



**Jobs for
the Future**

Is Health Care, the Fastest-Growing Sector, a Good Career Path?

Understanding Job Quality in the Health Care Sector

AT A GLANCE

High-quality pathways prepare students for good jobs—but what do we really mean by that? JFF's Quality Jobs Framework provides an expanded definition of quality jobs, highlighting job characteristics all workers deserve in addition to good pay and benefits, such as flexibility, autonomy, stability, and advancement opportunities. Through an examination of national data, we explore what measures of job quality the health care sector is strong in and where it could stand to improve. As the U.S. population ages and concerns about workplace conditions lead to strikes and resignations, increasing job quality in the health care sector is essential to the U.S. economy.

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About

About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all.

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About JFF's Language Choices

JFF is committed to using language that promotes equity and human dignity, rooted in the strengths of the people and communities we serve. We develop our content with the awareness that language can perpetuate privilege but also can educate, empower, and drive positive change to create a more equitable society. We routinely reevaluate our efforts as usage evolves.

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Table of Contents

- Introduction 4

- Health Care Sector at a Glance..... 5
 - Research Considerations 5
 - Compensation 6
 - Advancement 7
 - Agency & Culture 8
 - Structure 9

- Recommended Actions 10
 - 1. Design pathways with job quality in mind. 10
 - 2. Promote job quality awareness through robust regional data collection. 10
 - 3. Facilitate cross-sector collaboration to enhance understanding of job opportunities and job quality within the sector. 10
 - 4. Support education and training programs to address gaps in the sector. 11
 - 5. Advocate for policy reform that enhances job quality. 11

- Research Considerations 12
 - Sector Definition Discrepancies 12
 - Challenges in Employee Perspective Data 13
 - Limited Data Availability 13

- Endnotes 14

Introduction

More than half of the people in the U.S. labor force—92 million workers—are stuck without quality jobs and face systemic barriers to advancement. Jobs for the Future (JFF) released new standards—the [Quality Jobs Framework](#)—to redefine what it means to work in a quality job, looking beyond the traditional measures of pay and benefits. In addition to family-sustaining wages and benefits that provide comprehensive health care and retirement savings, workers deserve job flexibility, autonomy, stability, and advancement opportunities. These characteristics reflect an optimal definition of job quality and may not be currently present in many industries or occupations. Though the practices that lead to these characteristics will look different across industries, all industries can aspire to and move toward implementing these characteristics.

As education and workforce leaders provide better options for students and job seekers to advance along college and career pathways, we must also consider these new standards of quality jobs when identifying which industries to focus on that lead to promising credentials. **The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that by 2032 the health care and social assistance sector will grow more rapidly than any other sector, creating about 45% of job gains, or 2.1 million jobs, from 2022–2032.** Increased care for aging populations and a higher prevalence of chronic conditions will increase employment in key positions such as home health aides, nurse practitioners, and health service managers.¹ **But high-demand doesn't guarantee high-quality.** Below, we explore data that demonstrates where the sector has quality work conditions and areas of improvement.

[CLICK TO ACCESS OUR QUALITY JOBS FRAMEWORK.](#)



Health Care Sector at a Glance

The health care sector is bifurcated, with high-wage occupations (typically practitioner and technical roles that require extensive formal education) and low-wage occupations that are difficult to advance from, including many support roles. Our analysis shows that overall health care demonstrates similar levels of quality compared to other industries, but we hypothesize that if you disaggregate by high- and low-wage occupations, job quality would correlate with wages. A few key areas in the health care sector present clear areas of strength to interested potential workers. One notable strength is job security with a lower percentage of layoffs and discharges compared to the average across all industries and a projection for job openings that exceed the national average. Additionally, health care occupations require varying levels of formal education, allowing some workers to access living-wage jobs with sub-baccalaureate credentials.

Despite these strengths within the sector, some areas could be improved to better align with our comprehensive definition of quality jobs. The health care sector experiences prominent occupational segregation, with women and people of color being overrepresented in low-wage positions. Black workers specifically are overrepresented in low-wage occupations and both Black and Latine workers are underrepresented in high-wage occupations within health care.

