

## Experience of Nurses Working During the COVID Pandemic – Data from the 2022 NSSRN

March 2024

Nursing is the nation’s largest health care profession, with an estimated 4,349,377 actively licensed registered nurses (RNs) and advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs), as of December 31, 2021.

The National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses (NSSRN) surveyed a nationally representative sample of approximately 125,000 RNs and APRNs in the United States on a variety of topics, including nurses’ employment characteristics. More than 49,000 nurses responded to the survey and those results were extrapolated to estimate population totals. Employment findings from the survey refer to nurses who reported that they were employed between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021. For details on the NSSRN, see the end of this brief.

This brief provides information from the NSSRN on nurses’ experiences working during the COVID-19 pandemic. Key takeaways include:

- Nearly 1.7 million nurses (43.5% of the estimated 3,899,360 nurses employed) reported experiencing some form of employment change.
- The most common change reported by RNs was to temporarily float to a different unit or department within the same employer (19.7% of RNs reported temporarily floating to a different unit).
- Nearly a quarter of nurses experienced some form of employer-driven employment disruption. These disruptions included being forced to take leave, being furloughed (with or without pay), or being laid off.
- A total of 348,510 RNs (8.9% of the workforce) chose to leave their employer for another nursing job at some point between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021.
- 195,292 RNs (5.0% of those employed) left the workforce altogether, either for a non-nursing job or to retire.
- The most common reasons given for leaving the workforce were high-risk working conditions (51.3% of RNs who left the workforce), feelings of being overworked or burned out (50.1%), inadequate staffing (39.3%), and unsatisfactory safety protocols (36.8%).
- About 84,600 RNs out of 195,292 RNs who left the nursing workforce during the pandemic (43.3%) indicated that they intended to return to nursing, while 19.5% indicated that they did not intend to return and 37.2% of were uncertain about whether they would return to the workforce.
- In the 2022 survey, RNs reported higher levels and more frequent feelings of burnout during the pandemic. The share of RNs who experienced feelings of burnout every day increased from 11.8% in 2019 to 25.7% in 2021.
- 63.0% of nurses who had been tested for the COVID-19 virus reported at least one positive test result.

### About the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis

The National Center for Health Workforce Analysis provides analysis to inform health workforce policy by expanding and improving the data available on the health workforce, projecting the supply and demand for health workers, and disseminating workforce data to the public.

For more information, visit the [Health Workforce Analysis](#) webpage.

- While nurses aged 65 and above had the lowest rate of positive tests (45.6%), they had the highest rate of hospitalization due to the virus (3.2% of RNs aged 65 and above who tested positive for COVID were also hospitalized).

## Impact of COVID Pandemic on RNs' Employment Situations

While 56.5% of RNs employed at some point between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021 (or 2.2 million RNs) reported experiencing no change in their employment situation due to the COVID pandemic, nearly 1.7 million nurses experienced some form of employment change. The most common change was for an RN to temporarily float to a different unit or department within the same employer. In fact, nearly 20% of RNs employed during the pandemic floated to a different unit or department at some point (**Table 1**).

**Table 1. Employment Impacts Experienced by RNs Working During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Employment Impact Experienced	Count of RNs	Percent of RNs
Temporarily Floated to Different Unit/Department within Same Employer	766,673	19.7%
Forced to Take Their Own Paid Time Off	447,759	11.5%
Changed Employer but Remained in Nursing	348,510	8.9%
Forced to Take Unpaid Time Off	241,366	6.2%
Furloughed without Pay	211,041	5.4%
Furloughed with Pay	177,901	4.6%
Changed Role from Patient Care to Non-Patient Care	143,842	3.7%
Changed Role from Non-Patient Care to Patient Care	84,000	2.2%
Laid Off with Intent to Return to Nursing	58,971	1.5%
Temporarily Left Employer to Assist with the Pandemic Response	56,878	1.5%
Delayed Retirement	37,229	1.0%

Note: Nurses may have experienced more than one of the employment impacts listed in Table 1. As such, percentages are not additive. Percentages are based on the estimated total of 3,899,360 RNs working at some point between March 1, 2020, to December 31, 2021.

