THE STATUS OF THE NURSING WORKFORCE IN MONTANA

A Summary of the Results from the National Council State Board of Nursing 2022 Survey

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Montana's healthcare system relies on a highly skilled nursing workforce to provide needed care to patients. While nursing wages continue to rise and the number of nurses in Montana is growing rapidly, increased retirements from an aging population combined with new challenges from the global pandemic have made understanding the current and future nursing workforce essential. To help provide insight into these workers, the National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) conducts a national nursing survey every two years, including questions related to educational attainment, employment, earnings, and other demographic information. With over 20,000 actively licensed registered nurses (RNs), and 2,300 actively licensed practical nurses (LPNs) in Montana, this survey provides information on the demographics of these workers and can be used to guide discussions on the status of Montana's nursing workforce.

Highlights from the survey

- The number of nurses working in Montana is growing rapidly. The number of licensed Registered Nurses (RNs) increased from about 18,000 licensed RNs in 2020 to over 20,000 in 2022 – more than an 11% increase in just two years.
- Wages for nurses continue to grow at a healthy pace. Median income for Registered Nurses increased 20%, from $60,000 in 2020 to $72,000 in 2022. This is faster wage growth than nurses nationwide (reporting 14.3% growth), and faster than wage growth across all Montana jobs (12.6% growth).
- Tight labor markets and nursing worker shortages persist. Only 0.8% of Montana's RNs and 1.1% of Montana's LPNs report that they are unemployed and actively seeking work, lower than 2.0% and 3.0% nationally.
- Multistate licensing can help overcome workforce shortages in nursing by allowing employers to hire from outside the state. 83% of Montana's licensed RNs and 92% of Montana's LPNs hold a multistate license, although the survey suggests many nurses may be unaware of this benefit.
- American Indian nurses are underrepresented in Montana, making up about 2% of all nurses in the state compared to 6% of the total population.

Registered Nurses

- Approximately 87% of licensed RNs were working in the field in 2022, mostly unchanged from two years prior.
- About 26% of RNs actively employed in nursing said they plan on retiring or otherwise leaving the field in the next five years, higher than the 18% responding yes to that question in 2020.
- The median age of RNs in Montana has fallen from 48.5 in 2015 to 47.6 in 2020 to 45.2 years old in 2022, suggesting older workers continue to retire and are being replaced by a younger generation.
- 71% of Montana's RNs hold a bachelor's degree or higher as their highest level of education, similar to the national average of 72%.
- More RNs are attaining higher education once in the field. Approximately 12% of RNs beginning their career with a bachelor's degree have gone on to obtain a master's degree, higher than the 4% reported in 2020.
- The median wage for associate degree and bachelor's degree RNs is similar, at $70,000 and $68,000, respectively.
- RNs holding a master's degree earn median wages of $105,000, which is 50% more than RNs holding an associate or bachelor's degree.
- RN median wages grew 20% over the last two years due to increased demand for nursing and increased educational attainment of nurses. However, RNs working as staff nurses reported just 8% median wage increases, lower than the statewide average annual wage growth across all jobs.

Licensed Practical Nurses

- The number of licensed LPNs decreased from 2,600 in 2020 to 2,300 in 2022, suggesting older workers retiring from the profession have not been replaced by a younger generation of LPNs.
- LPNs remaining in the field are more likely to be working in nursing compared to two years prior. Approximately 76% of actively licensed LPNs are working as nurses, compared to only 69% in 2020.
- The median age of LPNs in Montana was mostly unchanged in the last two years, 53.8 years in 2022 compared with 53.5 in 2020.
- Montana's LPNs are now older than the national average, with a higher share of planning to retire soon. About one-third of LPNs actively employed in the field say they plan on retiring or leaving nursing in the next five years, higher than the national average of 26%. About 11% of Montana licensed LPNs are currently retired, also higher than the national average of 7%.
- LPN staff nurses work in a variety of different settings. The most common places for LPNs to work are in a nursing home/extended care (26%) or ambulatory care (15%). Only about 10% of LPNs report working in a hospital.

About the Survey

The National Nursing Workforce Survey, conducted by the National Council of State Boards of Nursing and the National Forum of State Nursing Workforce Centers, is a national-level survey that is focused on providing an overview of the nursing workforce. The survey is sent out to a random sample of individuals that hold either an active registered nurse (RN) license or an active licensed practical/vocational nurse (LPN/LVN) license. In Montana, 2,504 RN licensees were mailed a survey, and 640 responded. Of the 2,214 Montana LPN/LVN licensees that were mailed a survey, 567 responded. This analysis focuses on the responses of those Montana licensee respondents.

This analysis weighted the Montana data by Montana's age distribution to appropriately represent the state's nursing population. The national results are also weighted, with those calculations based on the U.S. state, age, and gender distribution.

Responses for the 2022 survey were collected from April 11, 2022 and September 30, 2022. Data can be compared to the 2020 survey, collected between February 19, 2020 and June 30, 2020 to help understand the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic had on the nursing workforce.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vital role nurses play in the state's healthcare system and economy. However, the past few years have been significant and transitional for the nursing workforce. In Montana, many registered nurses are retiring and being replaced by a younger generation with more education but less experience. Nursing wages are rising, and more people are being attracted to the profession. However, the field continues to experience significant workforce shortages – signified by unemployment rates well below the national average. Those who are working report an increased workload due to the pandemic, and many report feeling emotionally drained at least a few times a week. Montana's ability to attract and retain a high-qualified nursing workforce will help reduce the load on the state's existing workforce and help ensure all Montanans have access to high-quality healthcare.

Understanding the status of the nursing workforce is particularly important as over one-quarter of Montana's nursing workforce plans to retire or leave nursing in the next five years. Though steady wage growth and an increase in the overall number of licensed nurses statewide are encouraging, there are signs that future retirements may continue to contribute to a shortage of nurses in key areas. As nurses contemplate leaving the profession, a growing and aging population will continue to increase the demand for healthcare services.