Overall health care occupations offer a wage on par with the national average, with the highest-paying roles paying more than triple the average wage, and the lowest-paying roles paying just over half the average wage. The stark difference between these opposing ends calls for wage increases for the lowest-paid positions.

Research Considerations

This research encountered limitations stemming from unavailable key data and variability in health care definitions, which constrained the breadth and depth of our analysis. This document uses the term, health care sector, to encompass varying sector definitions (see [Sector Definition Discrepancies on page 12](#)). We recognize these constraints and advocate for future research to address these gaps to understand the subject matter comprehensively.

Review the [Research Considerations Section on page 12](#) for more information.

** Elements with this symbol note the unavailability of key data and challenges in employer perspective data.*

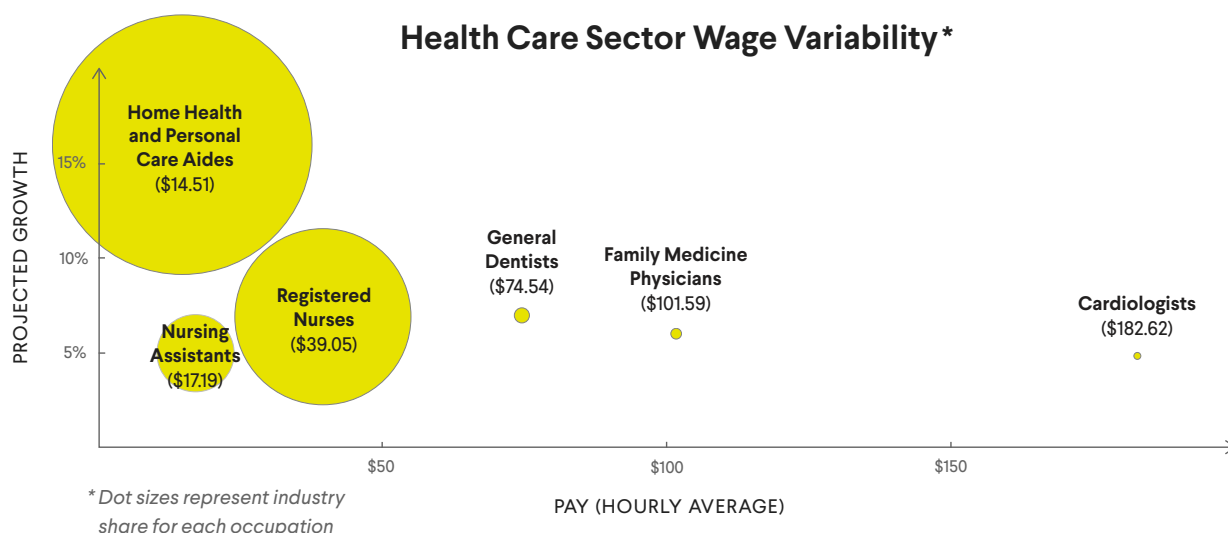


Compensation

All forms of pay, benefits, and leave that enable all workers to support themselves and their dependents at the local cost of living.

Living Wage

The 100 most common roles in the sector have an average hourly pay of \$34.83, similar to the national hourly wage average of \$34.55. Wages of health care occupations vary significantly between practitioners and support workers, as the visual below demonstrates.²



Comprehensive Benefits

The health care sector aligns with the national average in offering comprehensive benefits packages for workers through employer-sponsored health insurance and retirement savings plans.³

Paid Leave

While paid leave varies greatly across the sector, the majority of workers have access to both vacation time and sick time off.⁴ The percentage of workers with access to paid family leave in the health care sector trends 5% higher than average.⁵

Pay Equity and Transparency

According to the [Payscale Compensation Report](#), 41% of health care sector HR respondents expressed their intentions to conduct a race or gender pay equity analysis by the conclusion of 2023. This is considerably below the overall average of 52% across all industries.⁶

One of the highest-paid occupations in the health care industry is radiologists. In 2022, 75.5% of radiologists were men, 24.5% were women. Conversely, one of the lowest-paid occupations, home health aides, was 11.5% male workers and 88.5% female workers.⁷ Furthermore, 77% of radiologists were white, whereas 33.1% of home health aides were white.⁸



