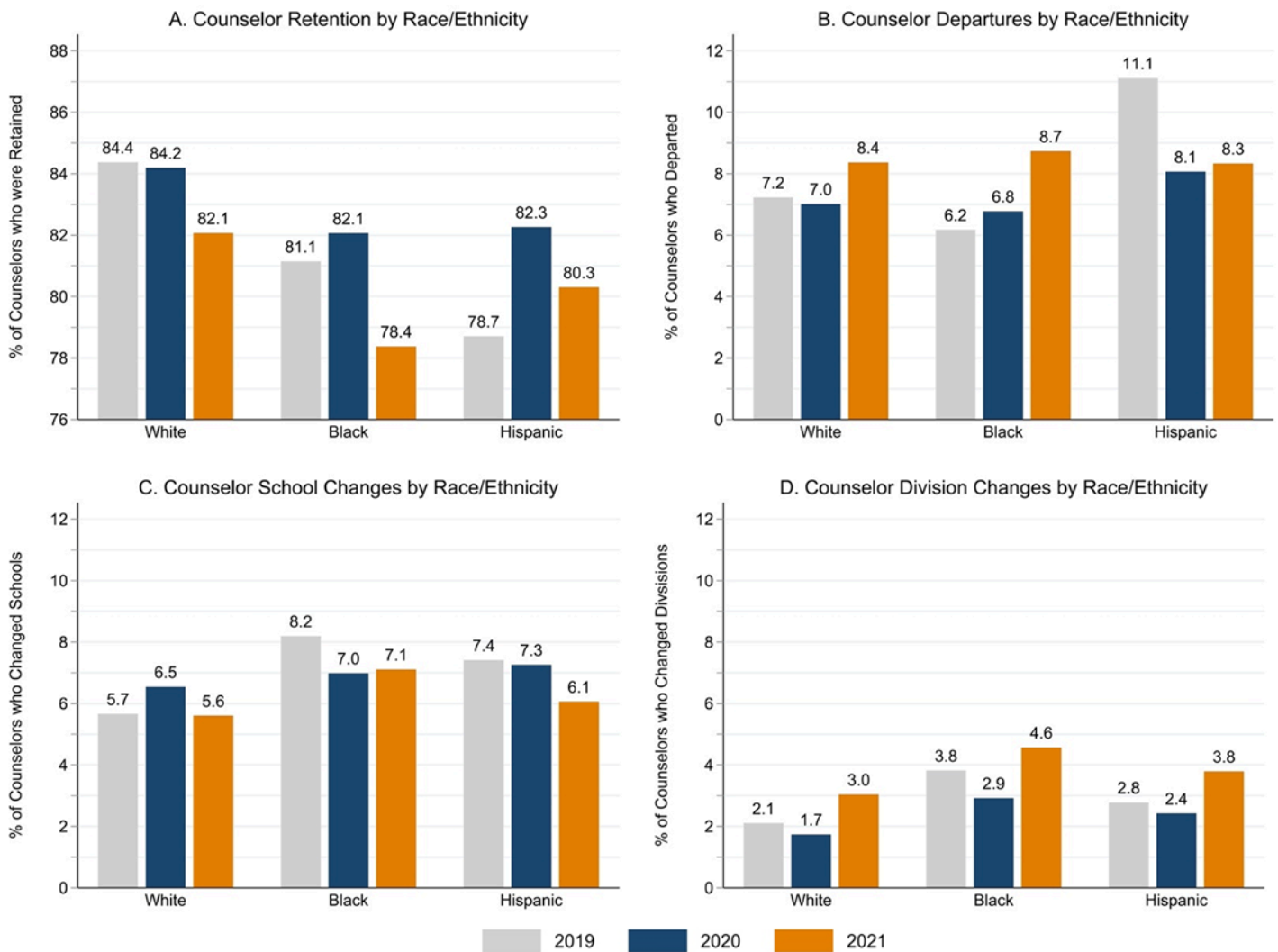
*How to interpret:* Of the female school counselors working in Spring 2021, 80.6% continued as a counselor in the same school in Fall 2022 (panel A) while 8.7% were not working in the Virginia public school system (panel B), 5.9% continued as a counselor but changed to a different school in the same division (panel C), and 3.8% continued as a counselor but changed divisions (panel D).

divisions in the figures. Given that a very low share of counselors changed roles each year, we did not include that in this analysis.