There are over 20,000 actively licensed RNs and 2,300 actively licensed LPNs providing critical care to Montanans around the state. The unemployment rate for nurses falls well below the average for all occupations, indicating critical worker shortages. The following sections explore nursing employment for RNs and LPNs in the state, as well as educational attainment and demographic shifts over the last few years.

Registered Nurses

Employment Status

The number of licensed RNs increased from about 18,000 licensed RNs in 2020 to over 20,000 in 2022. Most of these licensees are working in nursing. The NCSBN survey indicates approximately 87% of RNs are working in the field, and 68% are working full-time. In these ways, Montana nurses resemble the national nursing workforce. Figure 1 shows the employment status of licensed RNs in Montana.

Figure 1. Employment Status of Actively Licensed RNs in Montana
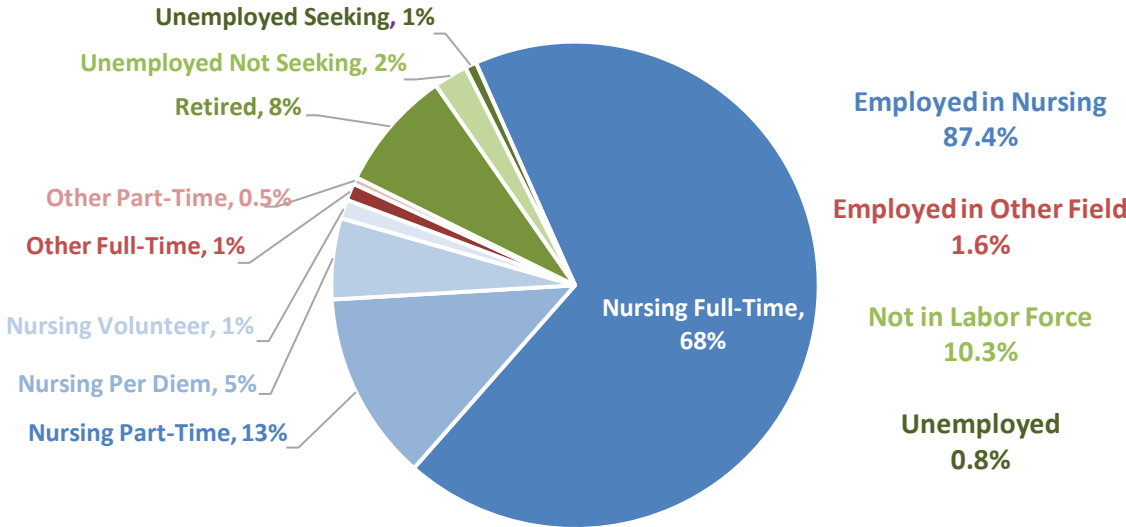
Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MTDLI.

Nationally, the share of RNs working in nursing increased significantly from 85% of licensees in 2020 to 90% in 2022. Montana did not see a significant increase in employment two years after the pandemic, likely because there are fewer unemployed nurses to hire. Less than 1% of Montana's licensees are unemployed and looking for nursing work, compared with 2.0% nationally.

> *Less than **1%** of licensed RNs are unemployed and seeking work.*

Twelve percent of licensed RNs are either working in other fields or are not participating in the labor force. There are many reasons an individual may choose not to participate in the labor force. They may be retired (8% of all actively licensed RNs), or they may have family or school commitments. Family commitments, like caring for children or adults with illnesses or disabilities, was the second most common reason for not actively seeking work. By maintaining their RN licenses, these individuals remain available to rejoin the nursing workforce in the future should they choose to do so.

Age Demographics

The median age of Montana RNs decreased in 2022, suggesting retiring RNs are being replaced by a younger generation.[1] The median age of Montana RNs was 45.2 in 2022, 47.6 in 2020, and 48.5 in 2015. In 2022, Montana RNs were similarly aged to the national median of 46 years.

Nationally, the age demographics of nurses shifted significantly in the two years following the pandemic as older nurses left the workforce. The share of U.S. nurses aged 50 and older fell from 53% to 43%, leaving behind a less experienced workforce.[2] Montana did not see as significant of a shift in age demographics during this time, likely because Montana RNs were younger than the national average and fewer reported plans to retire prior to the pandemic. [3] The share of Montana nurses aged 50 and older fell from 45% in 2020 to 41% in 2022. Median years of work experience remained constant at 13 years. The large change in age distribution of RNs for the U.S. and relatively smaller change for Montana results in Montana and the U.S. now having similar age distributions (Figure 2).

An aging workforce and increased retirements are drivers of workforce shortages across all occupations. Increased workload and stress from the pandemic have further contributed to shortages among nurses as burnout has led to some nurses leaving the occupation. According to the NCSBN survey, 26.2% of RNs employed in the field say they plan on retiring or leaving nursing in the next five years, significantly higher than 18.3% responding yes to this question in 2020. The share of Montana licensees with plans to retire is now similar to the national average.

> *26.2% of RNs say they plan on retiring in the next 5 years.*

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[1] MTDLI licensure data.

[2] The 2022 National Nursing Workforce Survey suggests the median years of work experience fell from 20 years in 2020 to 15 years in 2022.

[3] The 2020 National Nursing Workforce Survey indicates the median age reported by RNs across the U.S. was 52 in 2020. The 2020 survey suggested 18% of Montana RNs had plans to retire over the next 5 years compared with 22% nationally.

