

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Nursing Profession in the U.S.: 2020 Quantitative Survey Summary

Background

In January 2019, when Director-General of the World Health Organization proposed making 2020 the Year of the Nurse and Midwife, there was little indication that with or without the designation, 2020 would prove to be a landmark year for nurses around the world.

Presently, nurses are being widely called upon to find, shape and lead innovative solutions to address critical patient needs during the COVID-19 crisis, resulting in a dramatic shift of systemic barriers that have historically kept nurses from providing care at their full potential (Kunic, 2013).

Nevertheless, the essential and tireless role nurses play to strengthen the resilience of health systems amid the COVID-19 pandemic begs several questions: How has COVID-19 impacted the nursing profession? What will healthcare and the future nursing workforce look like once the COVID-19 crisis subsides? What skills and experiences will nurses need to thrive in the healthcare environments and health systems of tomorrow? How can nurses unleash the power of their innovative mindset and leadership skills to address evolving healthcare needs?

Uncovering the answers to these questions and navigating the nursing profession of the future will take a collective effort—with many voices and many perspectives. In support of that effort, Johnson & Johnson, in partnership with the American Nurses Association (ANA) and the American Organization for Nursing Leadership (AONL), commissioned a market research study to understand the current state of nursing amid the pandemic, four years after a baseline survey was conducted by Johnson & Johnson in 2016.

While we continue to learn more as the current health crisis ensues, this whitepaper summarizes key findings from August 2020, five months into the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States.

Statements from Our Partners

Johnson & Johnson

“The COVID-19 crisis has placed nurses into the spotlight like never before, showing the world what we already knew—that their frontline-view is critical to finding, shaping and leading innovative solutions to address critical patient needs amid the ongoing pandemic and beyond. As part of the broader Johnson & Johnson commitment to frontline health workers, we’ve partnered with the American Nurses Association and American Organization for Nursing Leadership to better understand this unprecedented moment in time, its impact on the nursing profession, and what is needed to equip nurses to thrive and drive much-needed change in our ever-evolving healthcare system.”

American Nurses Association

“The profession of nursing is at a historic juncture. Nurses around the world are being called upon to lead clinical teams and provide care on the front lines of a global pandemic, and for the first

time in recent history, nurses are being recognized as change agents for human health. But, given the growing complexities of our healthcare system and the health challenges communities face, we believe it will take the power of our collective voices to navigate the current healthcare environment and crystallize the nursing profession of the future. We are proud to partner in this endeavor which is informed by the findings of this study.”

American Organization for Nursing Leadership

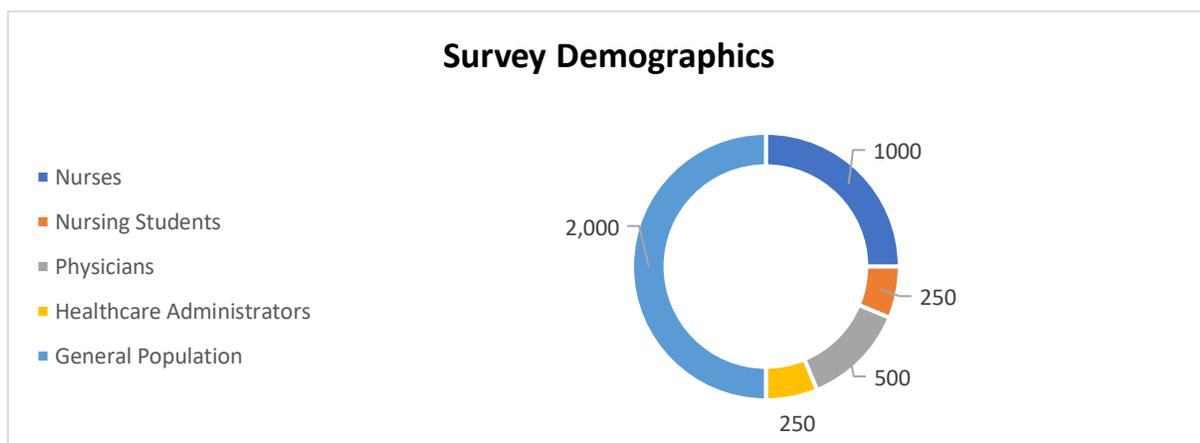
“Along with the rest of the nation, we have watched as the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed millions of nurses across the country to their limits and beyond, solidifying their roles as vital players on clinical care teams and demonstrating that nurses are natural-born innovators and leaders. Across our country, we have observed civil unrest in the quest for equity and social justice. Now more than ever is the time to reflect on nursing’s role in addressing the issues heightened by these events and to inform a progressive path forward where nurses are well-positioned and prepared to meet the evolving needs of our patients, communities and healthcare system.

The American Organization for Nursing Leadership is grateful for the opportunity to participate in this data-driven journey with the inclusion of many voices and exploration of diverse perspectives. Nursing leadership and innovation are at the core of the American Organization for Nursing Leadership, and through education, advocacy and community, we aim to support more than 10,000 nurse leaders of today to strengthen the nursing field of tomorrow. Achieving healthy communities and a robust nursing workforce requires leadership, commitment, innovation, collaboration and inclusion. We are proud to partner with Johnson & Johnson and the American Nurses Association for the journey forward, informed by these study findings.”

Methodology

This online survey was fielded by the research firm Ipsos from August 7 to 30, 2020 and included 4,000 individuals based in the United States. Among them were 1000 nurses (inclusive of 236 APRNs), 250 nursing students, 500 physicians, 250 healthcare administrators and 2,000 general population respondents.

