

Poll finds more Americans worried about health care understaffing

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A growing number of Americans are feeling the effects of the health

care staffing crisis in the United States, a new HealthDay/Harris Poll has revealed.

Health care has witnessed the greatest recent increase in consumers affected by staffing shortages, more so than retail, hospitality, education, [customer support](#) and manufacturing, [poll results](#) show.

More than a third (35%) of people noticed or had been affected by health care staffing shortages at the time of the February poll, up from 25% last November, noted Kathy Steinberg, vice president of media and communications research at the Harris Poll.

By comparison, 24% had been affected by staffing shortages in education in February, up from 17% in November.

Retail had the greatest staffing woes, with 36% of consumers noticing or being affected by not enough workers in February. But that number barely budged from November, when 35% said they'd seen staffing problems in stores.

"Quite concerningly, the data reveal an even more pronounced impact on women, who are more likely than men to have experienced shortages in health care now [41% vs. 28%], and also more likely to have noticed such shortages now than just a few months ago [41% in February vs. 31% in November]," Steinberg added.

These shortages have hampered people's ability to receive [medical care](#).

More than 4 out of 5 U.S. adults (84%) have tried to get health care in the past six months, and of those nearly 3 in 4 (73%) experienced delays or challenges in getting the care they need, the poll shows.

Further, more than half of the poll's participants (52%) said they're

worried they won't be able to get needed medical care because of staffing shortages.

Experts say that U.S. health care has been experiencing [workforce](#) issues for some time now, but the pandemic exposed and worsened those issues.

"We've had a health care workforce crisis in this country for a long time. It pre-dated COVID," said Sophia Tripoli, director of the Center for Affordable Whole Person Care for Families U.S., a nonprofit health consumer advocacy group.

"But I think the pandemic public health emergency has really amplified all of the shortages and the staffing issues," Tripoli said. "It's been a really difficult time for the health care workforce on the front lines of the greatest public health emergency we've faced in about 100 years."

The American Hospital Association (AHA), a health care industry trade group, agreed.

"Navigating workforce pressures were a challenge for hospitals and health systems even before the COVID-19 pandemic, but these challenges have been exacerbated as many hospitals and health systems continue to face significant financial constraints, including higher expenses for labor, supplies, equipment and drugs," the association said in a statement.

"In addition, hospitals are increasingly paying [higher wages](#) to keep and recruit enough staff while other staff leave the health care field due to burnout and retirement," the association added.

Tripoli chalks up many of the ongoing problems to the corporatization and consolidation of American health care, as independent hospitals and

clinics were scooped up by regional chains and health care networks.

"We've seen a lot of data after these mergers and acquisitions about reductions in wages and changing conditions for the workforce as [private equity](#) comes in and looks at where they can maximize revenue," Tripoli said. "It's been problematic in terms of the quality of care, in terms of the number of hours the workforce is expected to work. It really is a major driver in burnout."

Tripoli suggests that the United States could use a [task force](#) or commission to analyze health care workforce trends and come up with solutions, similar to the work of the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission regarding public insurance plans.

"We really do need to have that sort of entity that is charged with looking specifically at the health care workforce and making sure that we're meeting the needs of American families in today's modern society," Tripoli said.

The [hospital](#) association has a laundry list of potential solutions.

"The hospital workforce plays a critical role in treating patients and saving lives each and every day, and the AHA is supporting hospitals and [health systems](#) in their efforts to ensure the health care workforce remains strong and ready to care by expanding training options, recruiting internationally, launching nurse education programs, reimagining workforce models, investing in up-skilling and providing nontraditional support for [health care](#) workers," the statement said.

The poll was conducted between Feb. 16-21 among 2,048 adults 18 and older.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention has more about [addressing health care workforce shortages](#).

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