Figure 2. Age Distribution of Actively Licensed RNs in Montana and U.S.
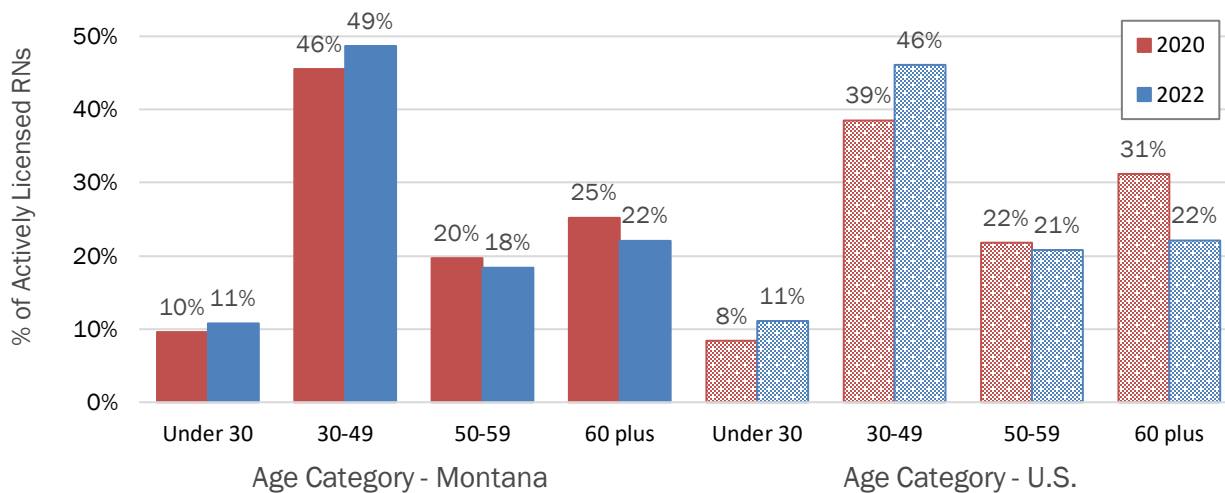
Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey. Montana estimates compiled by MTDLI using licensure data as of 5/31/2022.

Educational Attainment

Over the last decade, there has been a national push towards bachelor's degree attainment among RNs.[4] The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) identifies a bachelor's degree as the typical degree needed for entry into an RN occupation.[5] In Montana 71% of RNs hold a bachelor's degree or higher as their highest nursing degree, which is similar to the national average of 72%. As shown in Figure 3, a bachelor's degree is the most common degree earned among Montana RNs (58%), followed by an associate degree (27%), and a master's degree (11%).

> *Approximately **71%** of RNs in Montana hold a bachelor's degree or higher, similar to the national average.*

Educational attainment among Montana RNs has remained static over the past few years. However, that is expected to change as older workers retire and leave the workforce, leaving younger workers with higher levels of education to replace them. In Montana, 89% of RNs under age 30 hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 67% over age 50. Educational attainment has increased at the national level because of the significant shift in age demographics following the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, 70% of Montana RNs had a bachelor's degree or higher compared with 65% nationally.

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[4] The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health. National Academies Press, 2011.
[5] For a complete list of educational attainment by occupation used by the BLS to determine typical education for entry, please visit:
https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/education-and-training-by-occupation.htm

Figure 3. Highest Nursing Degree Earned by RNs in Montana compared with National Average
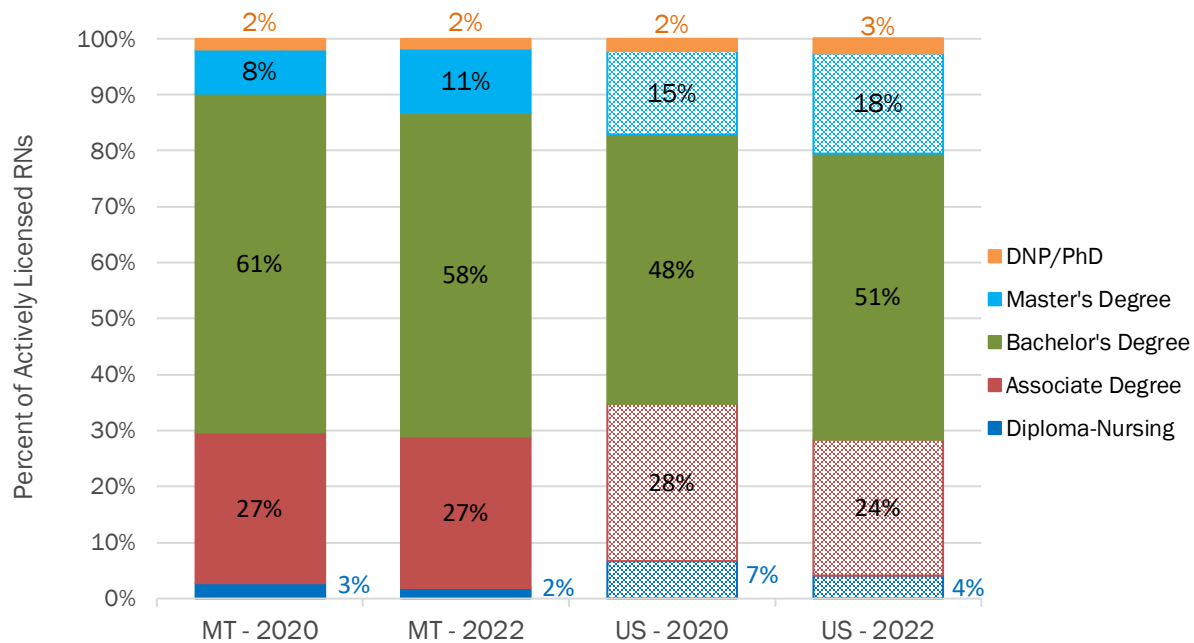
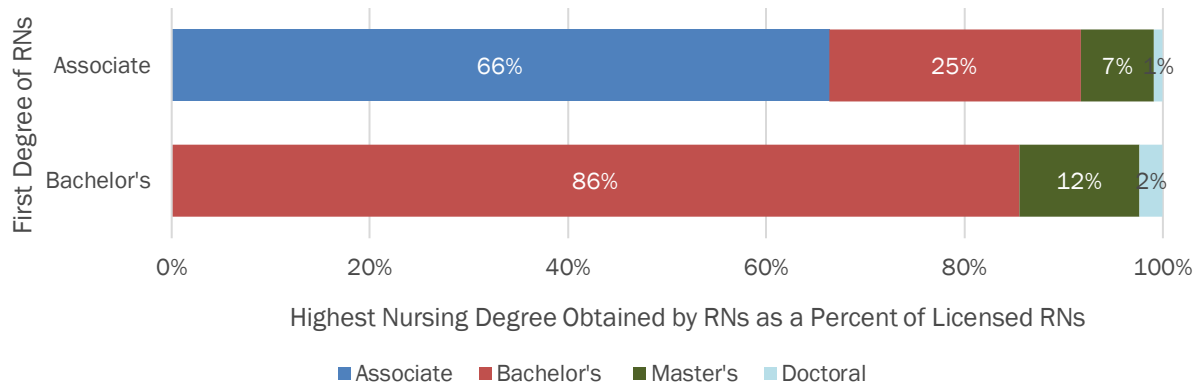Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MT DLI.

