

Comparing the Socioeconomic Well-Being of Workers Across Healthcare Occupations

Bianca K. Frogner, PhD, Susan M. Skillman, MS, Davis G. Patterson, PhD, Cyndy R. Snyder, PhD

BACKGROUND

The U.S. healthcare industry has been an engine for job growth over the last couple of decades. Much of the job growth has occurred among healthcare occupations that require less than a bachelor's degree. Healthcare occupations predominate among the twenty fastest growing occupations. Many of these are allied health occupations such as physical therapy assistants/aides, occupational therapy assistants/aides, and home health aides. There is growing apprehension among researchers that greater reliance on a low-skilled workforce without adequate pay may lead to high turnover, which can disrupt continuity of care and contribute to the delivery of poor quality care. This study examines measures of socioeconomic well-being in relation to job education requirements for individuals working in healthcare.

METHODS

We analyzed the 2015 Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey. Using the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Occupational Outlook Handbook, we assigned individuals into one of five categories based on the minimum education requirement of the occupation in which they were employed at the time of the survey: 1) high school degree or equivalent or below, 2) post-secondary non-degree award, 3) associate degree, 4) bachelor's degree, and 5) above bachelor's degree. Across these education categories and by healthcare setting, we compared the socioeconomic well-being measures of these individuals, which include whether their hourly wage was under \$15 per hour, whether they were at or below the poverty level, whether they lacked health insurance, and whether they relied on state/federal assistance programs.

KEY FINDINGS

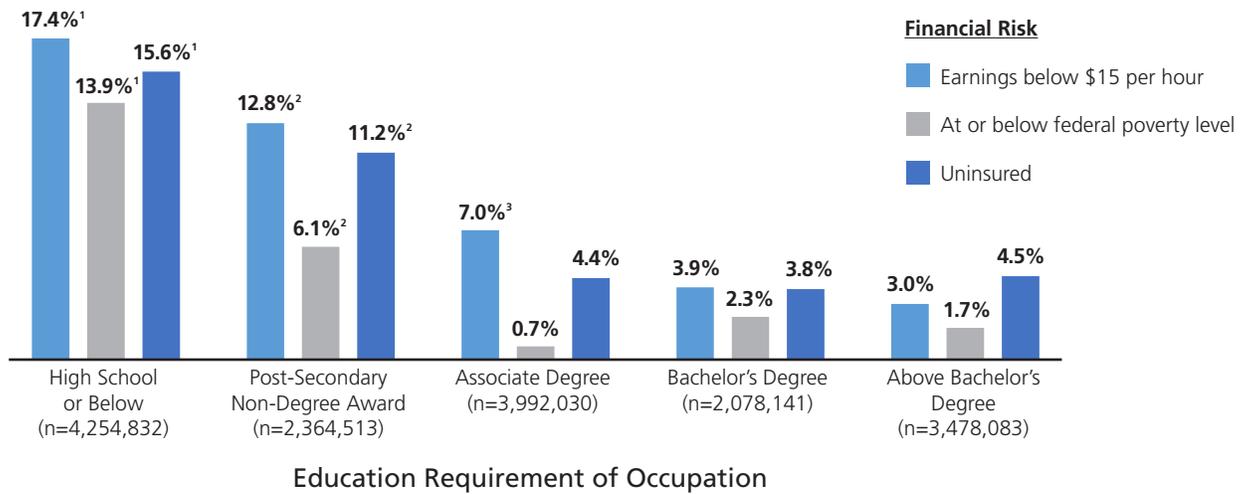
- Almost two-thirds of healthcare occupations in this study required less than a bachelor's degree for entry, consistent with statistics that the majority of healthcare occupations are low- to middle-skilled.
- Those working in occupations requiring a high school degree or below was the category with the highest percentage of people of color.
- There is a potential mismatch between skill and occupation; for example, over half of the individuals working in occupations requiring a high school degree or less attained more than a high school level of education.
- Despite working in healthcare settings, individuals across all education categories lacked health insurance ranging from 3.8% among those working in jobs requiring a bachelor's degree to 15.6% among those working in jobs requiring a high school degree or below. Uninsured rates were significantly higher among part-time workers in ambulatory and long-term care settings.
- Among those in occupations requiring a high school degree or below, 26.3% relied on the Earned Income Tax Credit, 18.2% relied on Medicaid, and 18.7% relied on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
- Long-term care settings have the highest proportion of individuals working in occupations requiring a high school degree or less, and 80% of these individuals relied on one or more state/federal assistance programs.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Workforce planners and policymakers who advocate for healthcare as a promising industry with growing job opportunities need to ensure that those entering these occupations have a viable career path moving forward. Employers wanting to reduce turnover for their workers in low-skilled occupations should find ways to address financial risks and workers' reliance on state/federal assistance programs. A few recommended strategies moving forward include:

- Employers should adopt retention efforts to minimize turnover such as professional development, mentorship, and educational support that lead toward upward career mobility.
- Hospitals and large ambulatory care centers with cafeterias or other food service may consider starting or enhancing programs to subsidize food for their employees.
- Healthcare employers should ensure that they are providing health insurance coverage for all employees, particularly part-time employees in low-skilled occupations.