The retention and mobility of female and male counselors (**Figure 4**) generally followed the same patterns as shown for all counselors in Figure 3. Female counselors were retained at a lower rate than male counselors, but these differences grew during the pandemic from 0.4 percentage points in spring 2019 to 2.4 percentage points in both spring 2020 and 2021 (panel A). This was driven by retention among male counselors increasing more

than for female counselors in spring 2020 (2.2 versus 0.4 percentage points). Retention decreased 2.9 percentage points in spring 2020 for both groups. Departures decreased more among male than female counselors in spring 2020 (0.9 versus 0.3 percentage points) but increased more among female than male counselors in spring 2021 (1.5 versus 0.8 percentage points).

There were meaningful differences across White, Black, and Hispanic counselors in how the retention and departure rates changed over the first two years of the pandemic (**Figure 5** on the next page).



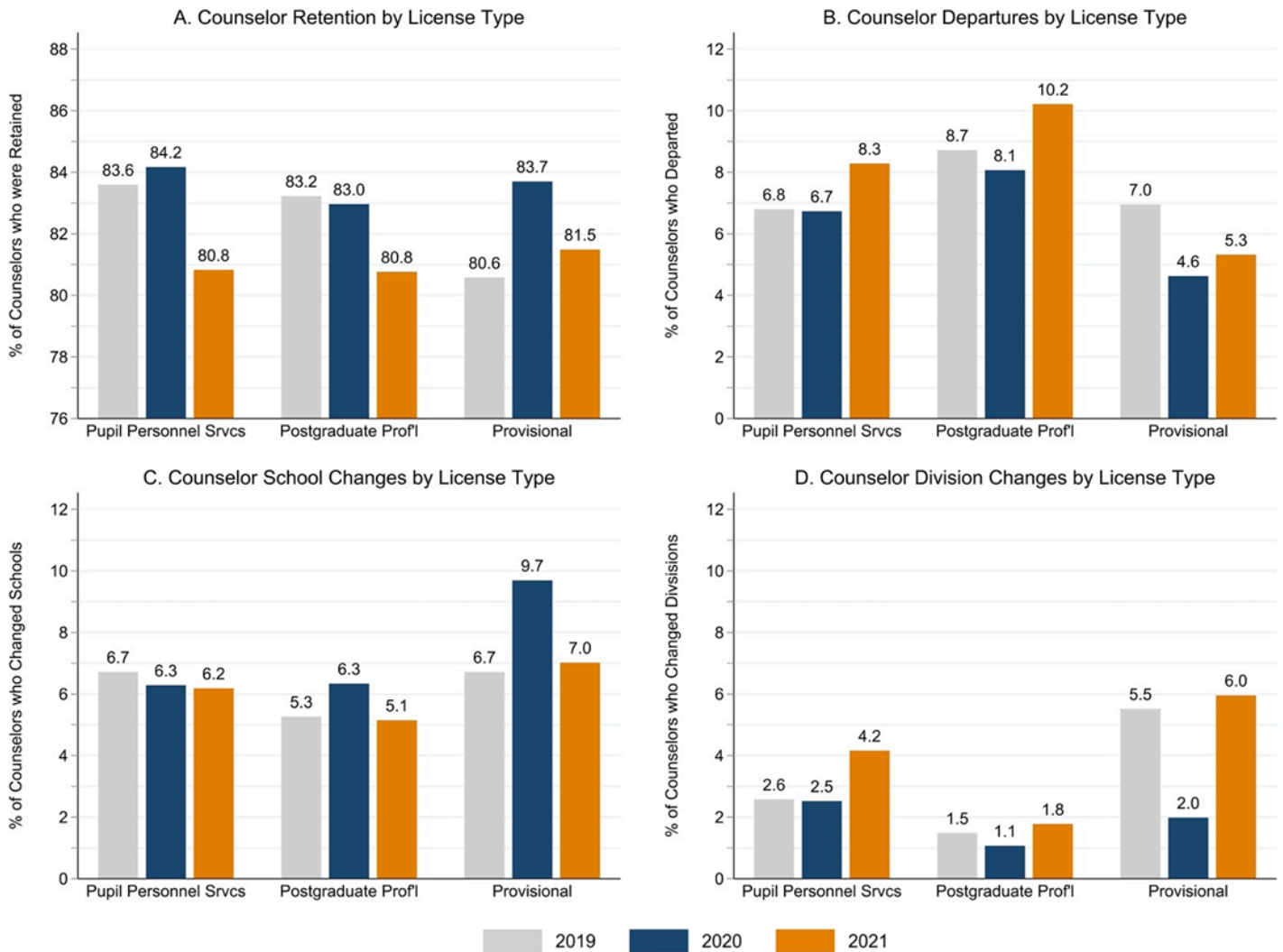
**Figure 5.** School Counselor Retention and Mobility Rates by Race/Ethnicity, 2019 to 2021

