
Burnout in U.S. Nurses: Risks and Consequences



A new study looks into the issue of nurse burnout in the U.S. and associated factors, urging healthcare provider organisations to improve their management effort in this area.

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Burnout is recognised as one of the major problems in healthcare, and nurses is one of the most affected group. A team of researchers investigated burnout-related issues in the U.S. nurse workforce, and particularly the impact of work environment on nurse retention levels (Shah et al. 2021).

They based their analysis on cross-sectional survey data, collected in 2018 in the U.S. National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses, from about 4 million nurses. Variables included a number of sociodemographic factors (sex, age, education, etc.) and profession-related characteristics, such duration of experience, work schedules, dominant function, reasons for changing or planning to change employment, etc.

The respondents (N = 3,957,661) were mostly female with mean age of 48.7 years. Of the total sample 9.5% reported leaving their most recent position, and of those, 31.5% cited burnout as one of the reasons (3.3% of the total sample). Among those who only considered leaving their position, burnout was a major contributing factor for 43.4%. Other factors included stressful work environment, inadequate staffing, lack of good management or leadership, and better pay/benefits. The overwhelming majority reported work environment and inadequate staffing in combination with burnout as the main factors for changing employment. Working in the hospital setting and more than 20 hours per week were associated with greater odds of burnout.

Other key findings of the study include:

- Among those nurses who left their position in 2017, a substantial share reported a stressful work environment.
- Variation in burnout reports between U.S. regions may point to stronger legislation and better nurse staffing in states where nurse burnout levels were lower.
- Number of hours worked per week had a stronger impact on a decision to leave position due to burnout than speciality area.
- The mean age of nurses who have changed or considered changing employment was younger than 45 years.

In conclusion the authors emphasise that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the burnout-related issues in the nurse workforce, and call on policymakers and employers to “also focus on aspects of the work environment known to improve job satisfaction, including staffing ratios, continued nursing education, and support for interdisciplinary teamwork”.

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