Figure 1: Survey Demographics



The Impact of COVID-19 on Nursing

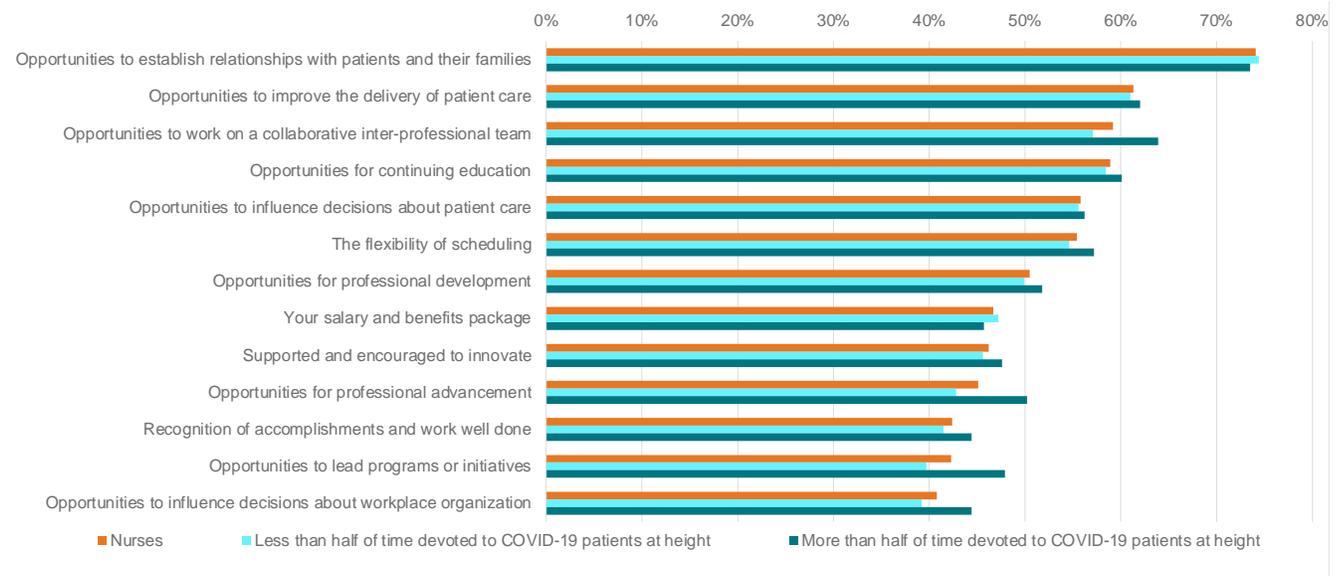
The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense impact on the United States healthcare system and its healthcare professionals. In this survey, we looked specifically at the pandemic’s impact on the nursing profession. Our study revealed that despite the incredible challenges posed by COVID-19, the crisis has resulted in some progress within the profession, accelerating changes in attitudes and expectations regarding nurses.

Times of crisis can break down long-standing barriers and build new pathways forward. According to our survey, 64% of nurses who spent more than half their time with COVID-19 patients are satisfied with opportunities to work on collaborative interprofessional teams, compared with 57% of nurses who spent less than half their time with COVID-19 patients.

Among that same set of nurses working with COVID-19 patients:

- 50% are satisfied with opportunities for professional advancement (compared to 43%)
- 48% are satisfied with opportunities to lead programs or initiatives (compared to 40%)
- 44% are satisfied with opportunities to influence decisions about workplace organization (compared to 39%)

Figure 2: Percentage of satisfaction with opportunities for advancement, leadership and collaboration by nurses who spent more and less time with COVID-19 patients

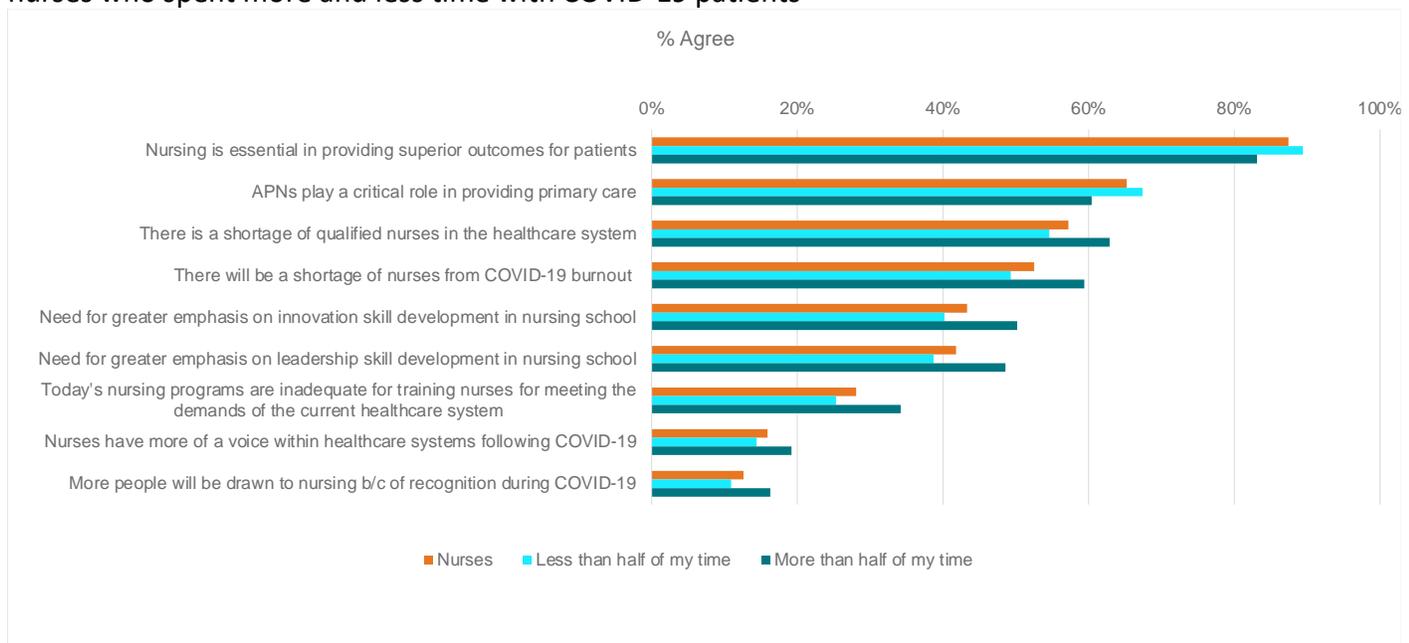


While these results are promising, the survey also revealed concerns among nurses about the future of the workforce.