*How to interpret:* Of the White school counselors working in Spring 2021, 82.1% continued as a counselor in the same school in Fall 2022 (panel A) while 8.4% were not working in the Virginia public school system (panel B), 5.6% continued as a counselor but changed to a different school in the same division (panel C), and 3.0% continued as a counselor but changed divisions (panel D).

White counselors were retained at higher rates than their Black and Hispanic peers but were the only group to experience a drop in retention in both the first and second years of the pandemic. In the second year of the pandemic, retention of Black counselors dropped more than the retention of White and Hispanic counselors (3.7 percentage points versus 2.1 and 2.0 percentage points, respectively). Departures at the end of the second pandemic year increased the most among Black counselors (2.5 percentage points) compared to 1.4 percentage points among White counselors and 0.2

percentage points among Hispanic counselors.

In **Figure 6** on the next page we have shown the changes in retention and mobility over the first two years of the pandemic separately by the three license types. In spring 2020, retention increased the most among provisionally licensed counselors (3.1 percentage points), likely due to pandemic-induced extensions of these licenses. This compared to a 0.6 percentage point increase among counselors with a Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) license and a 0.2 percentage point *decrease* among



**Figure 6.** School Counselor Retention and Mobility Rates by License Type, 2019 to 2021

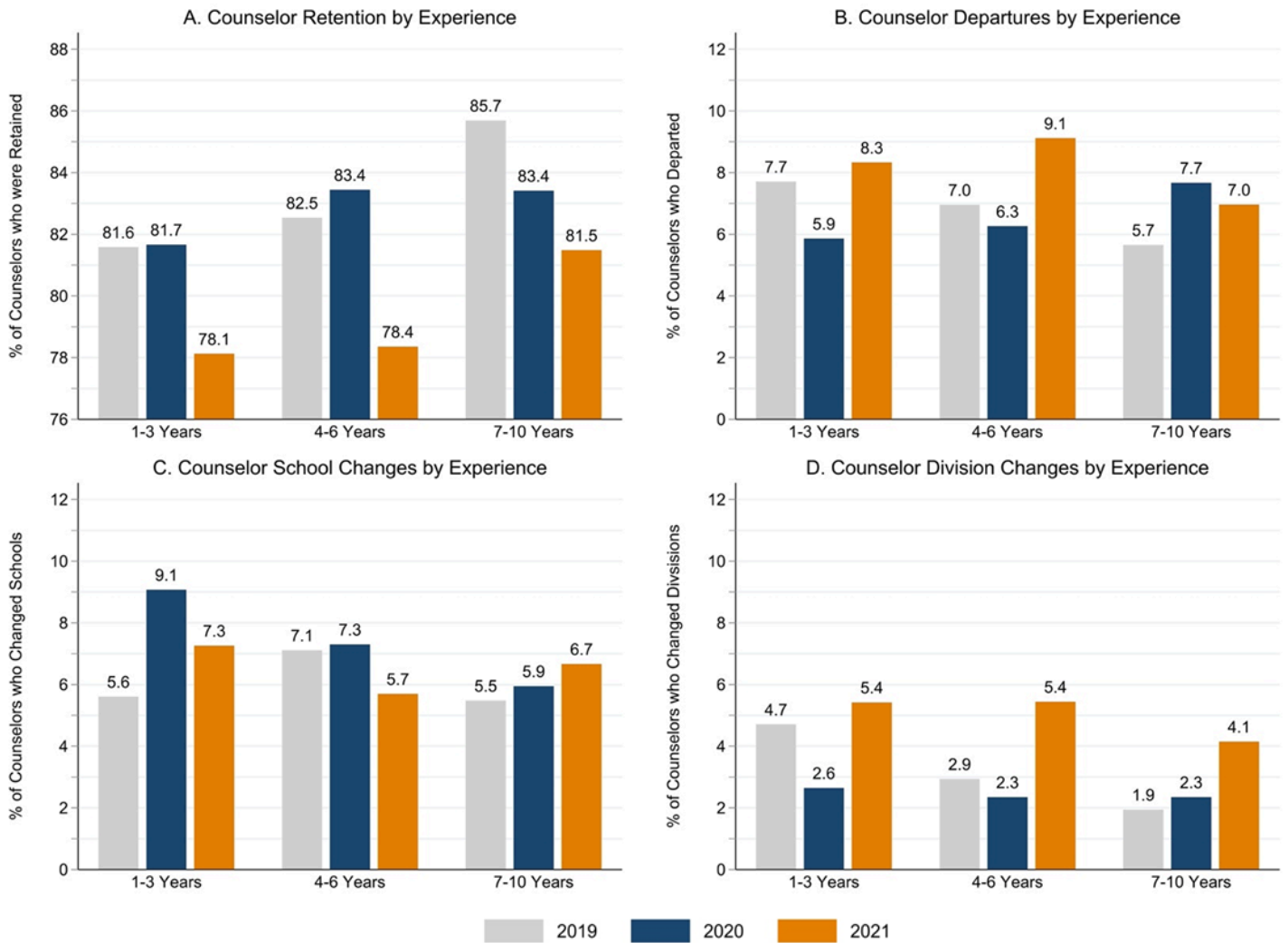
*How to interpret:* Of the school counselors with a Pupil Personnel Services license working in Spring 2021, 80.8% continued as a counselor in the same school in Fall 2022 (panel A) while 8.3% were not working in the Virginia public school system (panel B), 6.2% continued as a counselor but changed to a different school in the same division (panel C), and 4.2% continued as a counselor but changed divisions (panel D).

counselors with a Postgraduate Professional (PGP) license. One year later, in spring 2021, retention decreased more among counselors with a PPS license (3.4 percentage points) than among those with either a PGP or Provisional license (both decreased 2.2 percentage points). Departures that same year increased more among PGP-licensed counselors (2.1 percentage points) than among counselors with either a PPS or Provisional license (1.6 and 0.7 percentage points, respectively). Across all three years, provisionally licensed counselors were more likely to move within and transfer across

divisions than were counselors with either a PPS or PGP license.

The way counselors with between 7 and 10 years of experience responded to the pandemic differed from that of their less experienced peers (see **Figure 7** on the next page). While their retention rates were higher, counselors with 7-10 years of experience were the only group where the retention rate decreased in both the first and second years of the pandemic, an overall decrease of 4.2 percentage points. The pattern of year-to-year change in the