Most Montana RNs begin their career with a bachelor's degree (55%) followed by an associate degree (38%). Five percent of RNs begin their career with a certification or diploma. However, initial degree attainment differs by age. Nurses under age 30 are more likely to begin their career with a bachelor's degree (81%) than nurses over age 50 (48%). Nurses over age 50 are more likely to begin their career with an associate degree (40%) or a certificate/diploma (9%) than nurses under age 30 (16% and 0%, respectively).

Once RNs have their nursing license most do not achieve a higher degree in nursing. About 86% of Montana RNs beginning their career with a bachelor's degree continue to hold that as their highest level of nursing education. However, an increasing number of RNs are pursuing higher education after their initial degree. Twelve percent attained a master's degree, significantly higher than the 4% reported in 2020. For licensed RNs who entered their career with an associate degree, about 66% still hold that degree as their highest level of nursing education, while 34% have since progressed to achieve a bachelor's degree or higher.[6] 2022 rates of progression from associate degree entrants are similar to 2020. The academic progression of RNs in Montana is displayed in Figure 4.

> *Of the RNs beginning their career with an associate degree, an estimated **34%** have since achieved a bachelor's degree or higher.*

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6 Responses are specific to education related to nursing. An additional 6% of BSN RNs earned a graduate degree in another field. Another 14% of ASN RNs earned a bachelor's or higher in another field.

Figure 4. Academic Progression of RNs by Initial Nursing Degree Type in Montana

Highest Nursing Degree Obtained by RNs as a Percent of Licensed RNs

Associate | Bachelor's | Master's | Doctoral

Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MTDLI.

Fifty-eight percent of Montana RNs hold a bachelor's degree, as shown in Figure 5. RNs in the South Central Region (which includes Billings) have above average bachelor's degree attainment compared to the rest of the state.[7] RNs in the North Central region have below average bachelor's degree attainment. Higher educational attainment in the South Central region likely results from the large share of hospital employment.

Figure 5. Highest Nursing Degree of RNs in Montana by Region

Diploma-Nursing | Associate | Bachelor's | Master's | Doctoral
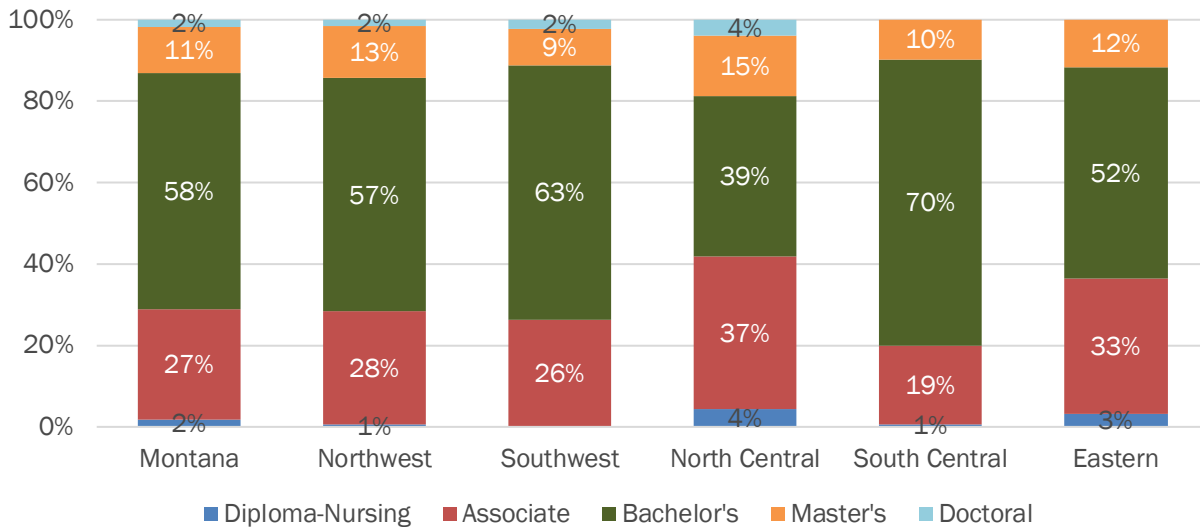
Note: Map of the regions are available at https://lmi.mt.gov/Projections.
Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MT DLI

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[7] For a map of Montana's regions, see https://lmi.mt.gov/Projections

Occupation and Wages

Figure 6 shows the top occupations and wages of licensed RNs by educational attainment. Staff nurse is the most common occupation among associate degree and bachelor's degree RNs. An estimated 63% of RNs who are working in nursing are working as a staff nurse, with most working in hospitals. Sixty-five percent of staff nurses hold a bachelor's degree in nursing while another 29% hold an associate degree.

> *Associate and bachelor's degree RNs earn similar median wages near $70,000, but those with a master's degree report a median salary of $105,000.*

Although wages typically increase with education levels in most occupations, associate and bachelor's trained RNs report similar median wages. Bachelor's trained RNs report a median salary of $68,000 and associate trained RNs report $70,000. There are three reasons for similar wages. First, ASN RNs tend to be older, and likely have more work experience. ASN RNs median age is 44 compared with 40 for BSN RNs.[8] Second, low unemployment and high demand in nursing results in all nurses being paid similarly, regardless of education. Third, associate and bachelor's trained RNs typically hold the same license type and therefore have the same scope of practice.