- Nurses who spent more than half their time with COVID-19 patients believe more strongly that the pandemic will cause burnout and a shortage of nurses compared with nurses who spent less than half of their time with COVID-19 patients.

- Nurses also believe that today’s nursing programs are inadequate for training nurses to meet the demands of the current healthcare system and see a greater need for nursing curricula to focus on innovation skill development and leadership.

Figure 3: Nurses’ perception of the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on the nursing profession by nurses who spent more and less time with COVID-19 patients



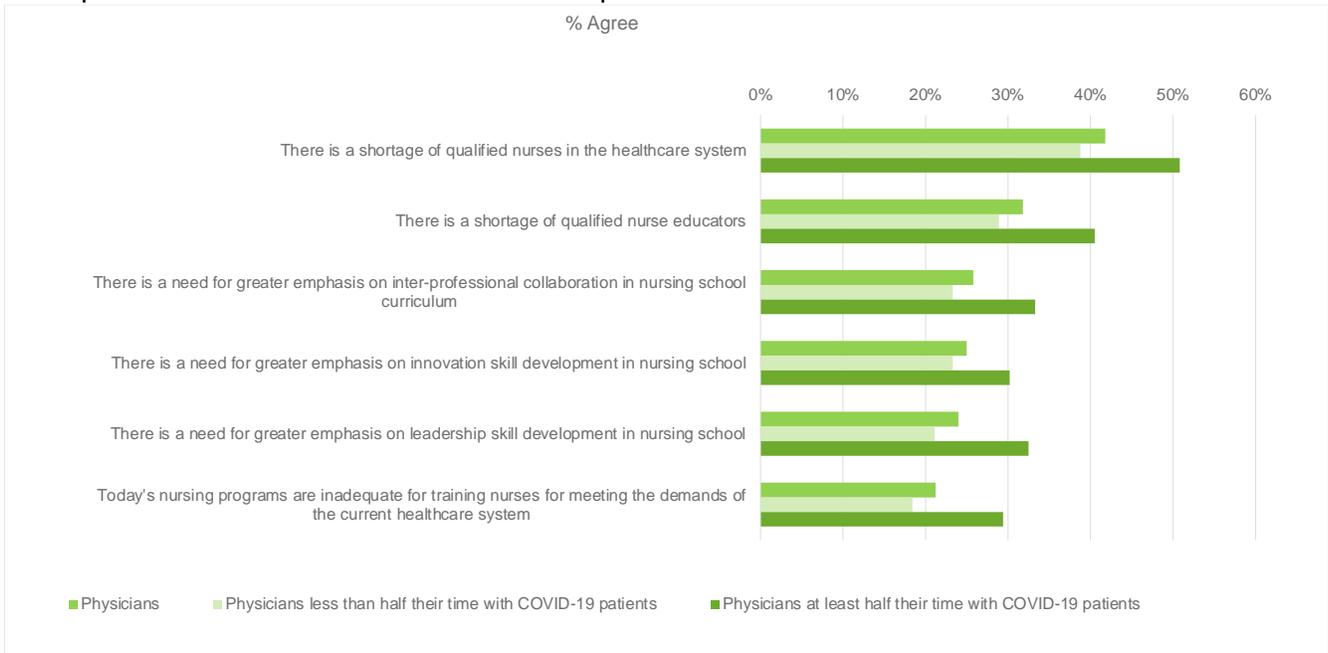
The survey also examined how physicians perceived nurses and the profession, comparing the attitudes of physicians who spent more than half their time with COVID-19 patients to those who did not.

The data demonstrate that physicians practicing in a setting where more than half their time was spent with COVID-19 patients are more likely to see opportunities for nurses and be supportive of them practicing to the limits of their license.

Our findings revealed that these physicians:

- Place a greater emphasis on the importance of innovation, leadership and collaboration for nurses
- Agree with nurses that there is a need for more focus on these areas within nursing school curricula
- See an enhanced role for nurses and APRNs—perhaps because of their experience with interprofessional collaboration during the pandemic

Figure 4: Physicians’ perception of their nurse colleagues and the nursing profession by physicians who spent more and less time with COVID-19 patients



The survey also revealed that the pandemic has accelerated support for certain aspects of patient care among nurses.

- **Health Disparities:**
 - Support for strategies to address health disparities is greatest for nurses in areas hardest hit by COVID-19
- **Telehealth:**
 - The use of telehealth is greater among nurses who spent more time with COVID-19 patients, and they are more open to the technology going forward

Other Findings

The survey also looked more generally at the state of the nursing profession compared to a similar study that was fielded by Johnson & Johnson in 2016. The data revealed that nurses continue to be viewed as essential to an effective healthcare system. Compared to 2016, all audiences surveyed view nurses as more important in 2020.

Yet, all audiences also agreed that nurses are undervalued—and the perceived net value of nurses has only increased among nurses themselves and nursing students.

Compared to 2016, nurses today think they have fewer opportunities within their profession. Nurses today are also less likely to say that there is a shortage of qualified nurses compared to 2016.

