

New study finds unionized health care workers earned better pay and benefits

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Unionized health care workers earned better pay and received better non-cash benefits, with little difference in their work hours when compared

to non-unionized workers, according to a new study, "Trends in Labor Unionization Among US Health Care Workers, 2009-2021," published on December 27, 2022 in *JAMA*.

"This study is the first to systemically investigate the landscape of labor unionization among the US health care workforce and its associated [economic effects](#)," said senior author Xiaojuan Li, Ph.D., Instructor in the Department of Population Medicine at Harvard Medical School and Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Institute.

Labor unionization efforts have resurged in the US, and [union membership](#) has been shown to improve worker conditions in some industries. However, little is known about labor unionization and its economic effects among health care workers. It remains unclear how labor unionization in health care has changed over the years and what benefits, if any, health care workers gain from unionizing.

To bridge this gap, the study team examined the prevalence of labor unionization among health care workers and its associations with employee pay, non-cash benefits, and work hours across the health care workforce in the United States. The team studied health care workers who participated in the US Census Bureau Current Population Survey and Annual Social and Economic Supplement between 2009 and 2021.

This nationally representative, population-based household survey allowed for a sample of over 14,000 self-identified health care workers, including physicians and dentists, advanced practitioners, nurses, therapists, and technicians and support staff.

Study researchers found that labor unionization rates were low, at an overall prevalence of 13.2%, with no significant change from 2009 through 2021. Labor unionization was associated with better pay and better benefits for [health care workers](#).

Unionized workers reported earning \$123 more per week than nonunionized workers, receiving better health insurance from their employer (both in terms of employer's contribution and the kind of insurance plan), and higher chance of having a pension or other [retirement benefits](#) at work. However, compared with nonunionized, unionized workers reported slightly more weekly [work hours](#).

"The associated benefits of unionization are striking but not surprising," said Ahmed Ahmed, fourth-year [medical student](#) at Harvard Medical School and first author of the study. "Unions collectively bargain for their members, which appears to improve both employee compensation and pay gaps between workers."

"Future causal analysis of the relationships, however, is needed," said Dr. Li. "And given the toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on the [health care](#) workforce, investigating whether unionizing could help mitigate burnout, will be important."

More information: Trends in Labor Unionization Among US Health Care Workers, 2009-2021, *JAMA* (2022). [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2022.22790](#)

Provided by Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Institute

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