Figure 6. Occupation and Wages of Licensed RNs in Montana by Highest Degree

	Associate RN	Bachelor's RN	Master's RN
Median Wage	$70,000	$68,000	$105,000
Top 4 Occupations (% Employed) Median Wage	Staff Nurse (68%) $69,000	Staff Nurse (73%) $65,000	APRN (57%) $120,000
	Nurse Manager (10%) $80,000	Nurse Manager (10%) $84,000	Staff Nurse (19%) $72,000
	Case Manager (7%) $62,000	Case Manager (6%) $67,000	Nurse Manager (7%) $110,000
	Other Health (7%) $78,000	Other Health (6%) $68,000	Other Health (7%) $80,000

Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MTDLI.

RNs with a master's degree earn more, reporting a median wage of $105,000. Advanced practice registered nurse (APRN) is the most common occupation among nurses holding a master's degree. The share of licensees working as an APRN increased from 5% to in 2020 to nearly 10% in 2022, the only occupation to see a significant increase in employment share over the two years. APRNs hold a more advanced license than RNs and earn a median wage of $120,000.

Montana RNs reported increased income from 2020 to 2022. Median income increased 20%, from $60,000 in 2020 to $72,000 in 2022. This is faster wage growth than nurses nationwide (reporting 14.3% growth), and faster than wage growth across all Montana jobs (12.6% growth). Fast wage growth was the result of increased nursing demand from COVID, inflation, and an increase in the number of licensees working as highly paid APRNs. RNs working as staff nurses experienced wage growth of 8.3% over the two years, from $60,000 in 2020 to $65,000 in 2022.

[8] ASN = Associate of Science in Nursing. BSN = Bachelor of Science in Nursing.

Increasing Supply of Nurses through Nursing Licensure Compact

Montana implemented the Nurse Licensure Compact (NLC) on October 1, 2015, allowing nurses who are both licensed in Montana and claim Montana as their primary residence to practice in any of the 39 states and 2 territories that are part of the NLC without obtaining a license in each of those states. According to the Montana Department of Labor and Industry, 83% of Montana's RNs and 92% of Montana's LPNs hold a multistate license.

New to the 2020 NCSBN survey were questions surrounding these types of multi-state licenses. According to the survey, 59% of Montana's licensed RNs who are actively employed in nursing report holding a multistate license, an increase from 40% who reported yes in the 2020 survey. About 39% of Montana's licensed LPNs actively employed in nursing report holding a multistate license, higher than the 2020 share of 26%. Survey results continue to be lower than the actual number of nurses with multistate licenses, suggesting nurses may be unaware of this benefit.

Both RNs and LPNs were asked how they used their multistate license. About 80% of RNs and LPNs with a multistate license responded they have not used their license, higher than national survey results of 68% for RNs and 77% for LPNs.

Figure 7. RN and LPN Multistate License Use
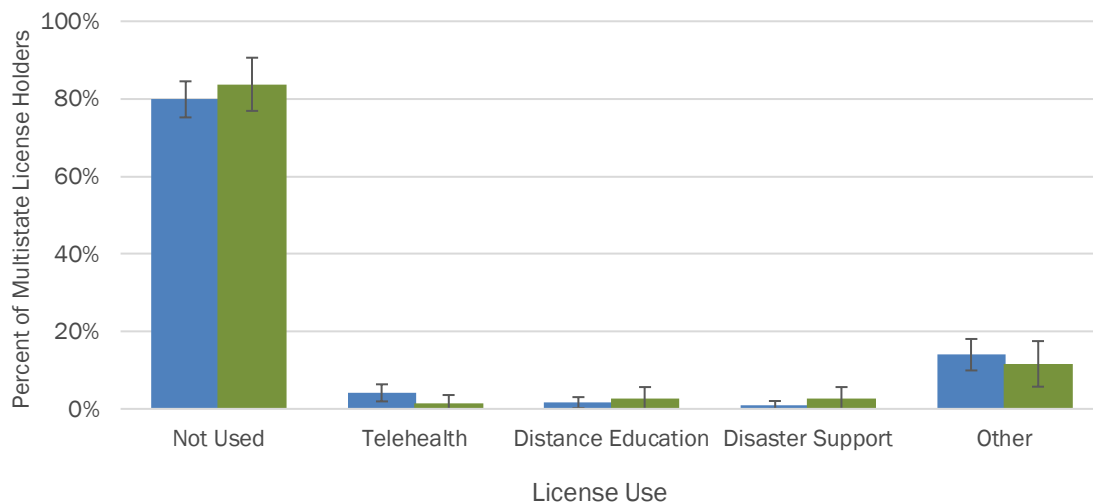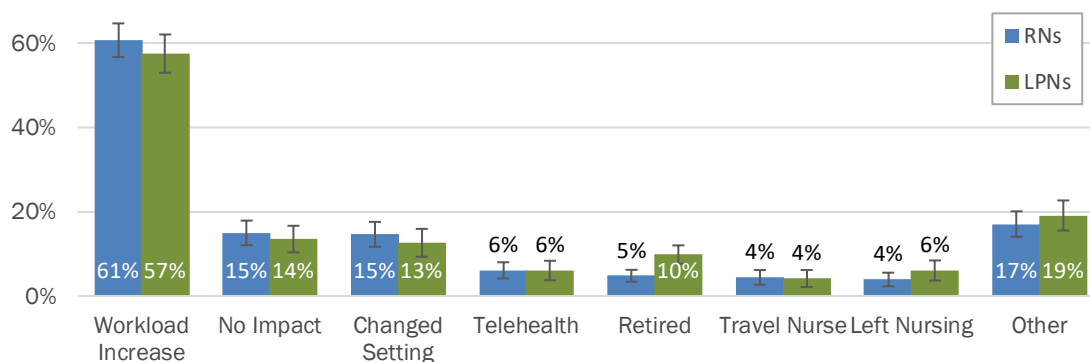

Notes: Error bars display 95% confidence limits.
Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MT DLI.
[1]Source: MTDLI

COVID-19 Impacts

New questions were added to NCSBN Survey regarding COVID-19 impacts and emotional well-being. Nurses were asked how COVID-19 affected their employment, with the majority reporting an increased workload. Only 15% of RNs and 14% of LPNs stated COVID-19 did not affect their employment. Figure 8 shows the share of nurses who became a travel nurse, changed their practice setting, started doing telehealth, left nursing, and/or retired. Responses in Montana were similar to the national survey.