Source: [2022 National Sample of Registered Nurses](#).

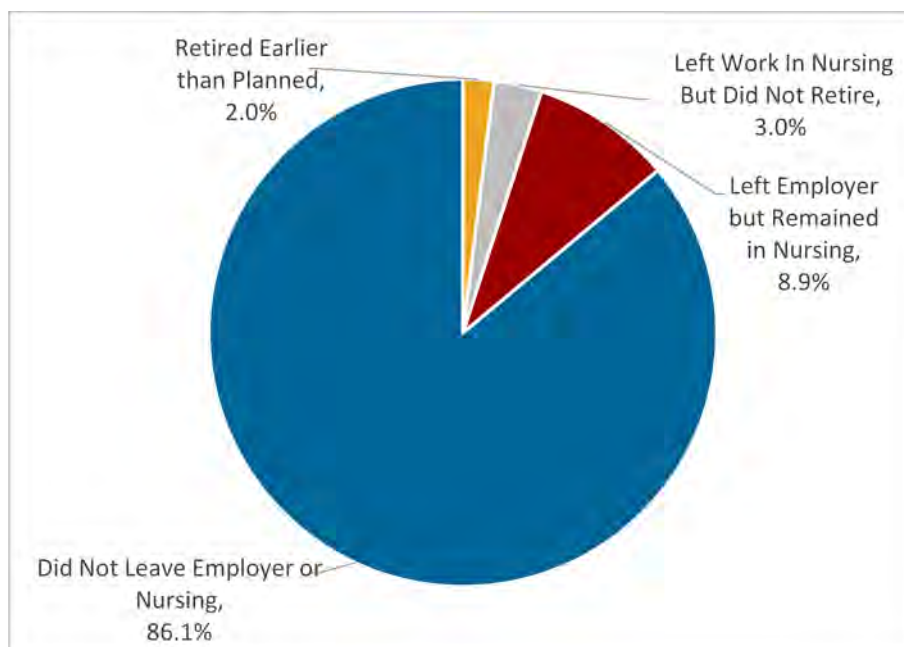
11.5% of RNs working during the pandemic were forced to take paid time off at some point between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021, while 6.2% were forced to take unpaid leave. Including nurses who were forced to take leave, furloughed (with or without pay), or laid off, almost a quarter of the workforce (859,418 RNs) experienced some form of employer-driven employment disruption.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, 348,510 RNs (or 8.9% of RNs employed) left their employer for another nursing job and another 195,292 RNs (5.0% of the workforce) left the workforce altogether (**Figure 1**). Of the nurses who left the workforce, 60.7% continued working but in a non-nursing job. The remaining 39.3% retired.

The 2022 NSSRN also asked RNs about the reasons that contributed to their decision to leave the workforce during the COVID-19 pandemic (**Figure 2**). The most common reason given for leaving the workforce was high-risk working conditions, with 51.3% of RNs who left the workforce indicating that high-risk conditions played a role in their decision to leave. This was followed by feelings of being overworked or burned out (50.1%), inadequate staffing (39.3%), and unsatisfactory safety protocols (36.8%). Overall, these results suggest working conditions were the most important factors in RNs' decision to leave the workforce during the pandemic. Underlying health conditions and family caregiving also played an important role in the decision to leave the workforce.

<sup>1</sup> This figure does not include nurses who switched employers or temporarily left work to assist with the pandemic response.

