

2020 Trends in Nurse Staffing

A national survey on the state of
nurse staffing in 2020.

Foreword

In 2020, hospitals across the U.S. are struggling to meet the rising demand for healthcare caused by an aging population, the effects of the opioid crisis, and insufficient staffing of frontline healthcare professionals. The nurse shortage is expected to increase as older nurses retire, creating a need for [an estimated 203,700](#)¹ new RNs each year through 2026 to fill the gap. Other factors influencing the nurse shortage include lack of educational bandwidth to train new nurses, career burnout, high turnover rate, and opportunities away from bedside brought on from advancements in technology.

At the beginning of 2020, when this survey was completed, we could not have even contemplated how the coronavirus would dramatically change every aspect of life. The COVID-19 pandemic will undoubtedly impact the future of bedside nursing, though the implications are unknown at this time.

Nurse recruitment and retention are top concerns facing healthcare executives and chief nursing officers. The study shows that organizations have implemented strategies to affect these concerns, including building newly licensed nurse (NLRNs) programs, fostering academic partnerships, recruiting international nurses, and investing the capital for internal recruitment and retention activities.

Hospital leaders are continuing to look for ways to cut contingent spend while prioritizing patient safety. Chief nursing officers are exploring innovative solutions to attract and retain talent to stabilize their units.

In this survey, Avant Healthcare Professionals 2020 Trends in Nurse Staffing Study, we analyze the state of nurse staffing, the status of U.S. nurse job vacancies, the cost comparison of outsourcing labor, and which strategies hospital executives are using to address understaffing in 2020. This data will compare data from 2019 to explore a shift in staffing trends.

This survey was sent to a list of hospital executives across the U.S. with the title of CEO, CNO, and HR executive. We received a total of 116 total responses from a variety of settings, including critical access hospitals and state facilities.

The data and responses included in this survey provide insight into staffing trends and how hospitals plan to staff during the national nursing shortage. Healthcare executives and nurse leaders may use this information to understand their staffing options in 2020.



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Executive summary

Avant Healthcare Professionals conducted a national survey about 2020 nurse staffing trends. The following is a brief overview of the findings.

Nurse vacancies remain high throughout the U.S., with most executives relying on new grads, internal recruitment, and external advertising to fill the openings. While new grads are the most popular option of recruitment for 2020, according to a study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, [approximately one in five newly-licensed RNs](#)² are likely to leave their profession within the first year.

More than half of the respondents indicated they have calculated the impact that nurse retirements will have on their staff. An influx of nurse retirements can create a skill gap in units. Finding and retaining experienced nurses to fill this skill gap is critical to organizations in 2020.

In 2020, hospitals are reporting a 10% increase in the utilization of travel nurses compared to 2019. The convenience of 13-week travel nurse options is offset by the continued rise in travel nurse bill rates and financial havoc created by chronic, long term, openings.

The highest reported needs for hospitals include med surg, emergency room, operating room, and intensive care nurses. Comments by respondents also suggest a continued rise in behavioral and long term care nurses.

This study indicates the importance of having a multi-faceted approach to nurse staffing in 2020.