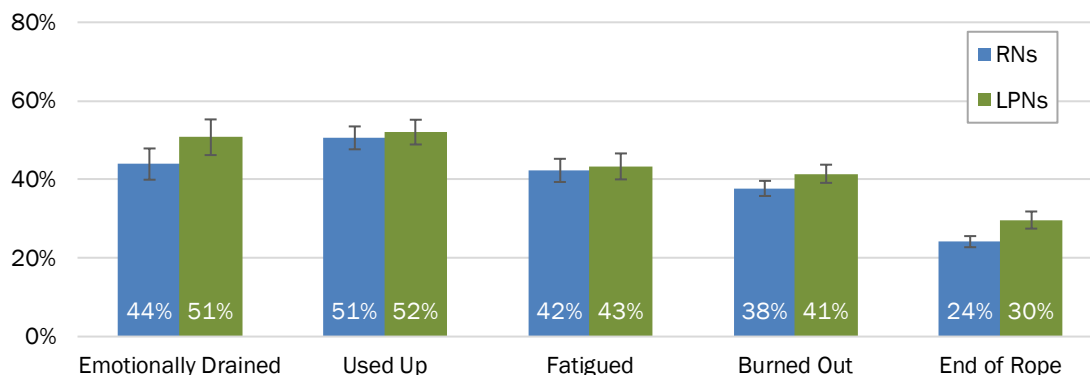Figure 8. How COVID-19 Impacted Montana Nursing Employment

Notes: Error bars display 95% confidence limits.
Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MT DLI.

Nurses were also asked a series of questions regarding their job and mental health, including how often they feel: emotionally drained from work; used up at the end of the workday; fatigued when they get up to face another day on the job; burned-out from work; and like they are at the end of their rope. Over 50% of RNs and LPNs responded that they feel used up at the end of the workday at least a few times a week. About 24% of RNs and 30% of LPNs responded they feel like they're at the end of their rope at least a few times a week. The share of Montana nurses responding they feel these emotions at least a few times a week are shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Share of Nurses with Described Feeling at Least a Few Times a Week

Notes: Error bars display 95% confidence limits.
Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MT DLI.
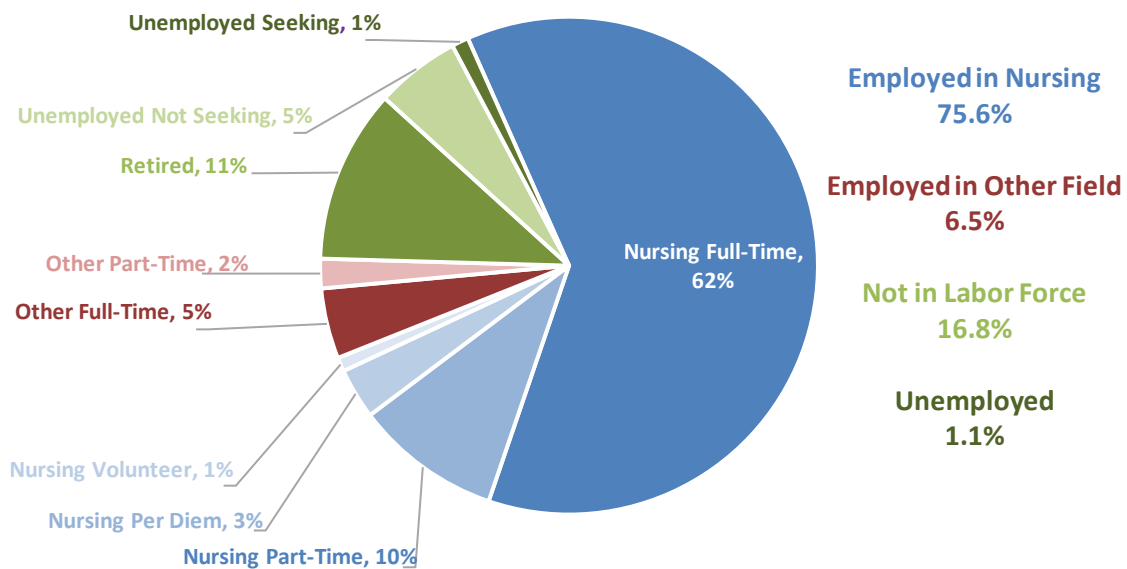
Licensed Practical Nurses

Employment Status

Workforce engagement of LPNs increased over the last couple years. In 2022, approximately 76% of LPNs are working in the field, up from 69% in 2020. More LPNs are also working full-time – 62% in 2022 compared to 51% in 2020. The employment status of LPNs in 2022 is shown in Figure 10.

The increase in workforce engagement is likely due to a couple factors. First, the COVID-19 pandemic increased demand for healthcare workers, bringing some LPNs back into the workforce and moved others from part-time to full-time employment. Second, there was a significant number of retirees reported in 2020, with some allowing their license to expire. The number of active licenses fell from 2,600 at the beginning of 2020 to 2,300 at the start of 2022.[9]

Figure 10. Employment Status of Actively Licensed LPNs in Montana

Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MTDLI.

About 17% of actively licensed practical nurses are not in the labor force. The most common reason LPNs do not participate in the labor force is due to retirement (11% of LPNs). Montana has a higher share of retired LPNs than the national average (7%). After retirement, family commitments are the most common reason LPNs were not seeking work, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 1.1% of Montana LPNs are unemployed and actively seeking work, less than the 3.0% reported across the U.S.

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[9] MTDLI licensure data comparing licensees active in January 2020 compared with January 2022.

Age Demographics

The age demographics of Montana's LPNs did not change over the last two years. Despite increased retirements leading to a smaller pool of licensees, the 2022 median age of Montana LPNs is 53.8 years compared with 53.5 in 2020, suggesting young workers are not replacing retirees. This trend contrasts with the national survey results, with the median age of LPNs decreasing from 53 to 47 across the U.S. Figure 11 shows the age distribution of LPNs in Montana compared to the U.S., with Montana having a higher concentration of those aged 60 plus.