Figure 1: Percentage of Healthcare Workers at Financial Risk by Education Requirement of Occupation

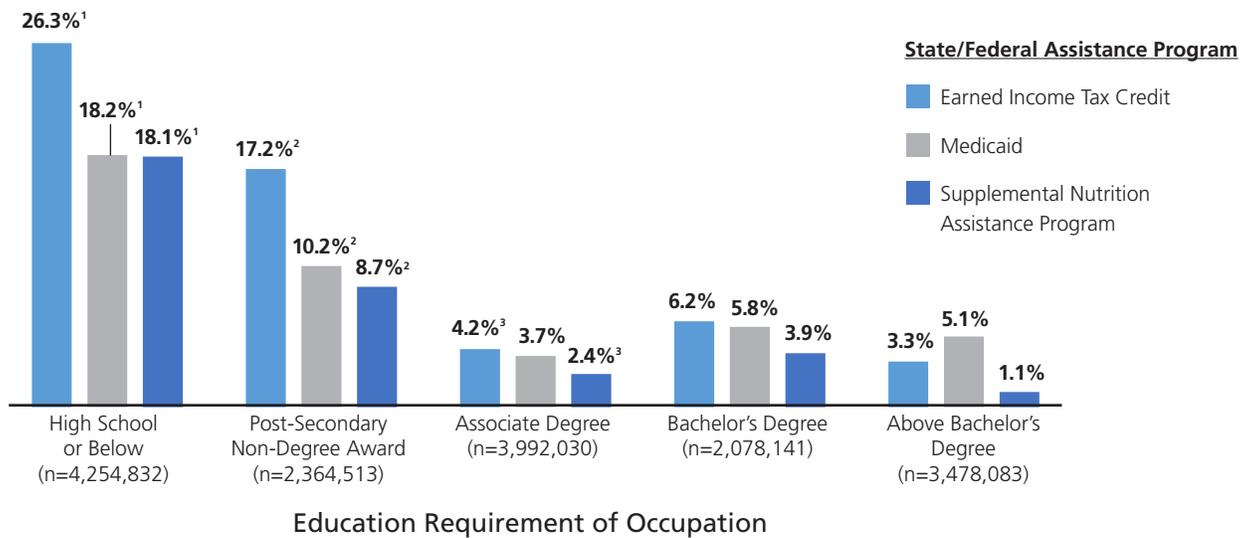


Significant differences at $p \leq 0.001$ between: ¹ high school or below versus post-secondary non-degree award, associate's, bachelor's, and above bachelor's degrees; ² post-secondary non-degree award versus associate's, bachelor's, and above bachelor's degrees; ³ associate's versus bachelor's and above bachelor's degrees

Note: Financial risk defined as individuals earning below \$15 per hour, being at or below the poverty level, or being uninsured. Significant differences between percentages of each financial risk category conducted using unpaired two sample t-test

Source: Author calculation of data extracted from Sarah Flood, Miriam King, Steven Ruggles, and J. Robert Warren. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 4.0. [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015.

Figure 2: Percentage of Healthcare Workers Relying on State/Federal Assistance Programs by Education Requirement of Occupation



Significant differences at $p \leq 0.001$ between: ¹ high school or below versus post-secondary non-degree award, associate's, bachelor's, and above bachelor's degrees; ² post-secondary non-degree award versus associate's, bachelor's, and above bachelor's degrees; ³ bachelor's versus above bachelor's degrees

Note: Significant differences between percentages of each assistance program type conducted using unpaired two sample t-test

Source: Author calculation of data extracted from Sarah Flood, Miriam King, Steven Ruggles, and J. Robert Warren. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, Current Population Survey: Version 4.0. [Machine-readable database]. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015.

More information about the socioeconomic well-being of healthcare workers is available in the report: Frogner BK, Skillman SM, Patterson DG, Snyder CR, Comparing the Socioeconomic Well-Being of Workers Across Healthcare Occupations. Center for Health Workforce Studies, University of Washington, Nov 2016. This work was funded through Health Resources and Services Administration Cooperative Agreement U81HP27844 Health Workforce Research Centers Program.