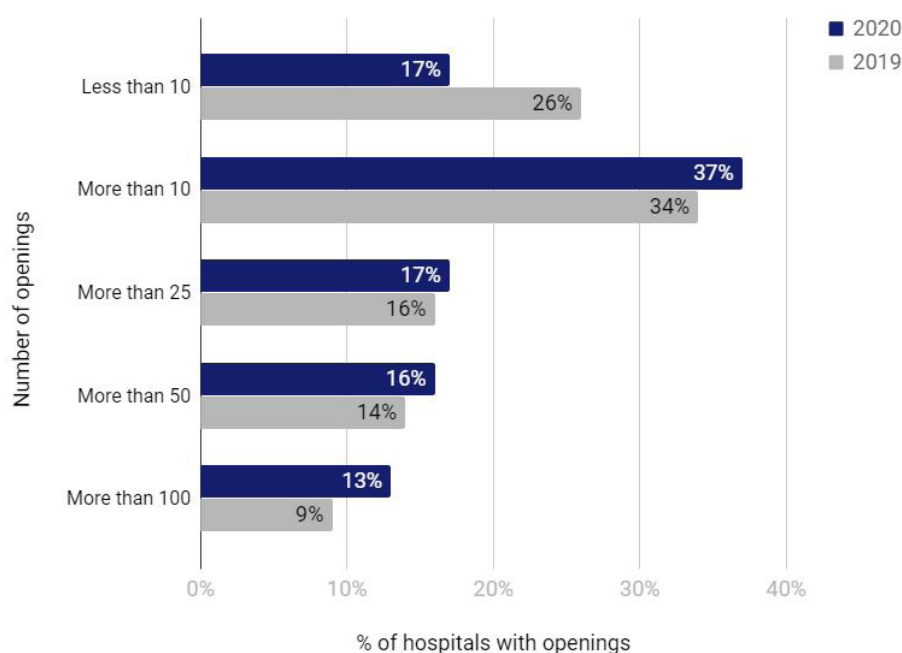


Addressing nurse staffing needs

In 2020, registered nurse job vacancies remain consistently high throughout the U.S., with most hospitals depending on new graduate nurses to fill the openings.

According to the Avant Healthcare Professionals 2020 survey, 54% of respondents reported having between 10 and 50 job openings to fill. 16% of hospitals reported having 50 to 100 openings, and 13% have over 100 openings at their facility. A reported 17% of participants are looking to fill between 1 and 10 positions.

How many openings do you anticipate this year?



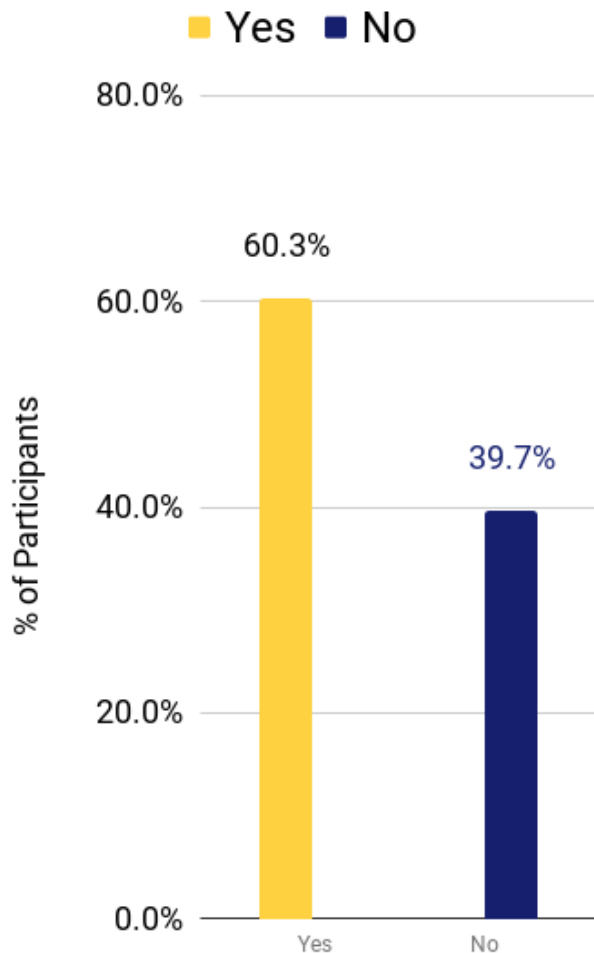
Compared to last year's data, there is a higher number of positions to be filled in 2020, which is linked to nursing retirements and an increase of nurses leaving the bedside.



Job openings might be higher than reported since roughly 40% of respondents have not factored in the number of nurses who will retire in 2020.

A substantial segment of the nursing workforce is nearing retirement age. The experience gap created by these retirements will cause challenges in patient satisfaction and can increase the potential of staff burnout.

Have you factored in nurse retirements for 2020?

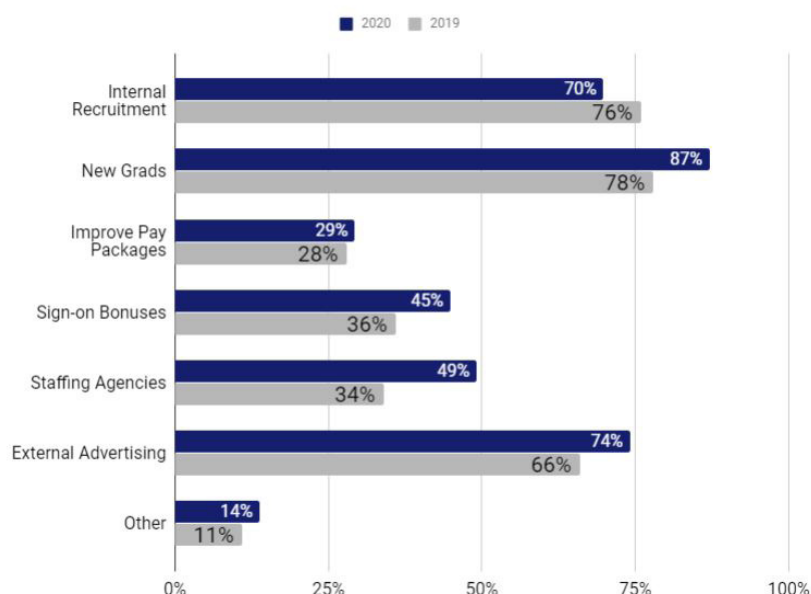


Around 87% of respondents will rely on new nurse graduates to fill job openings, which is an increase of 9% from 2019's data.