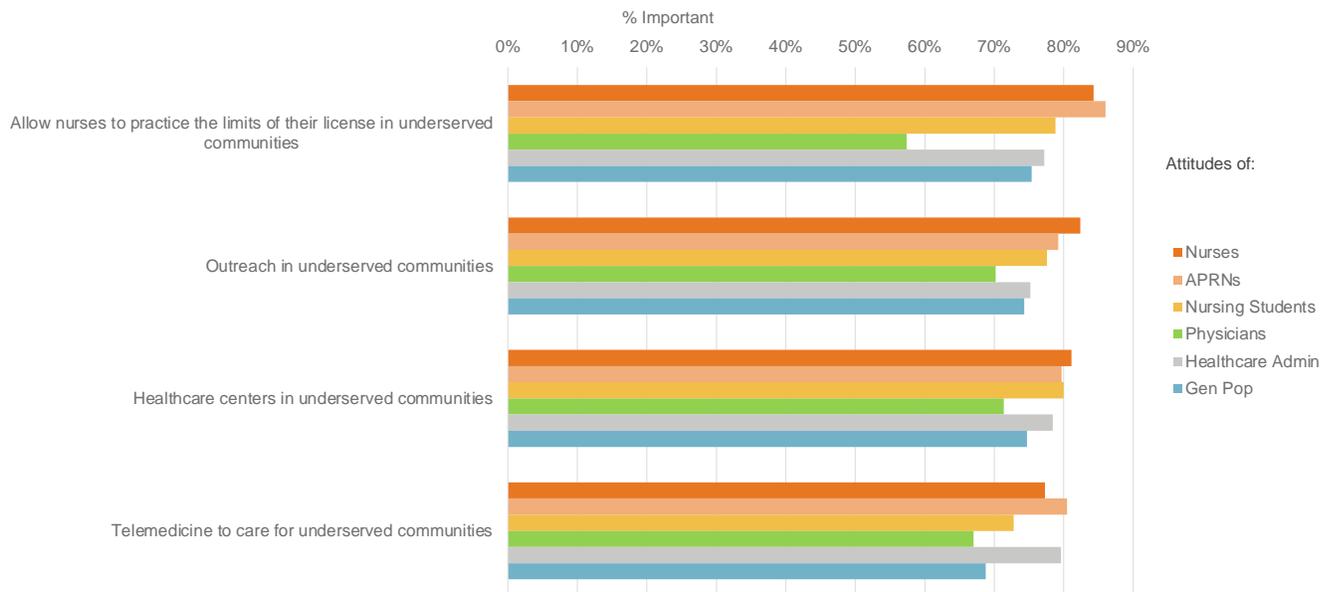
The study uncovered seven areas for further investigation to help nurses continue to expand their role in the delivery of high-quality healthcare:

1. Health Disparities
2. Healthcare Innovation and Health Tech
3. Mental Health and Resiliency
4. Nursing Education and Skill Development
5. Health System Efficiency and Nursing Leadership
6. Practicing at Full Potential
7. Gender Differences within Nursing

Health Disparities

All stakeholder groups surveyed support taking action to address underserved communities. The most important steps, according to respondents, include allowing nurses to practice to the limits of their license, conducting outreach to these communities, having healthcare centers within them, and using telemedicine. Among nurses surveyed, APRNs and younger nurses have a greater interest in addressing structural inequalities and community health roles.

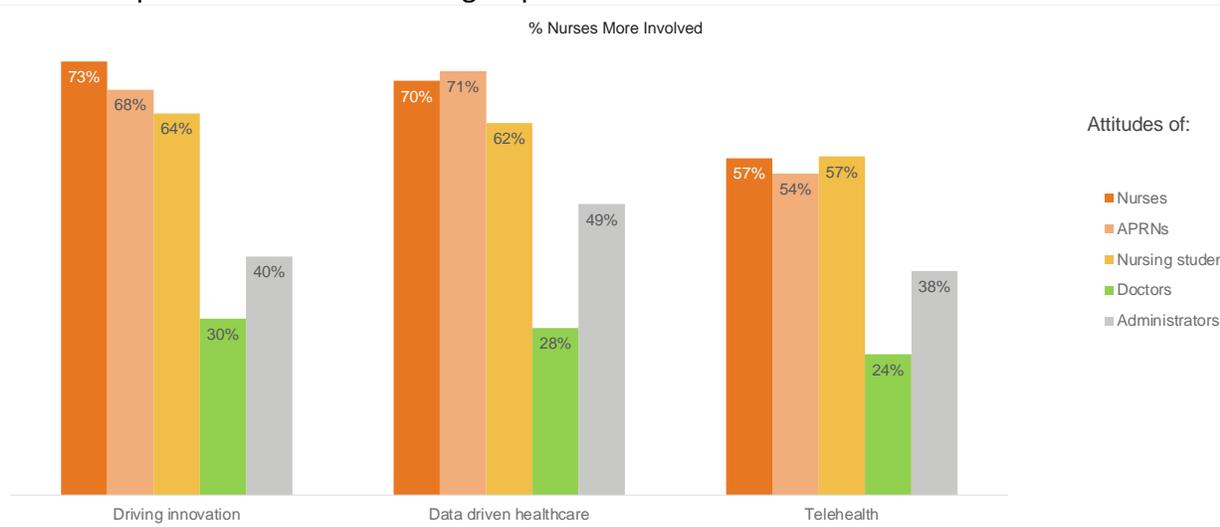
Figure 5: Perceived importance of efforts that would improve healthcare disparities by healthcare professional stakeholder group



Healthcare Innovation and Health Tech

Nurses expressed interest in playing greater roles in healthcare innovation and technology, with 73% of nurses surveyed indicating they should be more involved in this aspect of care. Nurses also feel they should be involved in decision-making earlier—both in the development and selection of technologies used in patient care. This desire to be more involved in innovation and data-driven healthcare is even higher among younger nurses surveyed.

Figure 6: Attitudes toward nurse involvement in healthcare innovation and technology by healthcare professional stakeholder group



Mental Health and Resiliency

Among 16 priorities tested, resiliency is ranked third in importance across all stakeholder groups and respondents see healthcare administrators as having a big role to play in this area. Asked about the top challenges or pain points facing nurses today, administrative burden ranked as the third pain point for APRNs, behind burnout and understaffing. Therefore, while mental wellbeing and resiliency support is important, this study indicates that key factors related to mental health seem to be tied to addressing administrative challenges—long hours, understaffing and administrative burden.

