

Rising harassment drives mental health crisis among US medical workers

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Credit: Pavel Danilyuk from Pexels

American health workers are facing a mental health crisis intensified by rising harassment that spiked during the COVID pandemic, according to an official report published Tuesday.

Between 2018 and 2022, more than double the number of doctors, nurses and others reported harassment at work either from patients or coworkers, which increased rates of anxiety, depression and burnout, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said.

Documented incidents of harassment including threats, bullying, and [verbal abuse](#) rose sharply during the pandemic, with [health professionals](#) 50 percent more likely than other [community members](#) to be targeted, according to a prior study in *BMJ Open*, a [medical journal](#).

"We depend on our nation's [health workers](#) and they must be supported," said CDC Chief Medical Officer Debra Houry in a statement about the new study, which surveyed more than 500 health workers.

The analysis showed 46 percent, or nearly half of all health workers reported often feeling burned out in 2022—an increase from 32 percent in 2018. Nearly half of health workers also reported they were likely or very likely to apply for a new job, in contrast to other worker groups who reported a decrease in job turnover intention.

Among those health workers who experienced harassment, 60 percent reported feelings of depression, compared to 31 percent who had not experienced harassment.

"Positive working conditions, such as trust in management and supervisor help, were associated with lower odds of poor mental health symptoms and burnout," the report said.

While the initial public reaction to the COVID pandemic was to recognize and honor health workers, they later found themselves on the frontlines of public frustration and fatigue with the virus.

The pandemic has since faded, but the issue of workplace violence

against medical professionals remains in focus.

"In the ER, there's a certain level of resignation that violence is just part of the job, like getting bloodstains on our shoes," Helen Ouyang, an emergency room physician and a professor at Columbia University wrote in an opinion piece on the same topic for the New York Times Tuesday.

"We have come to endure racist, sexist and homophobic slurs, choosing silence over confrontation, to fulfill our duty to care for human life."

A 2022 American College of Emergency Physicians survey found 55 percent of ER doctors had been assaulted, nearly all by patients. Among ER nurses, the figure rises to 70 percent, according to the Emergency Nurses Association.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, a federal agency tasked with recommendations for the prevention of workplace illness and injury, is preparing to launch a national mental health campaign for health workers this fall.

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