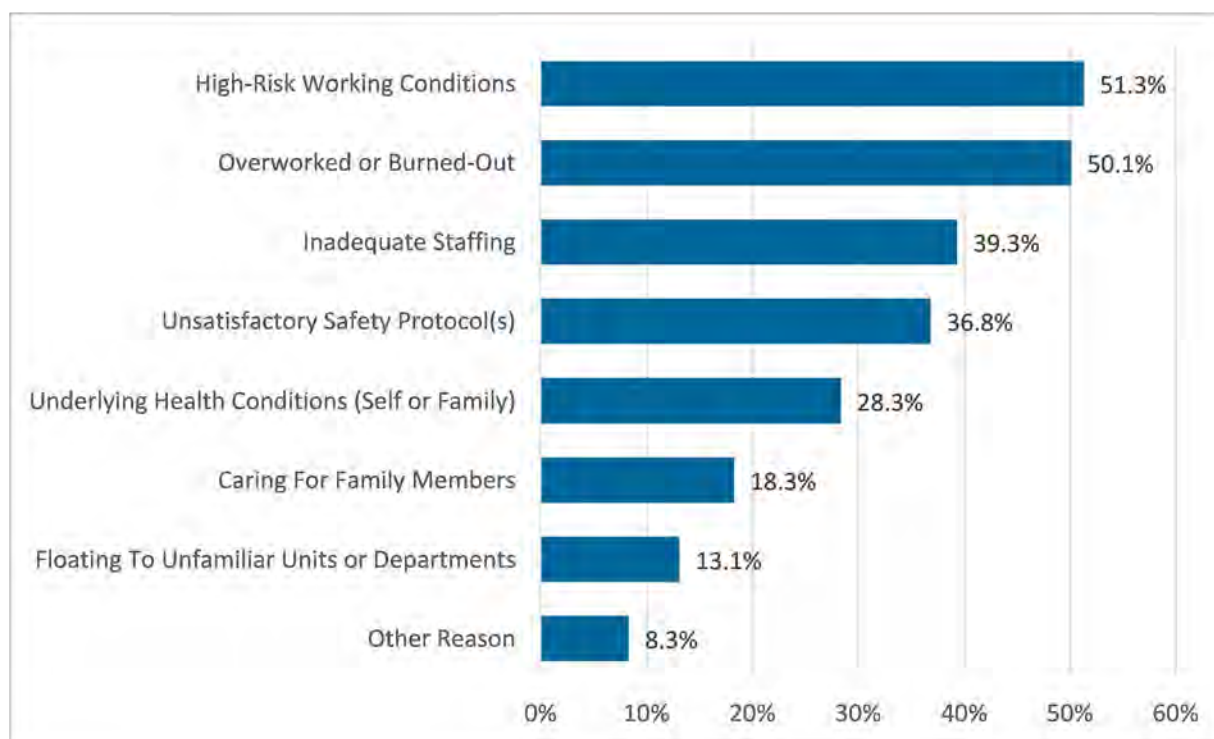
**Figure 1. Nurses Leaving the Workforce Between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021**



Note: A total of 3,899,360 RNs were employed at any time between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021.

Source: [2022 National Sample of Registered Nurses](#).

**Figure 2. Reasons Nurses Left the Workforce Between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021**

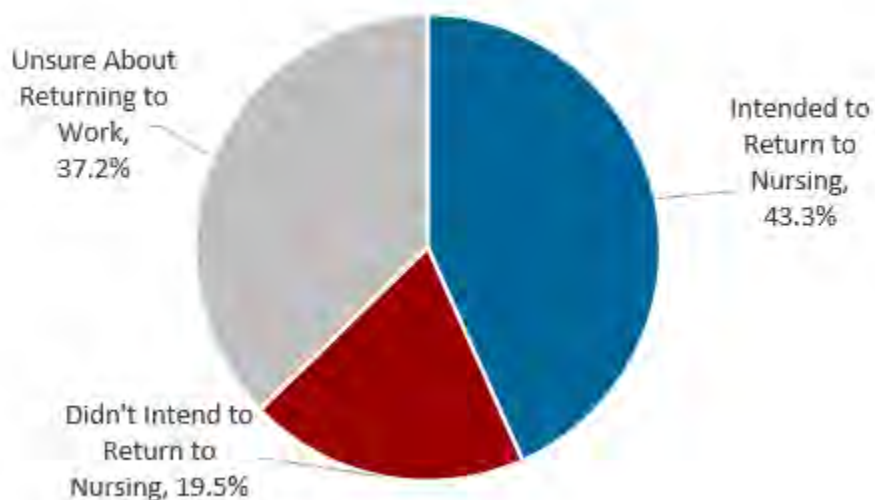


Note: A total of 3,899,360 RNs were employed at any time between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021.

Source: [2022 National Sample of Registered Nurses](#).