**Figure 7. School Counselor Retention and Mobility Rates by Years of Experience, 2019 to 2021**

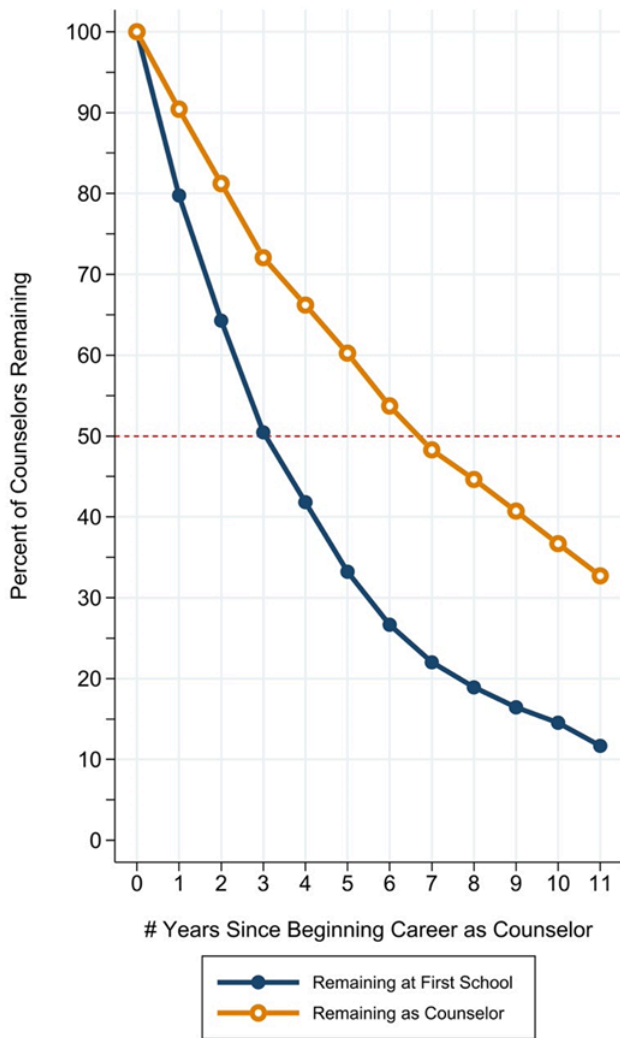
*How to interpret:* Of the school counselors who were in their 1st through 3rd year as a counselor in Spring 2021, 78.1% continued as a counselor in the same school in Fall 2022 (panel A) while 8.3% were not working in the Virginia public school system (panel B), 7.3% continued as a counselor but changed to a different school in the same division (panel C), and 5.4% continued as a counselor but changed divisions (panel D).

other two groups (1-3 years and 4-6 years of experience) was the same as the overall pattern – a slight increase in the first year and a larger decrease in the second year. That decrease in retention in the second year of the pandemic was larger among the lesser experienced counselors than among the more experienced counselors. It decreased 3.6 and 5.0 percentage points among counselors with 1-3 and 4-6 years of experience, respectively, compared to 1.9 percentage points among counselors with 7-10 years. Group differences were also evidenced with respect to departures. While the departure rate

decreased in the first year of the pandemic among the less experienced counselors, it increased 2 percentage points among those with 7-10 years of experience. In the second year of the pandemic, departures rates rose among counselors with 1-3 and 4-6 years of experience (2.4 and 2.8 percentage points, respectively) but decreased 0.7 percentage points among the more experienced counselors.

**Persistence**

Separate from the effects of the pandemic, we were



**Figure 8.** Percent of School Counselor Remaining at First School and as a Counselor by Years of Experience, 2009 to 2021

Note: This analysis included all school counselors who began their careers between 2009 and 2017.

*How to interpret:* A year after they began their careers as school counselors 90.4% were still working as a counselor and 79.8% were still working in the school in which they started their career as a counselor. Eleven years after starting their careers as school counselors 32.7% had been a counselor every year and were still working as a counselor while 11.7% were still a counselor at their initial school.

interested in following the career trajectory of first-year counselors to determine how long they persisted in their initial school and until they stopped (at least for one year) their career as a counselor in the Virginia public school system. In **Figure 8**, we have shown the percentage of counselors remaining at their initial school and as a counselor after each year since the start of their career as a school counselor. Twenty percent of counselors leave their initial school after their first year and almost half have left after their third year. Not all counselors who left their initial school stopped their career as a counselor. Therefore, the length of their first spell as a counselor was longer than their spell at their initial school. Ten percent left counseling after one year and more than half had left after seven years.