> *Over **one-third of LPNs** say they plan on leaving the field in the next 5 years*

Just over one-third of all LPNs working in the field plan to retire or leave the nursing workforce within the next five years, higher than the share of RNs reporting similar plans.[10] In general, LPNs have higher turnover than RNs, which may be exacerbated by the aging population. Montana's LPNs are older than the U.S. median with a higher share either retired or reporting plans to retire, indicating Montana employers may experience increased LPN retirements compared with the national average and have difficulty replacing these retiring LPNs.

Figure 11. Age Distribution of Actively Licensed LPNs in Montana and U.S.
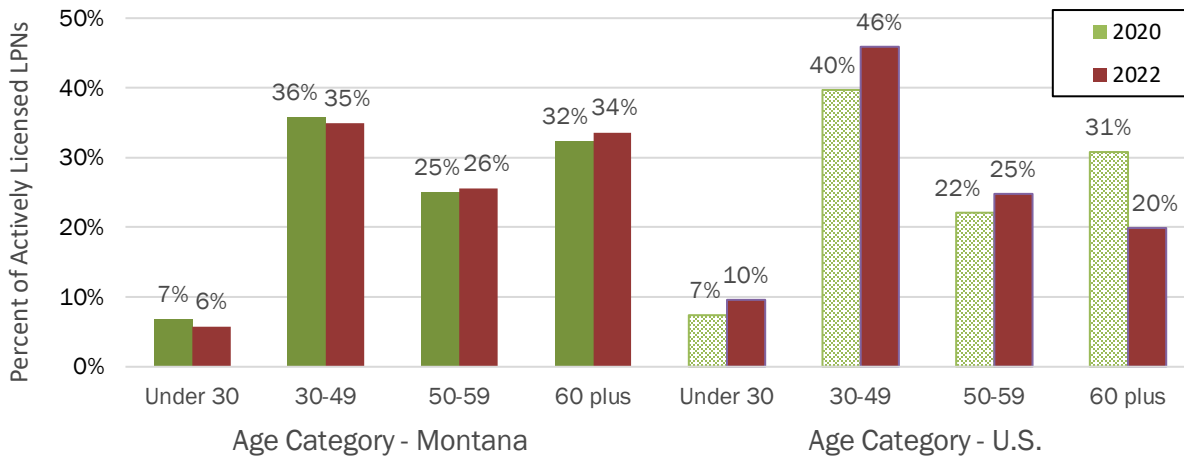
Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey. Montana estimates compiled by MTDLI using licensure data as of 5/31/2021.

Educational Attainment

Most LPNs in Montana hold a certificate or diploma as their highest level of nursing education (66%) followed by an associate degree (33%). Associate degrees are more common for Montana LPNs than the national average. Nationally, only 13% of LPNs have attained an associate degree.

The share of Montana LPNs with an associate degree increased since 2020, to 19%. The increase is likely because older LPNs with lower levels of education are leaving the workforce, and younger LPNs with higher levels of education are remaining in the workforce. Forty-seven percent of nurses under age 50 have an associate degree compared with 22% of LPNs over age 50. Despite higher levels of education among younger workers, a nursing certificate/diploma is the most common educational attainment and is considered the entry level requirement by the BLS.

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[10] In 2020, 49% of LPNs reported plan to retire or leave the nursing workforce. Part of the decline is due to fewer LPN licensees (some of these workers allowed their license to expired).

**Figure 12. Highest Nursing Education for Montana's LPNs by Age**
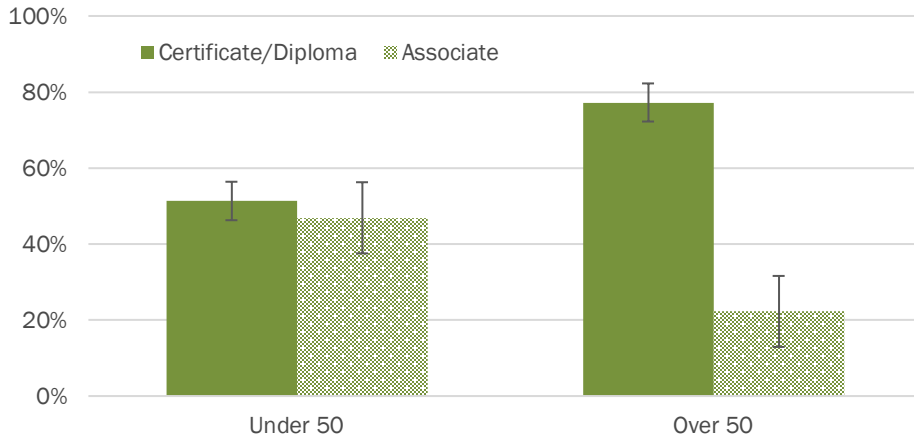
Notes: Error bars display 95% confidence limits. Degrees are Associate in Nursing and vocational/practical nursing certificate.
Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MT DLI.

Diversity Among Nurses in Montana

Results from the survey suggest that the racial composition of the nursing workforce is different from the racial composition of the state. Over 94% of RNs and LPNs are white, between 1-2% are American Indian, and between 2-4% responded with some other race (including more than one race). In comparison, 85% of Montana residents are white, 5.8% are American Indian, and about 9% are another race. Results are in Figure 13. The racial disparity indicated by the survey suggest that schools and health centers may wish to consider programs to increase recruiting of American Indians into nursing professions.