The majority of the RNs who left the nursing workforce during the pandemic (43.3%) indicated that they intended to return to nursing, while 19.5% indicated that they did not intend to return (**Figure 3**). The remaining 37.2% of RNs who left the workforce were uncertain at the time about whether they would return to the workforce.

**Figure 3. Future Nursing Employment Intentions for Nurses Who Left the Workforce Between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021**



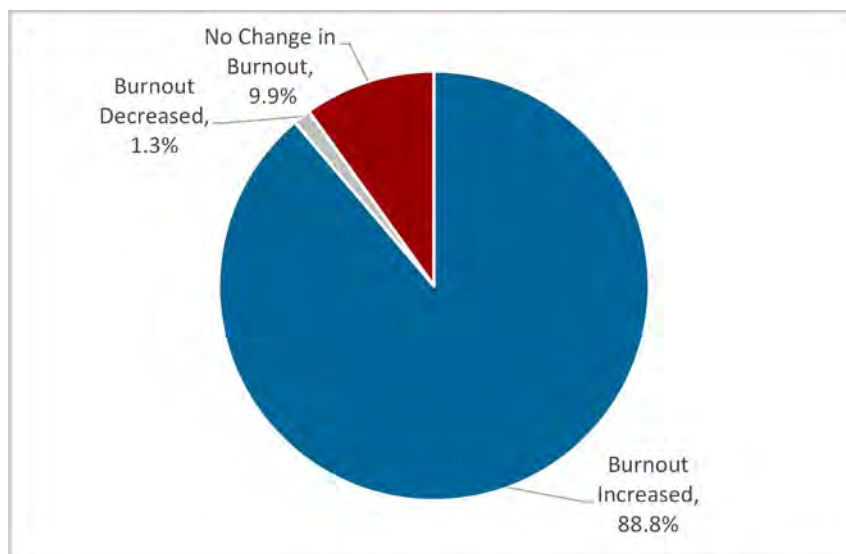
Note: A total of 3,899,360 RNs were employed at any time between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021.

Source: [2022 National Sample of Registered Nurses](#).

## Burnout Increased During the Pandemic

RNs reported higher levels and more frequent feelings of burnout during the pandemic. In fact, 1.9 million RNs (88.8% of nurses who had been employed in the same position for at least a year and had experienced burnout) indicated that their feelings of burnout had increased during the pandemic (**Figure 4**). Only 1.3% of nurses who had felt burned out reported a decrease in burnout during the pandemic.

**Figure 4. Impact of the Pandemic on Burnout Among RNs**



Note: Percentages based on 2,163,072 RNs who were employed in the same job on December 31, 2020, and December 31, 2021.

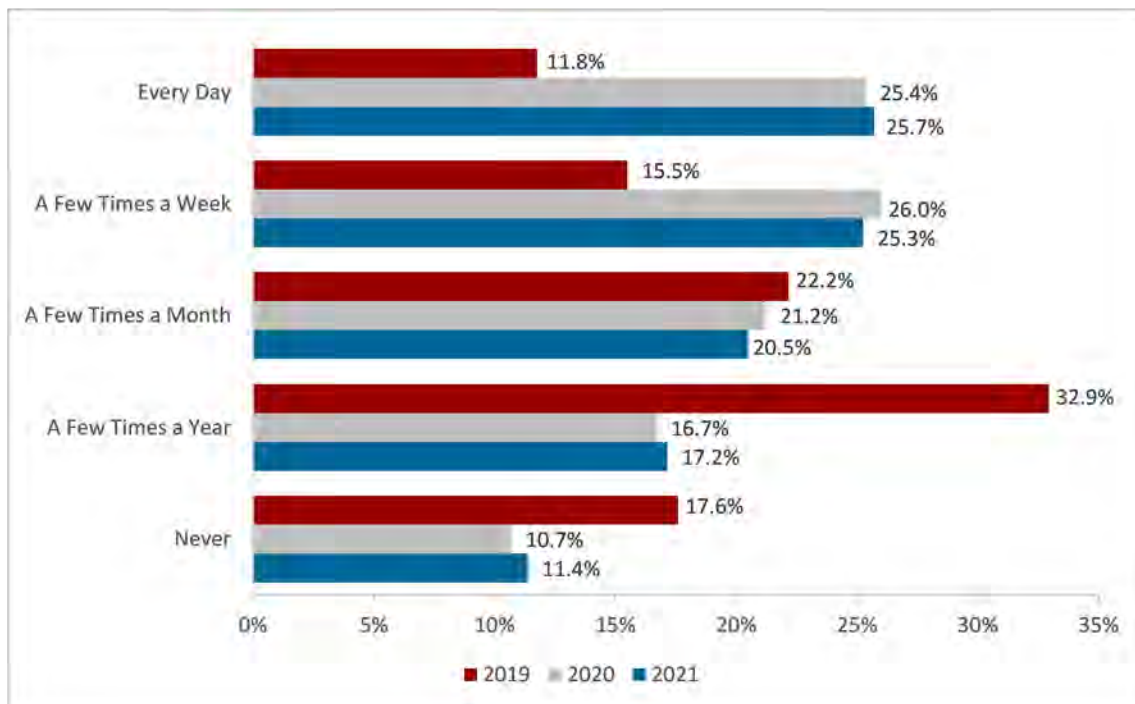
Source: [2022 National Sample of Registered Nurses](#).