Figure 7: Level of importance of priorities for the evolving healthcare system over the next 10 years by healthcare professional stakeholder group

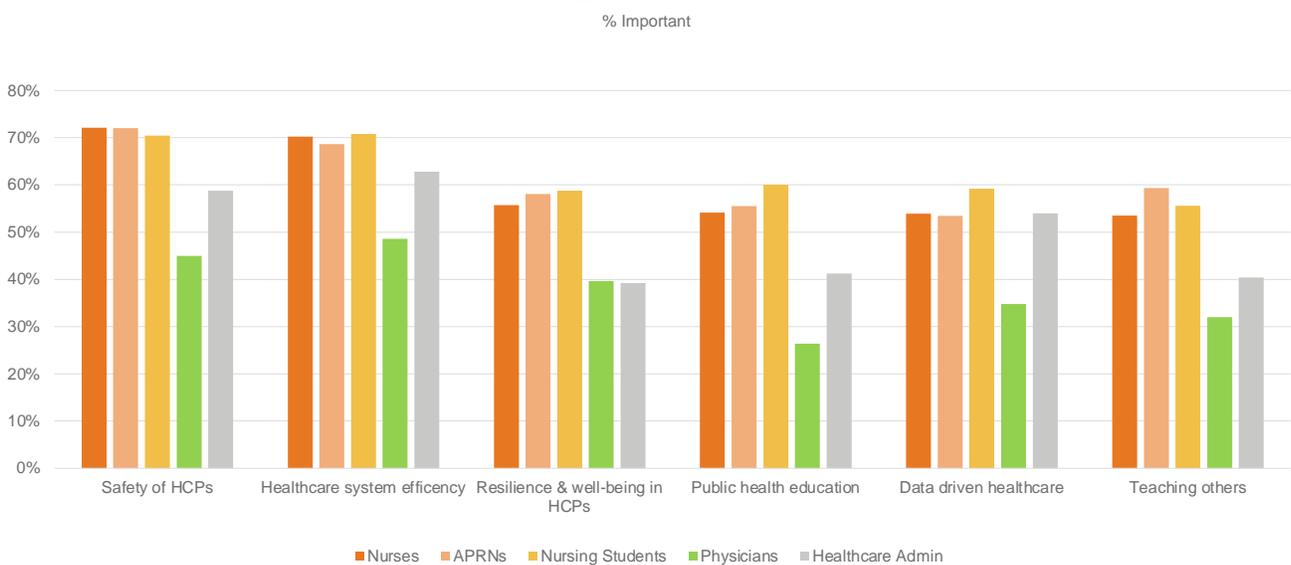
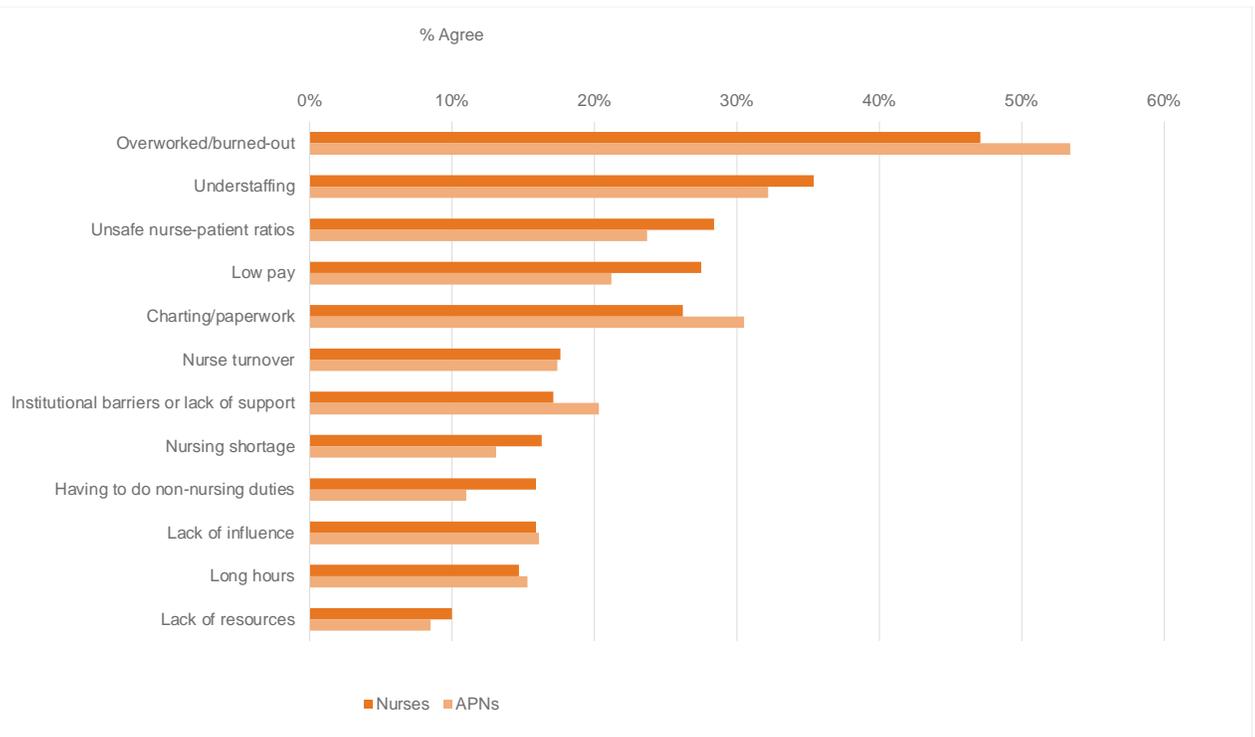