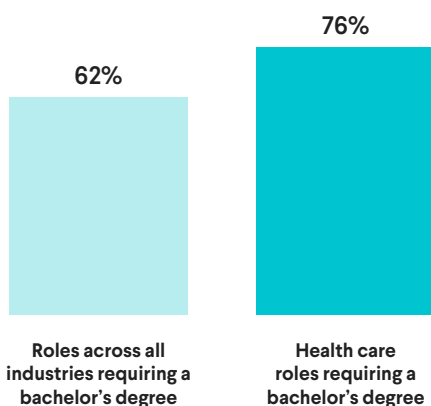
Advancement

The policies and practices that provide all workers with equitable opportunities to grow their skills, knowledge, and careers within their organization or industry.

Skills-Based Practices

There exists significant variability in requirements for roles within the health care sector. In 2023, 91.4% of practitioner roles and 75.4% of support roles require credentials.^{7,8} Additionally, 39.1% of practitioner roles and 20.4% of support roles require prior work experience.^{9,10}

Roles That Require a Bachelor's Degree¹¹



38%
of health care workers hold an advanced degree

Lower-wage roles, such as home health aides and phlebotomists, require certification, but not a degree. High-wage occupations, like doctors and dentists, require advanced degrees. Between these extremes, many middle-wage jobs, such as dental hygienists and respiratory therapists, can often be obtained with an associate's degree or certification.

Transparent Career Pathways*

Across the industry, 50% of respondents express satisfaction with existing career advancement opportunities, including promotion and learning new skills, which is aligned with respondents across all industries.¹² Because the sector heavily requires licensure for occupations, there is greater clarity on what education is necessary for health care occupations.

Career Coaching and Training

The health care sector aligns closely with the average in providing financial support to employees for formal training and education for skill development and in offering formal leadership coaching and/or mentoring programs.¹³

Inclusive Internal Advancement*

Within the health care sector, 24% of respondents reported that they would likely be promoted at their primary job, trending lower than the 30% of respondents across industries who said the same.¹⁴



Agency & Culture

The extent to which all workers are encouraged and supported to use their expertise to drive change within their organization and have a sense of belonging and value in the workplace.

Belonging and Psychological Safety*

In the health care sector, 71% of workers report enjoying their day-to-day work (e.g., good co-workers/managers, pleasant work environment, manageable stress level), which is comparable to workers in other industries.¹⁵

While there has been recent news of high resignations within some occupations in the health care sector, in February 2024, the quit rate in health care aligned closely with the overall average across industries at 2.1% compared to 2.2%.¹⁶

Ability to Organize*

There are several avenues through which workers can organize, including grassroots movements, employee resource groups, and advocacy networks, all of which contribute to shaping the sector's approach to worker representation and collective action. While comprehensive data is difficult to source from all avenues, the health care sector had a union membership rate of 7.7% in February 2024, exceeding the average union membership rate of 6.05% in the private sector.¹⁷

Opportunities for Input*

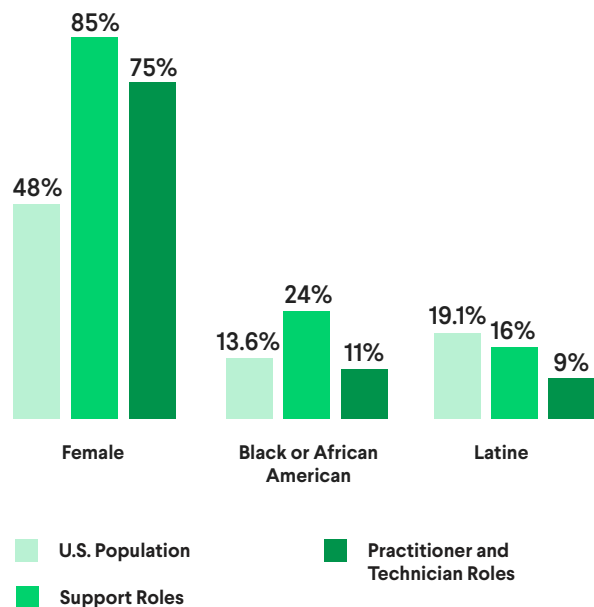
Within the sector, 81% of workers report having the power to change things about their job that they are not satisfied with, surpassing the average across industries at 50% of workers overall.¹⁸