Additionally, feelings of burnout became more frequent during the pandemic (**Figure 5**). In the 2022 NSSRN, RNs were asked the how frequently they felt burned out by their work in 2019, 2020, and 2021. The share of RNs who experienced feelings of burnout every day increased from 11.8% in 2019 to 25.4% in 2020 and 25.7% in 2021. Similarly, the share of RNs who experienced feelings of burnout a few times a week increased from 15.5% in 2019 to 26.0% in 2020, before declining slightly to 25.3% in 2021. Combined, these results suggest that more than half of the nurses working during the pandemic experienced feelings of burnout at least a few times a week.

In contrast, the share of nurses who indicated they never felt burned out or only experienced feelings of burnout a few times a year declined in 2020 before rebounding slightly in 2021. The share of RNs who never felt burnt-out or only experienced feelings of burnout a few times a year was 22.0 percentage points lower in 2021 than in 2019 (28.5% in 2021 compared to 50.5% in 2019).

In 2020 and 2021, respectively, only 10.7% and 11.4% of nurses indicated that they never had feelings of burnout during the year.

**Figure 5. Frequency at Which RNs Experienced Feelings of Burnout in 2019, 2020, and 2021**



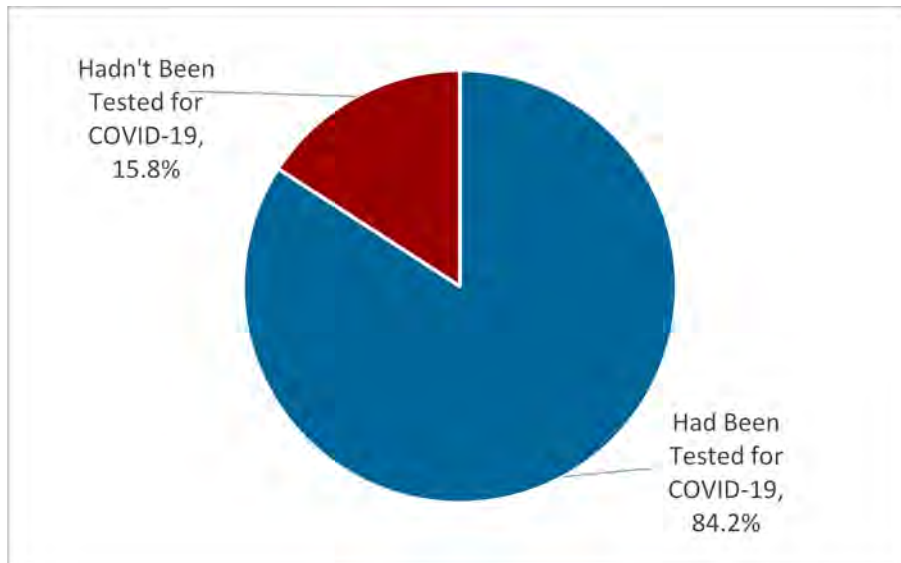
Note: Percentages based on 3,687,501 RNs employed in 2019, 3,809,363 RNs employed in 2020, and 3,809,934 RNs employed in 2021.