While this is a popular strategy to fill nurse vacancies, newly-licensed nurses can be hard to retain on staff (an estimated 1 in 5 leave within the first year). This can be harmful long-term as [it is estimated](#)³ that replacing a registered nurse can cost anywhere from \$22,000 to \$64,000.

It can take newly-licensed nurses years of experience in their practice setting to work safely and independently. Geography is also an issue as hospitals in more rural communities have difficulties recruiting new grads to their facilities.

How do you plan to fill your openings?



“I’m the CNO in a rural critical access hospital; recruiting to this type of area is extremely difficult.”

- CNO from 2020 survey

Hospitals will also utilize internal recruitment efforts through referrals, external advertising on job boards, staffing agency partnerships and sign-on bonuses to attract nurses in 2020.



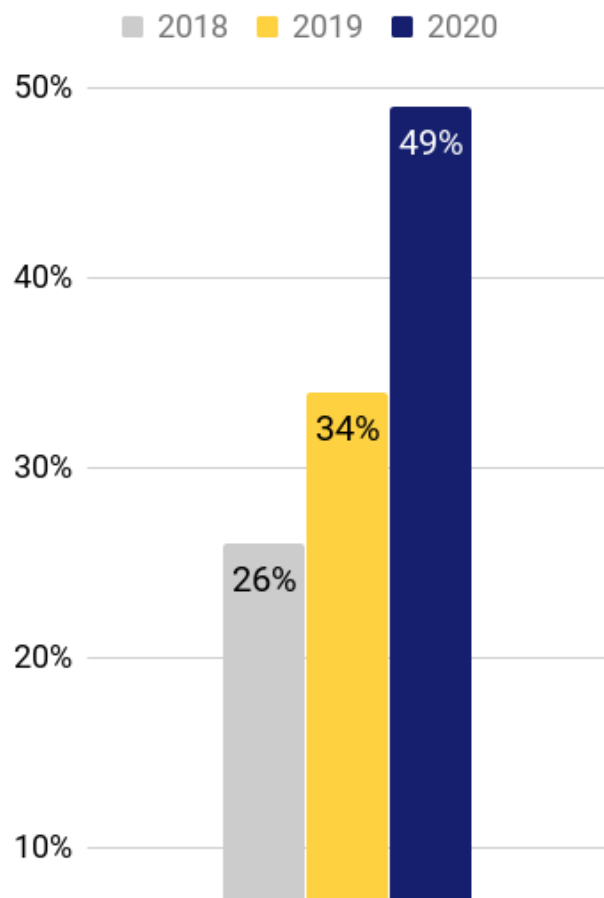
Leveraging staffing partnerships to bridge experience gap



More healthcare executives are looking to establish partnerships with staffing agencies to outsource recruitment efforts.

Survey results showed that there is a 15% increase in hospitals that will rely on staffing agencies to recruit nurses in 2020 as compared to the 2019 data.