Meaningful Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

Demographically, the health care sector is predominantly female, with women comprising 77% of the workforce in 2023. When comparing lower-wage support roles to higher-wage practitioner and technician roles, we see women make up 85% of support roles and 75% of practitioner and technician roles.¹⁹

Black workers are overrepresented in lower-wage support roles and underrepresented in higher-wage practitioner and technician roles. Latine workers are underrepresented in all health care roles.^{20, 21}

Health Care Workforce Demographics COMPARED TO U.S. POPULATION





Structure

The foundational elements that support a safe, healthy, and stable environment for all workers.

Safe, Healthy, and Accessible Workplaces*

The health care sector carries moderate physical risk compared to other industries. In 2023, a majority of health care workers spent their workdays standing. Additionally, 73.3% of practitioners and 82.6% of support workers had to perform tasks in low postures during the workday.²² ²³ Health care positions that require patient handling, which are primarily support roles, are at an increased risk for musculoskeletal disorders.²⁴



Health care workers are at **greater risk of experiencing workplace violence** than

those in other industries, particularly in home health environments,²⁵ and they also encounter **serious safety and health hazards**, including risks from bloodborne pathogens, chemical and drug exposure, and exposure to radioactive materials and X-rays.²⁶

Comprehensive data related to discrimination, harassment, and accommodations for workers with disabilities within the health care sector is limited. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that discussions should extend beyond physical safety to encompass broader issues of inclusivity, equity, and support for all.

Job Security*

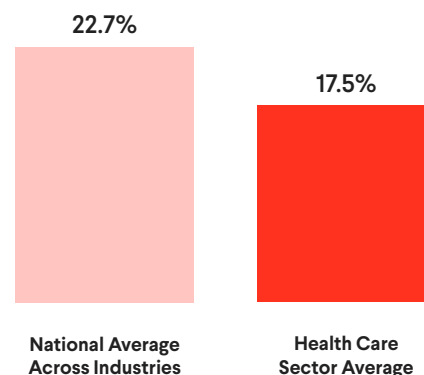
The health care sector is stable and growing rapidly. The job security landscape is notable, with the rate of layoffs and discharges at 0.7% in February 2024, below the overall average across all industries at 1.1%.²⁷

Fair Scheduling

In February 2024, part-time and full-time workers within the health care sector maintained an average workweek of 33.2 hours, on par with the national average across industries, which is 34.4 hours.²⁸

Additionally, 82.3% of health care workers were unable to work from home for any of their weekly hours. This is slightly higher than the average across industries, standing at 77.3%, indicating a lower level of flexibility and control over their work hours and arrangements.²⁹

Percentage Working from Home SOME OR ALL HOURS



Recommended Actions

Below, you can explore five key avenues for pathways leaders to better assess health care job quality in their communities and address gaps.

1 Design pathways with job quality in mind.

- Ensure pathways programs of study include rigorous core academics and career-focused learning to develop both employability skills, such as communication and critical thinking, and technical skills, such as health care ethics, medical terminology, and patient care.
- When offering career exploration opportunities, highlight health care professionals underrepresented in high-wage positions, including Black, Latine, and Indigenous workers.
- When providing career exposure activities like job shadows and mock interviews, provide students with guidance around asking questions related to job quality.

3 Facilitate cross-sector collaboration to enhance understanding of job opportunities and job quality within the sector.

- Utilize this resource to benchmark companies and organizations against sector averages, promoting transparency and continuous improvement.
- Build pathways into and within the sector that promote seamless transitions and stackable credentials to ensure clear opportunities for advancement.