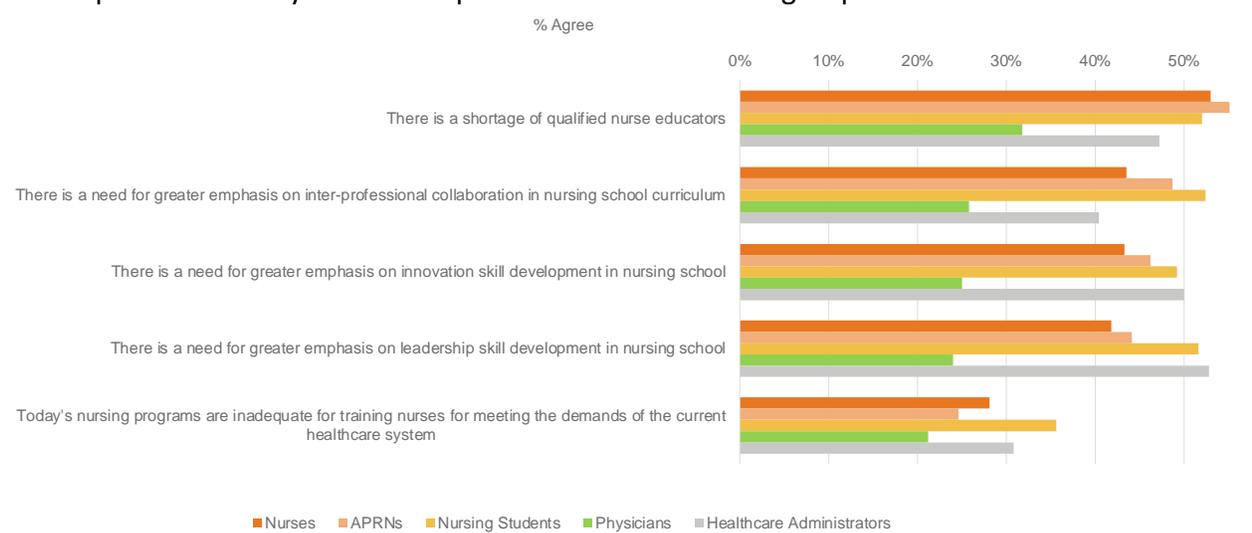
Figure 8: Percentage of agreement with mental health and resiliency priorities among nurses and APNs



Nursing Education and Skill Development

Nursing students that were surveyed indicated that they want more focus on innovation, leadership and collaboration in their nursing school curriculum—and healthcare administrators are aligned with the students in this thinking.

Figure 9: Percentage of participants who agreed with statements on nursing education and skill development needs by healthcare professional stakeholder group

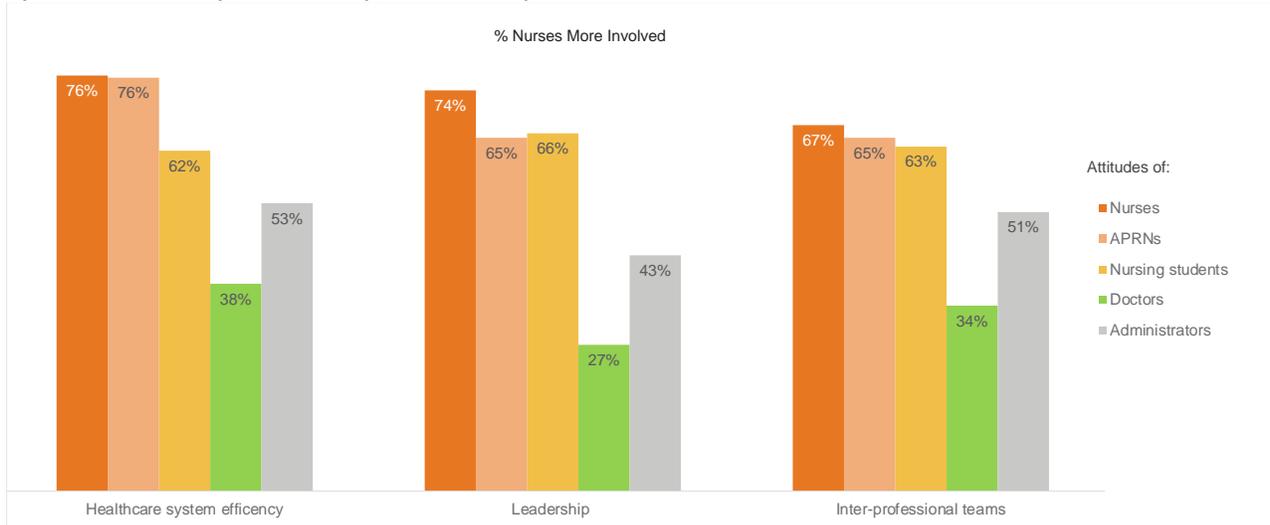


Healthcare System Efficiency and Nursing Leadership

Among 16 priorities tested, healthcare system efficiency ranked first in importance across all stakeholder groups. All stakeholder groups surveyed, except for physicians, say that nurses should be more involved in healthcare system efficiency, leadership and interprofessional teams.

While the data reveal that nurses are making inroads toward being perceived as more critical members of coordinated care teams, they are not perceived as leaders. In fact, the study revealed that nurses are underappreciated and undervalued—particularly by physicians.

Figure 10: Percentage of stakeholders who believe nurses should be more involved in health care system efficiency, leadership, and inter-professional teams



Practicing at Full Potential

Among all stakeholder groups surveyed, physicians are the least supportive of nurses and APRNs playing an expanded role in areas of patient care. However, that finding varies by age and state regulations related to scope of practice.

Older physicians are more likely to recognize the role nurses play in patient care (70% over the age of 65 support an expanded role for nurses) and are more likely to feel very strongly that nurses are undervalued.

In states where individuals can obtain a license or certification that permits them to handle more complex casework with greater independence and discretion consistent with the role of an APRN, physicians are in greater favor of broadened nurse involvement in patient care.

Figure 11: Percentage of physicians' opinions about nurses and the nursing profession, broken out by age