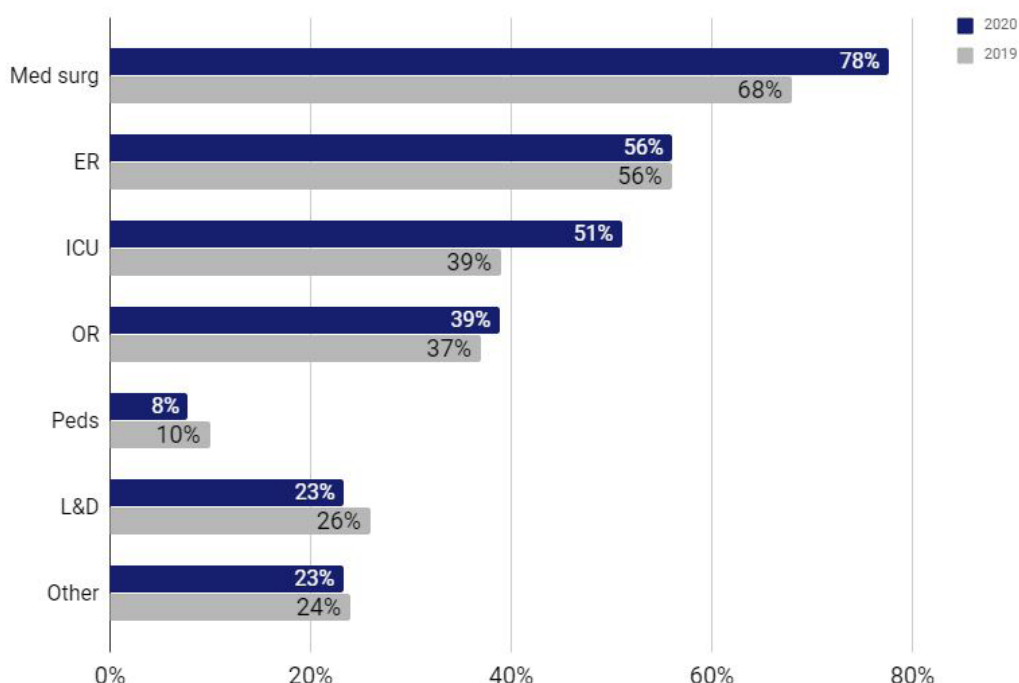
Are you planning on using staffing agencies in 2020?



Nurses by demand

The highest demand nurse specialties across the U.S. are medical-surgical, emergency room, intensive care unit, and operating room. The demand for medical-surgical increased by 10%, while the demand for ICU nurses jumped 12.54%, making it the highest increase compared to 2019 data. Comments from respondents indicated that there is a growing need for psych and behavioral health nurses captured in the “other” category.

What specialties do you need to fill in 2020?



Seeking cost-effective solutions

Hospitals executives are looking to utilize more cost-effective staffing strategies in 2020.

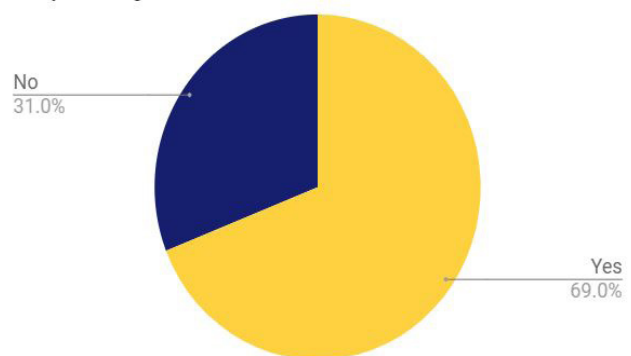
According to the survey, 2019 data indicated that 58% of organizations were utilizing travel nurses to fill staffing gaps. In 2020, that number increased to 69%, representing a 12 point increase. Coupled with this higher usage, is the increasing bill rates for travel nurses. A recent study has found that travel nurse pay has [nearly doubled](#)⁴ as of late March 2020 due to high demand as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Of those using travel nurses, approximately 30% of the respondents reported paying over \$70 an hour for the contracted labor. Comments suggest that rates for highly coveted specialties could exceed \$90 per hour. Geographical location also had a significant impact on travel bill rates.

Organizations are seeking out cost-effective solutions, such as float pools, tuition reimbursements, and utilizing international nurses to offset the high cost of travel nurses and to offset turnover costs.

A [recent study](#)⁵ by the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) indicates an increase in international nurse staffing in recent years. Hourly bill rates for international nurses are significantly less than the hourly bill rate of travel nurses nationally and offer the opportunity for high conversion rates at the completion of their assignment. The ability to fill chronic openings on a long term assignment allows for staff stability and a reduction in costs associated with turnover.

Are you using travelers?



“Travel nurses are too expensive for our current budget. We often fill holes with agency staff for intermittent needs and pool staff.”

- CNO from 2020 survey

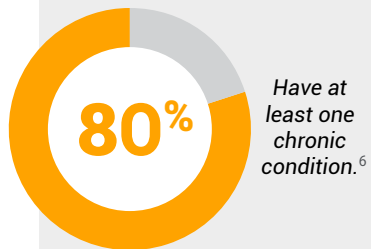
Causes of U.S. nurse shortage

The nursing shortage is a strong driver in hospitals using contract labor nurses.

BABY BOOMERS

75
MILLION³

An aging population of 75 million "Baby Boomers" continues to drive demand for healthcare services.



ACA COVERAGE

20
MILLION⁴

An estimated 20 million people now have health insurance coverage through the Affordable Care Act.