Source: [2022 National Sample of Registered Nurses](#).

## RNs' Experiences with COVID

Many nurses were on the front-line of the pandemic response and faced exposure to the virus as part of their job. As of December 31, 2021, 84.2% of nurses who were employed had been tested for the COVID-19 virus at least once, not including antibody tests (Figure 6), and 63.0% had tested positive (Figure 7). However, just 1.7% of those RNs who tested positive required hospitalization.

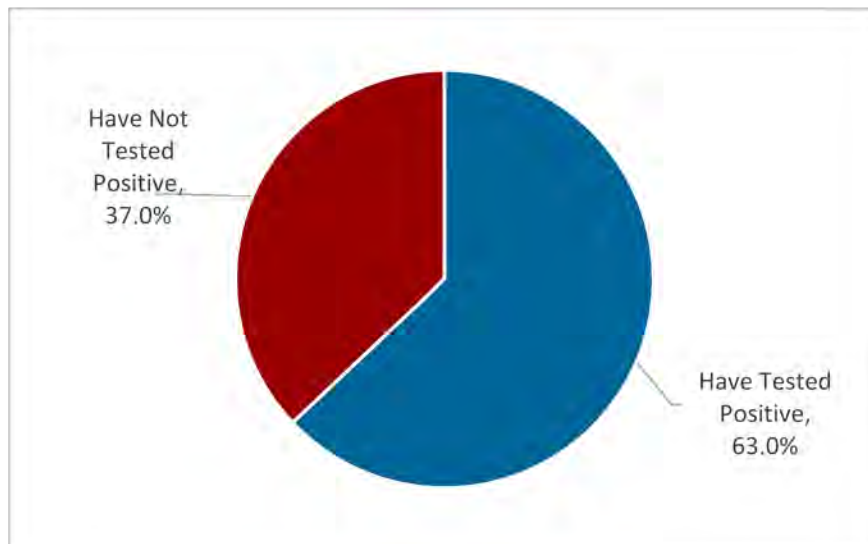
**Figure 6. Percent of Nurses Who Had Been Tested for COVID-19, as of December 31, 2021**



Note: A total of 3,899,360 RNs were employed at any time between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021.

Source: [2022 National Sample of Registered Nurses](#).

**Figure 7. Percent of Nurses Who Have Ever Tested Positive for COVID-19**



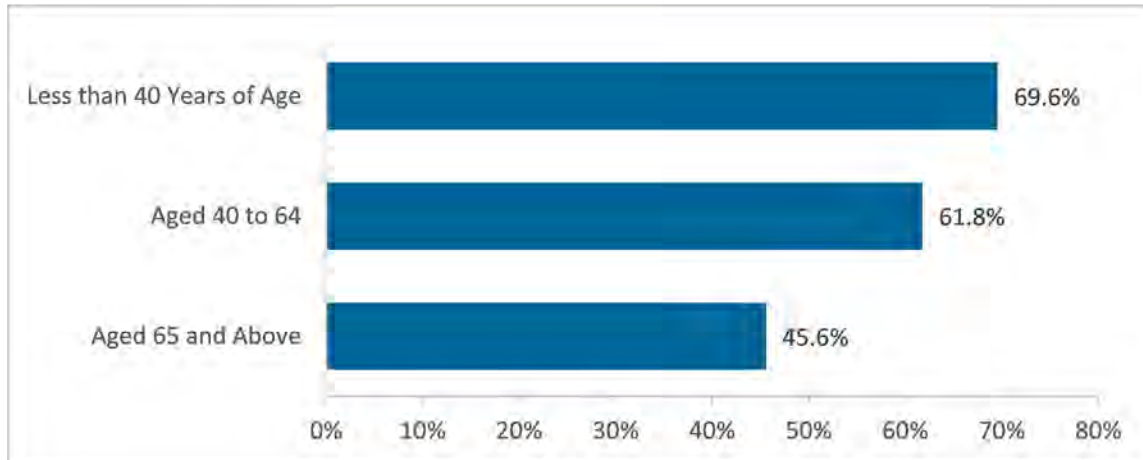
Note: A total of 3,899,360 RNs were employed at any time between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021.