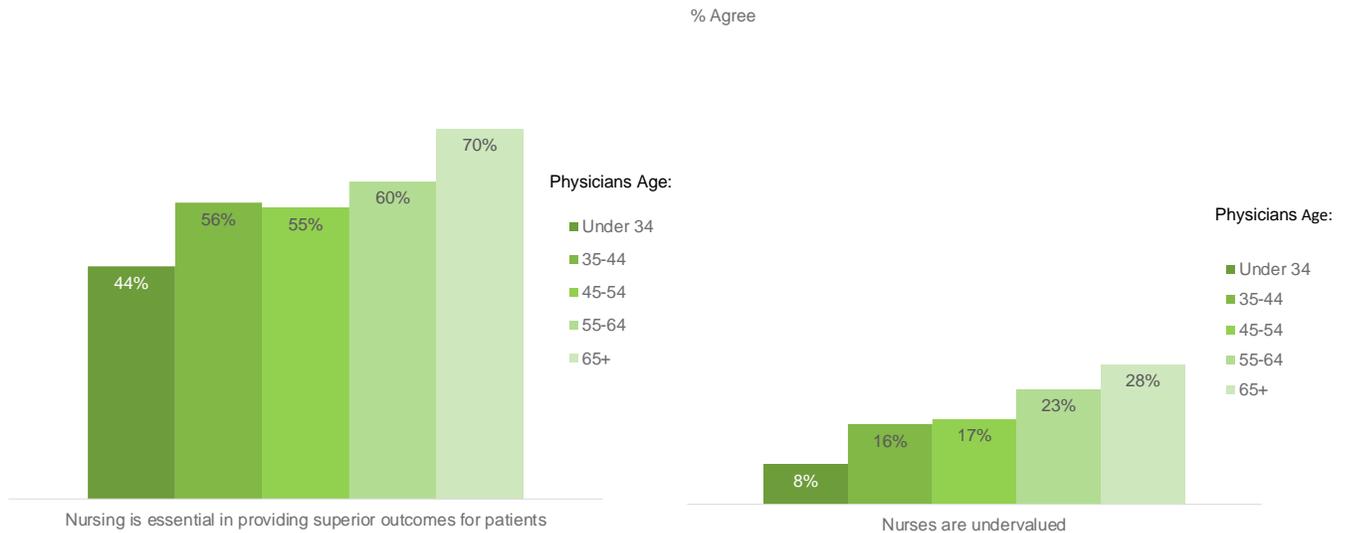
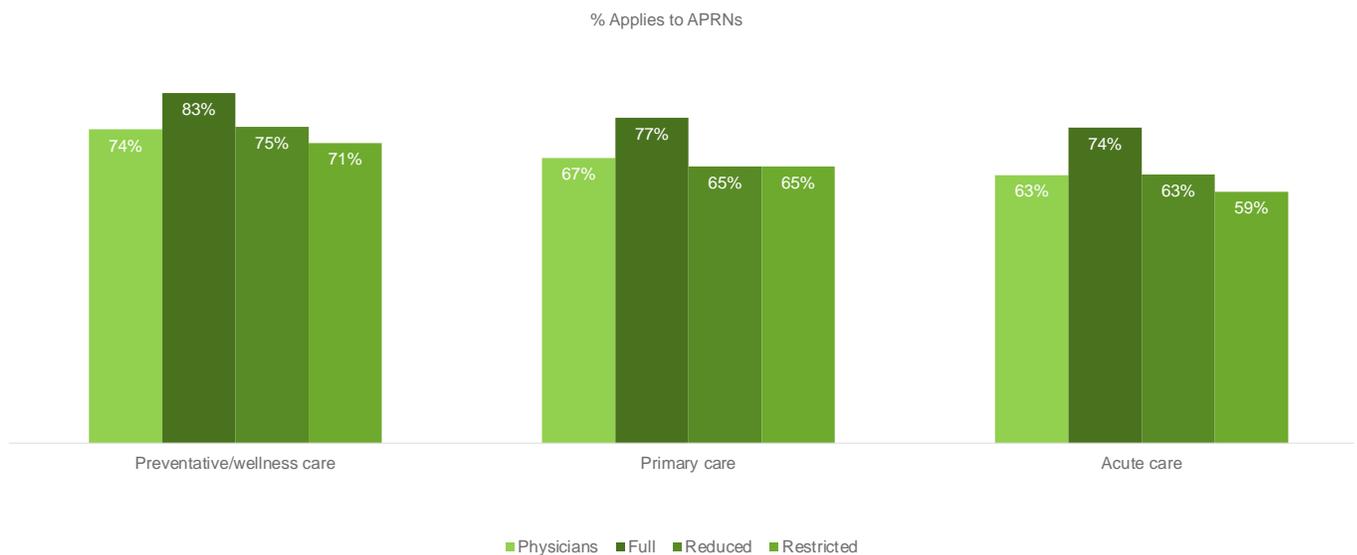


Figure 12: Percentage of physicians' who work with nurses across practice area and degree of nurse licensure



Gender Differences within Nursing

Male nurses are significantly more satisfied, compared to their female counterparts, with opportunities for continued education and development, working on interprofessional teams, salary, opportunities for leadership and influence and recognition within the profession. Looking at the characteristics of leadership specifically, male nurses place significantly more importance on formal roles and titles, whereas female nurses prioritize patient advocacy.

Figure 13: Male and female nurses’ perception of opportunities and recognition in the workplace