OPIOID EPIDEMIC

1.3
MILLION⁵

In just one year, over a million people were hospitalized or treated in an ER due to opioid related issues.

That's
3,500
people each day!



70,000

NURSES RETIRING ANNUALLY⁷

By 2030, almost a million nurses will retire and leave the workforce taking with them the years of knowledge and experience they have accumulated.

64,000

TURNED AWAY FROM NURSING PROGRAMS²

U.S. nursing schools turned away over 64,000 qualified applicants from nursing programs in 2016 due largely in part to an insufficient number of faculty and clinical preceptors.

17,000

NURSING INSTRUCTORS NEEDED⁸

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Employment Projections for 2012-2022, over 3,400 nurse instructors will be needed each year through 2022. That's over 17,000 in just the next five years (2018-2022).

About the survey

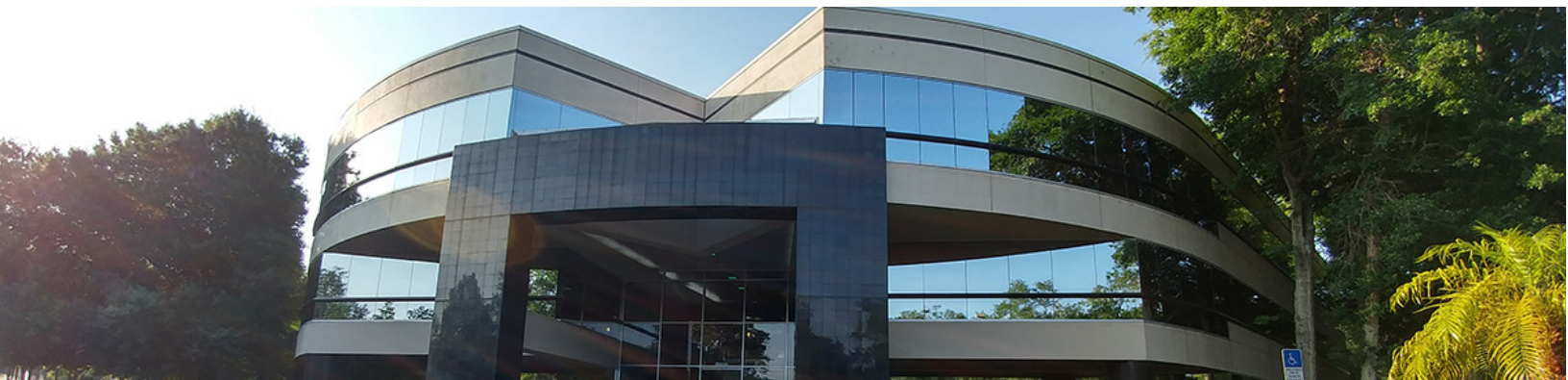
A total of 116 hospital executives and senior leaders across the United States participated in this survey. These participants included CEOs, CNOs, and HR executives from a variety of health systems, including critical access hospitals, state facilities, and larger health systems. The responses were collected late February and March of 2020, which may not factor in the lasting effects of COVID-19; however there are participant comments that reference it. COVID-19 will undoubtedly impact the future of nursing.

More than 438,000 new registered nurse job openings are projected to be added to the workforce by 2026, surging from 2.7 million jobs to 3.2 million, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. It is also projected that there will be a need for 203,700 new RNs each year through 2026 to fill new positions and replace vacancies left by retiring nurses. The most significant drivers of the nursing shortage are the increase in patients, the imbalance of registered nurse distribution geographically, the high turnover of new grads, and nurse retirements. Over 50% of the facilities Avant Healthcare Professionals staff are in rural communities across the U.S.

The southeast and the south-central part of the U.S. will be impacted most by the nurse shortage. U.S. hospitals affected most by the nurse shortage will require a comprehensive approach to staffing. Avant Healthcare Professionals has been conducting this study annually since 2017 with the intent to provide hospital executives with vital information on nurse staffing trends through the perspective of their peers.

About Avant Healthcare Professionals

Avant Healthcare Professionals is the premier staffing specialist for internationally educated registered nurses, physical therapists and occupational therapists. Avant helps clients improve the continuity of their care, fill hard-to-find specialties, and increase patient satisfaction, revenue and HCAHPS scores. Avant is a Joint Commission accredited staffing agency and founding member of the American Association of International Healthcare Recruitment (AAIHR). Avant Healthcare Professionals is a member of the Jackson Healthcare family of companies.



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2. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation <https://www.rwjf.org/en/library/articles-and-news/2014/09/nearly-one-in-five-new-nurses-leave-first-job-within-a-year--acc.html>
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