In **Table 1**, we have provided statistics on how long it takes for half of counselors to separate from their initial school and their counseling career as well as how these lengths of time varied by counselor gender, race/ethnicity, and license type. Male counselors persisted slightly longer than female counselors. While White counselors persisted slightly longer at their initial school than Black and Hispanic counselors, Hispanic counselors persisted slightly longer in their career. The largest differences we found were between the licenses counselors held in their first year. Half of counselors with an initial PGP remained at their initial school over a year longer and stayed as a counselor for almost two years longer

**Table 1.** Number of Years When Half of School Counselors have Separated from their First School and from the Career

Counselor Group	Separate from First School	Separate from Career
Overall	3.05	6.85
Female	3.08	6.67
Male	3.14	6.97
Black	2.94	6.07
Hispanic	2.73	6.96
White	3.14	6.63
Pupil Personnel Services	2.76	5.73
Postgraduate Professional	3.85	7.62
Provisional	3.01	6.72

Note: Includes school counselors who began their careers between 2009 and 2017. Teachers are assigned to a license type based on the license they held in their first year as a counselor.

than counselors with an initial PPS license and almost one year longer than counselors with an initial Provisional license.

## Conclusion

School counselors provide important services to students, and these services are vital to the ongoing pandemic recovery. The state has acknowledged this in laws that prioritized counselor time for providing direct counseling services to students and lowered the counselor-to-student ratio. Counselors, however, also experienced the pandemic and its impacts. We examined how the composition of Virginia's public school counselor workforce changed between SY 2011-12 and 2021-22 and how the pandemic altered their retention and mobility patterns. Since SY 2011-12, the number of school counselors increased 23%, the percentage of non-White counselors increased by 5.3 percentage points to 34%, and the percentage with a PPS license increased 9.8 percentage points to 62%. Over the first two years of the pandemic, the retention rate decreased 2.3 percentage points to 80.9%, and the departure rate increased 1.1 percentage points to 8.5%. The patterns of these changes were similar to the changes among teachers over the same period but were less pronounced. The direction and magnitude of these changes differed with counselor gender, race/ethnicity, license type, and years of experience. Finally, almost half of first-time counselors left the first school in which they worked within 3 years, and slightly more than half had stopped working as a counselor after 7 years. These findings revealed some of the ways the pandemic impacted Virginia's public school counselors. Our hope is that more research will be conducted on counselors, such as research in how divisions have responded to the new laws, to support the important work they do.

## Acknowledgment

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## Endnotes

[1] Counselors must hold a license with a school counselor endorsement. The Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) and Postgraduate Professional (PGP) licenses both require the completion of a master's degree program in counseling. The PGP also requires passing scores on the mandated professional teacher's assessments. Those holding a Provisional license are typically new school counselors. The non-renewable Provisional license allows an individual to work as a counselor while completing the PPS or PGP license's requirements for the school counselor endorsement.

[2] We exclude data from a small number of divisions in the years when they underreported the number of school counselors working in their schools. See the appendix for further details.