Figure 13. Racial Composition of RNs and LPNs compared with Montana
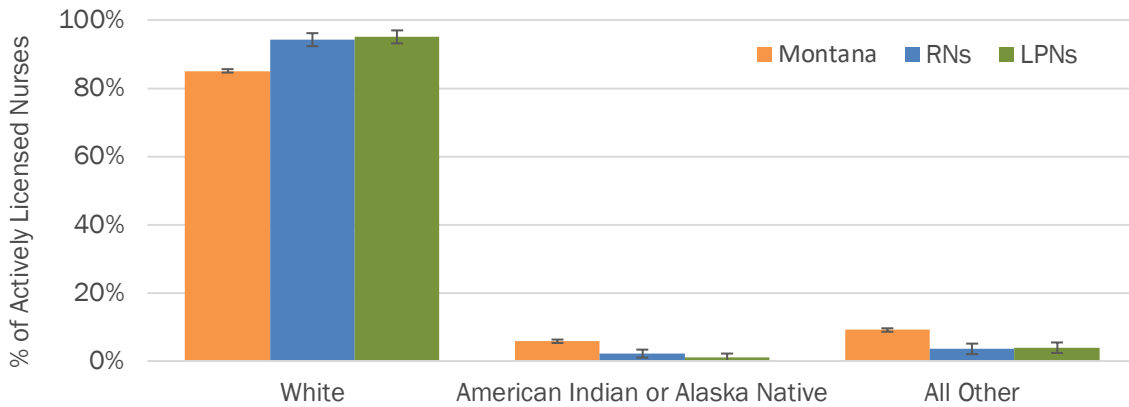
Note: More than one race included in "All Other" group.
Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MT DLI. Montana racial composition from the 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, U.S. Census Bureau.

Occupation and Wages

Most employed LPNs are working as staff nurses (80%) with a median wage of $47,000. Figure 14 shows the percent of LPNs employed by occupation with the median salary. Other-Health Related occupations earn the most of the occupations listed, earning $53,000 per year, followed by nurse managers at $51,000. All occupations reported the same median hours worked. There were no significant changes in LPN job titles between the 2020 and 2022 survey.

Figure 14. Salary and Hours Worked per Week of Primary Job for LPNs in Montana

Primary Job Title	Percent Employed		Median Salary	Median Hours Worked
Staff Nurse	79.7%	+/-4.6%	$45,000	40
Other-Health Related	9.3%	+/-3.3%	$53,000	40
Nurse Manager	5.6%	+/-2.8%	$51,000	40
Case Manager	3.8%	+/-2.2%	$50,000	40

Notes: Occupations with less than 10 responses are excluded.
Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MT DLI.

While most RNs work in hospitals (55%), LPN staff nurses work in a variety of different settings. The most common places for LPNs to work are in a nursing home/extended care (24%) or ambulatory care (16%). Only about 11% of LPNs report working in a hospital. There was no significant shift in LPN work locations since 2020. Figure 15 shows LPN employment by primary setting.

Figure 15. LPN Primary Employment Setting
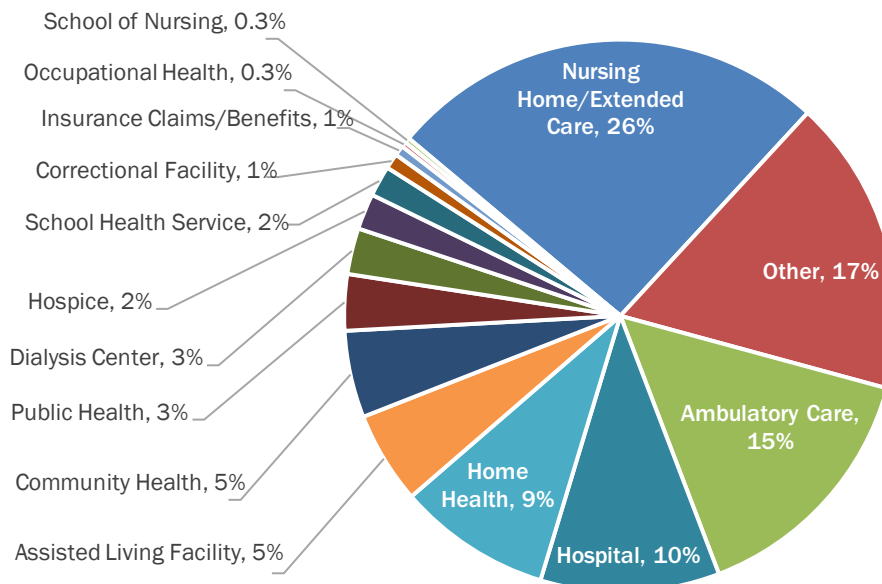
Source: National Council State Board of Nursing (NCSBN) 2022 Survey compiled by MT DLI

LPNs experienced 12% wage growth over the last two years, from $42,000 to $47,000. LPNs working as staff nurses reported slower growth, at 7%. These changes are less than LPNs nationwide (14%) and less than wage growth across all jobs (13%).[11] As over one-third of LPNs contemplate leaving the workforce over the next five years, wage growth may be essential for retaining the workforce.

Conclusion

The NCSBN survey continues to provide critical insight into the nursing workforce during a time when the population is aging into retirement and the global pandemic has caused additional stress to the healthcare system. Recruitment and training of nurses will continue to be essential in the next several years. Low unemployment leaves few licensed nurses available to take new or unfilled jobs, and nearly one-quarter of RNs and over one-third of LPNs plan on retiring or leaving the field in the next five years.

Retaining nurses may require attention towards wages, workloads, and the mental well-being of the existing workforce. Inflation, increased demand, and shifts into higher wage jobs increased median wages by 20% for RNs and 12% for LPNs, with staff nurses reporting slower growth. In addition, most nurses (60%) reported increased workload due to the pandemic, and many report feeling emotionally drained, burned out, and like they are at the end of their rope at least a few days a week. Wage increases at the given workload may not be sufficient for staff retainment.

Changing age demographics is important to monitor as it significantly impacts the number of nurses available and the level of experience and education of the nursing workforce. On a national level, many older nurses left the workforce during the pandemic, and younger workers with less experience but higher levels of education replaced them. The shift in demographics, job experience, and educational attainment was not as significant in Montana because Montana entered the pandemic with a younger RN workforce. In terms of age, Montana RNs are now similar to the national cohort, with a comparable share of retirees and a comparable share with plans to retire. On the other hand, Montana LPNs are older and more likely to retire than LPNs nationwide. There are not enough young workers currently replacing retiring LPNs.

The NCSBN survey continues to provide critical information on the status of the nursing workforce in Montana. Understanding the demographic and educational trends of nurses in the state, as well as their engagement in the labor force, will help continue to build Montana's healthcare sector.

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[11] BLS. QCEW. 2022.