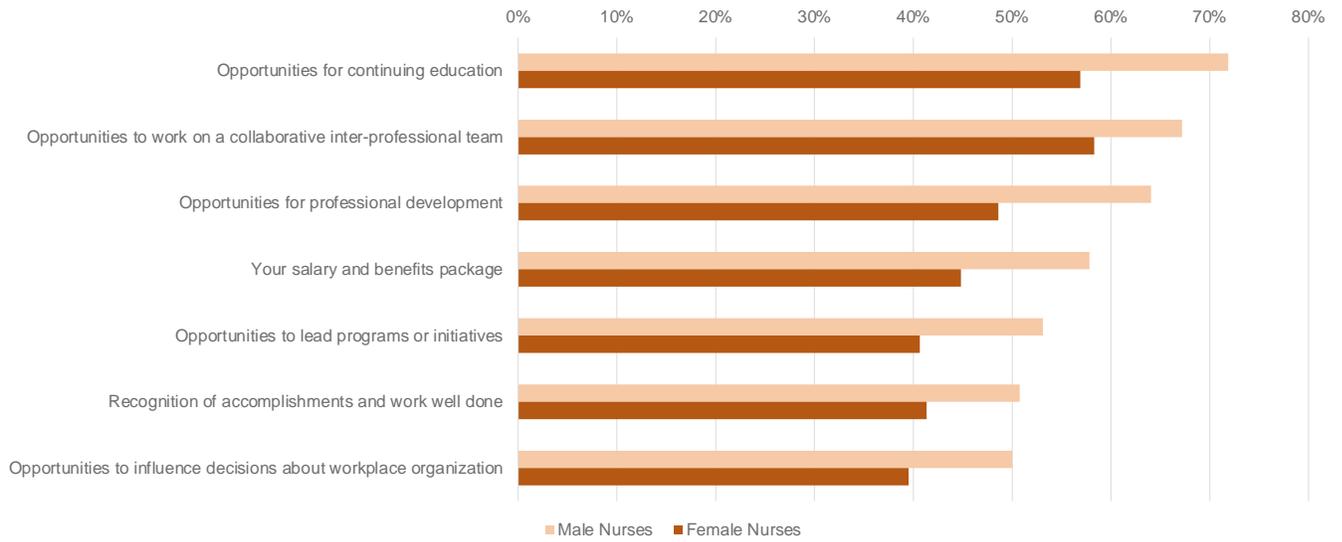
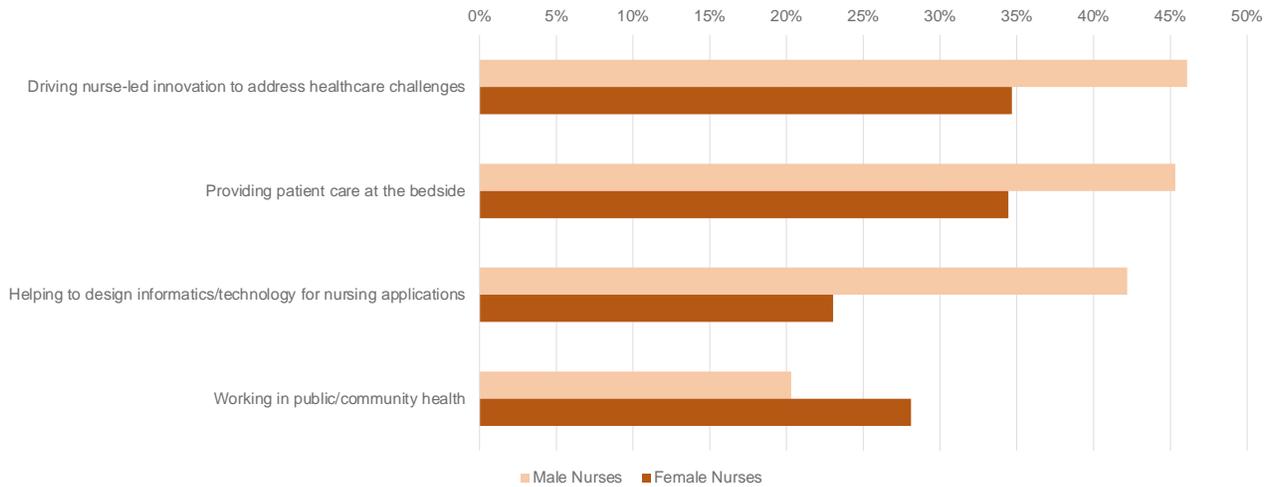


Figure 14: Male and female nurses’ interest in broader healthcare opportunities



Female and male nurses also vary in their interests within the broader healthcare landscape— male nurses are significantly more interested in driving nurse-led innovation and helping design technology for nurses; female nurses are significantly more interested in working in public and community health.

Conclusion

COVID-19 is fundamentally changing the way hospitals and health systems operate and how nurses and other HCPs provide care—and it has laid bare the ever-present challenges of the American healthcare system. Nonetheless, findings from the 2016 and 2020 surveys share a similar trend: in many healthcare settings in the U.S., healthcare system efficiency is a top priority, yet the nation’s well-educated, experienced nursing workforce remains underutilized and undervalued.

The onslaught of COVID-19, however, has exposed some silver linings, as barriers to practice, nursing innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration have been lowered. Nurses who spent a greater amount of time caring for COVID-19 patients also saw greater opportunities for leadership, influence and professional advancement. Nurses are now being recognized for their clinical know-how, innovative nature and their critical frontline view—qualities long-known by Johnson & Johnson, the American Nurses Association and the American Organization for Nursing Leadership, and other nursing organizations across the country.

What matters most now is what we know and what we do next: How can we use the lessons from COVID-19 to empower the nursing profession and power up nurse-led innovation to elevate patient-centered care and outcomes?

A strong starting point is strengthening the organizational structures that foster and incubate nurse-led and other healthcare provider innovation, tap into nursing patient care insights, and prioritize interdisciplinary collaboration. Arguably, this could enhance system efficiency.

Next, we should also look at new, evolving and emerging models of patient care delivery. The onset of the pandemic lessened barriers to scope of practice in areas like telehealth, increasing the ability of nurses to provide care and improving patients’ access to qualified healthcare providers. In addition to improving access to care, when nurses can engage in telehealth, it also helps to address health disparities and to reach underserved communities. Nurses, who understand the patient continuum of care as well as anyone, could also lead the way in community-based care-delivery models and population health.

When it comes to product development and product selection, there is a clear opportunity to tap into the insights of nurses earlier on in the process, given their proximity to patient care. Increasing focus on data-driven healthcare could also improve efficiencies and outcomes.

And let’s take a fresh look at nursing education, as this research indicates a strong interest in a nursing workforce equipped to lead, innovate and collaborate in a variety of settings outside of hospitals.

We also see a strong need to support the mental health and resiliency of our front line, including nurses, but perhaps a critical step there is for health systems to get to the root of the problem first: Nurses are feeling overworked, are concerned about short-staffed working environments and are weighted with heavy administrative burden. A strong, empowered workforce is at the heart of a strong healthcare system.

In light of these findings and additional discovery that we will undertake in the areas of organizational structure, care delivery, policy change and workforce resiliency, the hope is that as a collective—Johnson & Johnson, the American Nurses Association and the American Organization for Nursing Leadership— we will help further shape a progressive path forward for the nursing profession within our U.S. healthcare system, which will ultimately lead to elevated, yet more efficient, patient-centered care.

Citation: Kunic RJ, Jackson D. Transforming nursing practice: barriers and solutions. *AORN J.* 2013;98(3):235-248. doi:10.1016/j.aorn.2013.07.003

Publication Date: January 2021