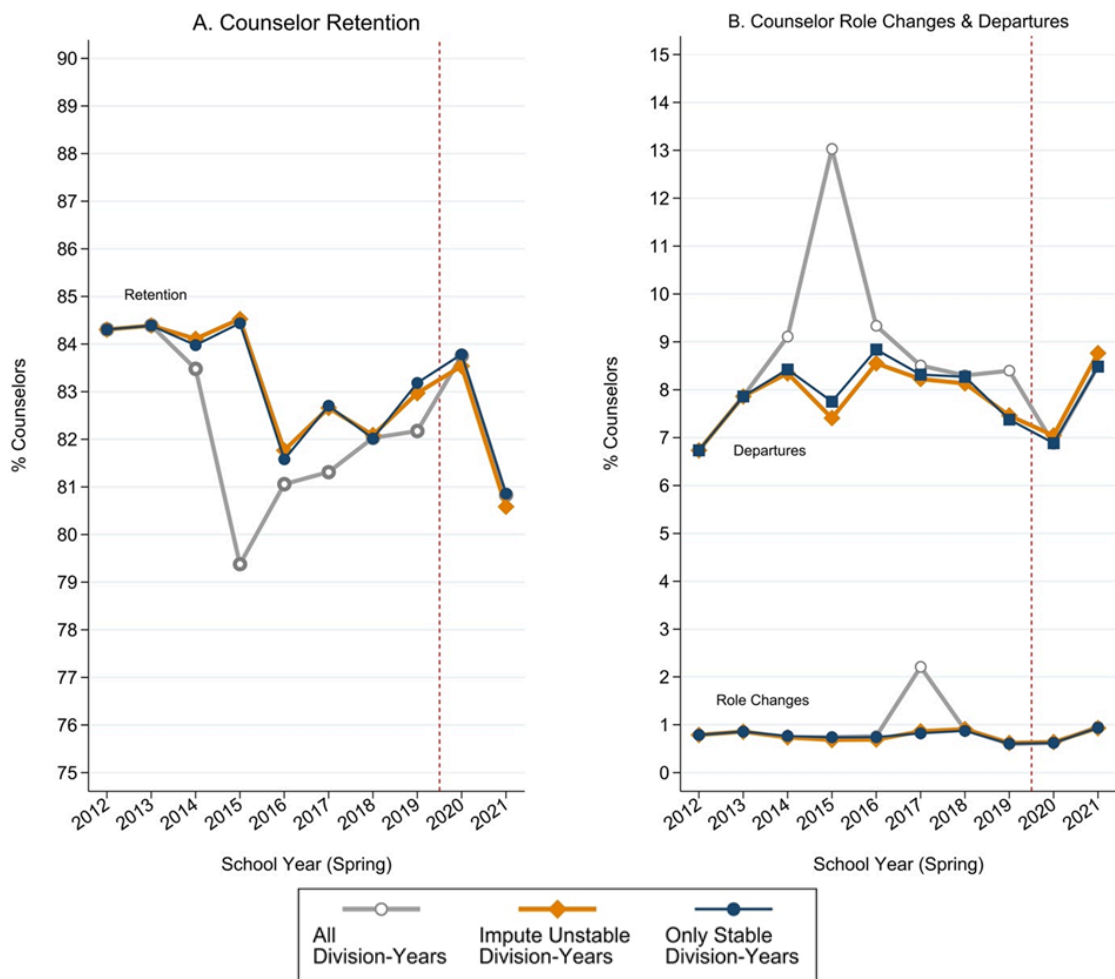
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## Appendix

Some divisions in some years underreported the number of counselors employed in their schools. There were two ways in which this occurred. First, the division may have excluded counselors from the data submitted to VDOE. We, as a result, incorrectly identify these counselors as having departed. This can be seen in gray line with hollow circle markers in **Figure A1** by the large drop in the retention rate (panel A) and large increase in the departure rate (panel B) in 2015. The second form of underreporting was when divisions included counselors in their data submission but listed them in a non-

counselor role. Here, we incorrectly identify these counselors as having changed roles. This can be seen in panel B with the spike in the rate of role changes in 2017. We considered two approaches to avoiding these misidentifications: (1) imputing the number of counselors and their retention and mobility behavior using the division’s data from surrounding years (the orange line with diamond markers) and (2) dropping the unstable years in the underreporting divisions (navy line with solid circle markers). Both yielded nearly identical trends in overall counselor retention and mobility. We opted for the second approach and excluded the unstable years in the underreporting divisions.



**Figure A1.** School Counselor Retention and Mobility Rates on Various Samples, 2012 to 2021

*Note:* There was one division with unstable data for in 2015, 2017, and 2019 through 2022 as well as two divisions in 2016 and 2018. *How to interpret:* Of the school counselors working in Spring 2015, 79.4% continued as a counselor in the same school in Fall 2015 (panel A, All Division-Years). When the missing data are imputed for the unstable division-years, this same rate increases to 84.5% (panel A, Impute Unstable Division-Years). If the unstable division-years are excluded and not imputed, the retention rate was 84.4% (panel A, Only Stable Division-Years).