Source: [2022 National Sample of Registered Nurses](#).



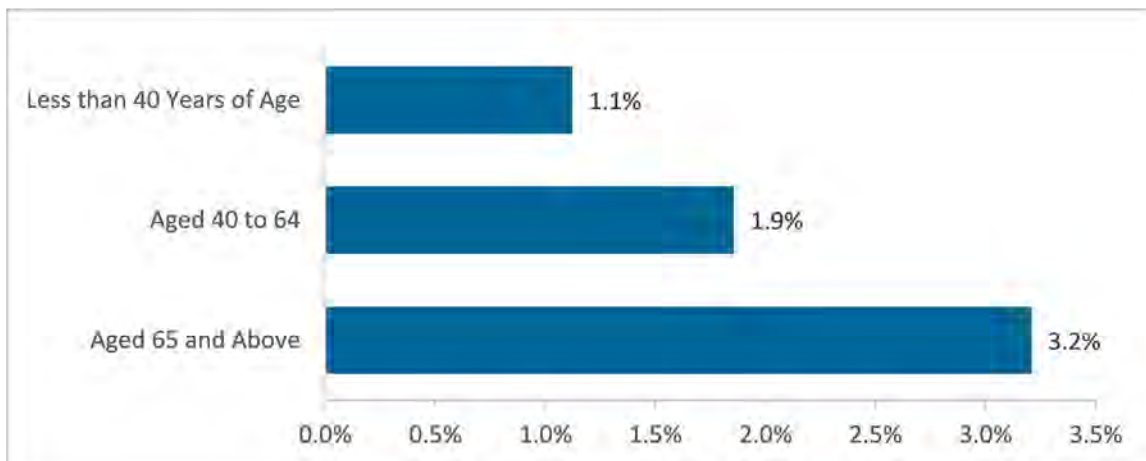
The share of RNs who tested positive for COVID at some point was highest among nurses below the age of 40 and lowest among those aged 65 and above (**Figure 8**). In contrast, hospitalizations due to the COVID-19 virus were highest among RNs aged 65 and above. Approximately 3.2% of nurses aged 65 and above who tested positive were hospitalized due to the virus, compared to 1.9% for RNs aged 40 to 64 and 1.1% for RNs less than 40 years of age (**Figure 9**).

**Figure 8. Percent of Nurses Who Have Ever Tested Positive for COVID-19, by Age**



Note: Percentages based on estimated 1,397,103 RNs less than 40 years of age, 2,105,213 RNs aged 40 to 64, and 397,042 RNs aged 65 and above that were employed at any time between March 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021. Source: [2022 National Sample of Registered Nurses](#).

**Figure 9. Percent of Nurses Who Have Ever Tested Positive and Been Hospitalized for COVID-19, by Age**



Note: Percentages based on estimated 972,512 RNs less than 40 years of age, 1,301,269 RNs aged 40 to 64, and 180,915 RNs aged 65 and above who tested positive for the COVID-19 virus. Source: [2022 National Sample of Registered Nurses](#).

## About the Data

The National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses (NSSRN) is the longest running survey of registered nurses (RNs) in the United States. Since its inaugural assessment in 1977, the NSSRN has provided educators, health workforce leaders, and policymakers with key details and developments of the nursing workforce supply. Considered the cornerstone of nursing workforce data, this comprehensive exploration provides information on the demographics, educational attainment, licenses and certifications, and employment characteristics of RNs in the United States.

In collaboration with the U.S Census Bureau, the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis administered the 11th NSSRN data collection beginning in December 2022. From December 2022 to April 2023, a total of 49,234 registered nurses completed the survey via a web form or a paper questionnaire with an unweighted response rate of 40.6% (41.1% weighted). This survey gathered data from participants with active RN licenses from all U.S. states revealing a comprehensive look into the RN and Advanced Practice Registered Nurse (APRN) workforce.

To learn more about the NSSRN or to download data and reports, visit [National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses \(NSSRN\)](#).