2 Promote job quality awareness through robust regional data collection.

- Ensure data is collected at an occupational level to capture the job quality differences between practitioner and technical roles versus support roles.
- Collaborate with local hospitals, clinics, and health organizations to disseminate information about the Quality Jobs Framework and apply the framework to your region's health care sector.
- Building on the [Gallup Great Jobs survey findings](#), collect data from local health care workers about agency and culture, including work-life balance, job satisfaction, belonging and psychological safety, and opportunities for workers to speak up.³⁰
- Collaborate with HR to collect more data on advancement opportunities, job safety and security, and job classification.

4 Support education and training programs to address gaps in the sector.

- Invest in and promote programs that enhance skills, make direct connections to employers, support career advancement, and align with the framework's principles.
- Foster partnerships between educational institutions and employers to ensure that workforce training aligns with the evolving needs of quality jobs in the health care sector and offers opportunities to advance to higher-level/higher-wage positions.
- Foster partnerships between educational institutions and employers to ensure that training and work-based learning opportunities are accessible to underrepresented groups in the health care sector, especially high-wage occupations.

5 Advocate for policy reform that enhances job quality.

- Support pay transparency efforts, encouraging employers to include salary ranges in the job descriptions.
- Secure funding that supports strengthening the connection between learning and work, such as education-to-career pathways and work-based learning opportunities that prepare people to enter quality health care jobs.
- Advocate for equitable and inclusive hiring practices that prioritize local workers, including skills-first hiring and fair chance hiring that provide greater access to quality jobs.
- Advocate for improved paid family and medical leave at the state and local levels.
- Advocate for wage increases that meet the criteria of the regional living wage for the lowest-paid but highest-demand health care occupations, such as nursing and medical assistants and home health and personal care aides.

For more detailed information and possible actions to support policy reform in your area, review the blog, [Four State and Local Policy Trends That Help Advance Job Quality](#).³¹



Research Considerations

Sector Definition Discrepancies

One limitation for determining quality indicators for the health care sector is the inclusion of related occupational groups within some sources' definitions, leading to slight inconsistencies in how broadly the health care sector is categorized. This makes data collection and analysis difficult because different sources use different occupations when referring to health care. This limitation underscores the necessity for a more precise and up-to-date definition of the health care sector.

The table below shows how health care occupations are organized and included under various groups.

TITLE	DEFINITION	SOURCE
Education and Health Services Industry	The education and health services industry encompasses roles in the healthcare and social assistance sub-sector (NAICS 62) and the educational services sub-sector (NAICS 61).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) • Pew Research Center
Health Care and Social Assistance Sub-Sector	The health care and social assistance industry encompasses roles engaged in ambulatory health care services, hospitals, nursing and residential care facilities, and social assistance. This industry is defined by NAICS 62.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lightcast • Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) • Payscale • Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)
Health Care Occupations	<p><i>This occupational group includes:</i></p> <p>Healthcare practitioners and technical workers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chiropractors, dentists, pharmacists, physicians, surgeons, health diagnosing and treating practitioners, therapists, veterinarians, registered nurses, health technologists and technicians, occupational health and safety specialists. <p>Healthcare support workers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nursing; psychiatric and home health aides; occupational therapy and physical therapy assistants and aides; dental, medical, and veterinary assistants; phlebotomists; and medical transcriptionists. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) • Gallup

Challenges in Employee Perspective Data

Finding data that reflected employee perspectives, especially in elements requiring subjective input, was difficult. Namely, with data sourced from Gallup, more information within the dataset and sufficient sample sizes for confident statements on work-life balance, job satisfaction, and related aspects were needed, potentially impacting the confidence of insights.

Limited Data Availability

Efforts to locate sector-level information for all elements outlined in the Quality Jobs Framework proved challenging. This limitation underscores the importance of addressing data availability gaps to facilitate more comprehensive assessments.

The two elements that were not successfully obtained for this analysis are:

- Proper Job Classification, which examines whether workers are properly classified (as employees, contractors, etc.) based on clear and transparent criteria and in accordance with local law and whether they receive proper benefits and protections based on that classification.
- Transparent HR Function, which examines workers' access to transparent and responsive support on work issues, their comfort in seeking out that support, and clear communication of workers' rights.



Endnotes

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