



**BC NURSES'  
UNION**

*Standing up for health care*



# THE FUTURE OF NURSING IN BC

[www.bcnu.org](http://www.bcnu.org)

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and  
the nursing shortage in British Columbia

FALL 2021

# ABOUT BCNU

We are the BC Nurses' Union. We represent more than 48,000 professional nurses and allied health care workers, providing care in hospitals, long-term care facilities and in the community.

We speak up and speak out for safe, quality, public health care. We value and respect diversity, and pride ourselves in providing protection, representation and services to all members.

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# BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically highlighted the serious shortcomings of BC's health care system — a chronic nursing shortage that has existed for years, leading to increasingly difficult working conditions for nurses in this province who are providing patient care during this public health emergency.

BCNU conducted a survey of its members in May 2021 amidst the strain of British Columbia's third COVID-19 wave. The purpose of the survey was to seek a greater understanding of the mental and physical toll the pandemic continues to have on the tens of thousands of nurses providing direct patient care to those most in need. The survey primarily focused on nurses' access to PPE, increased workload, workplace violence, nurses' intent to stay in the profession, and a variety of other workplace issues. Nearly 3,500 members (3,479) provided responses over a two-week period.

Demographic characteristics including age, geography and classification reported by the respondents aligned well with what we know about the BC nursing workforce through the BCNU member database and information reported publicly through the Canadian Institute of Health Information (CIHI). This gives us confidence that our sample is reasonably representative of the larger population of nurses in BC.

What nurses told us is that they were at a breaking point long before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the added stresses they have endured throughout this extensive public health emergency have greatly impacted their mental and physical health. In fact, many nurses told us this has led them to considering leaving the profession they once loved.

It is critical that the government take action now to improve working conditions for nurses in all health care settings across the province, whether it's long-term care, acute care, or community care. Without bold leadership and significant investments, the health care system will continue to struggle to retain educated nursing professionals — the backbone of our health-care system responsible for providing the care British Columbians need and deserve.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Throughout the survey, nurses told us what needs to happen to address the serious issues they face every day on the job.

- The **staffing crisis** was by far the most commonly cited issue. Nurses suggested a general **pay increase, tax incentives and student loan forgiveness** as ways to attract more nurses into the profession. **Mental health supports** coupled with **time off** to recover from the strains of the pandemic were also raised as a strategy to retain those already working.
- Nurses also called for increased access to **education** for LPNs to move into RN positions and RNs to move into specialty positions.
- **Unfettered access to PPE** was the next most frequent ask. Many nurses called for the government to explicitly acknowledge that COVID-19 is **spread by aerosols**, and to require employers to provide sufficient PPE to protect against airborne transmission of the virus. Nurses also often described being supplied with inappropriate, poorly sized or poor quality PPE.
- Many members felt that **pandemic pay** should have been continued throughout the pandemic as a means to recognize the extraordinary amount of additional work and strain borne by nurses throughout this time.
- Nurses also described what they felt to be a lack of **respect** from government. This theme was commonly tied to issues related to insufficient **funding for health care**, the increase in nurses' licensing **fees**, and the challenges experienced by nurses due to how the **surgical restart program** was pushed through, despite the staffing crisis. Nurses highlighted that the government and their employers should be actively seeking their **engagement** to help find solutions.

# PANDEMIC SURVEY: KEY FINDINGS

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically highlighted the serious shortcomings of BC's health care system, including a chronic nursing shortage that's existed for years, and the increasingly difficult working conditions that nurses have come to expect every day while they provide patient care in health-care settings across the province.

New research conducted by the BC Nurses' Union in the height of the COVID-19 third wave exposes the mental and physical toll the pandemic continues to have on nurses on the front lines. Results also offer a sobering look at the current gaps in the health-care system. From amplified levels of moral distress among nurses, to hindered recruitment and retention efforts within the profession, there is serious concern that these systemic issues are having a lasting impact on the delivery of safe patient care.

BCNU would like to thank the nurses who took the time to share their experiences in this important survey. The union will continue to work with government and health employers on short-term and long-term solutions because we believe a healthy future requires investing in more nurses.

## STAFFING AND WORKLOAD

**76%** say that their workload has increased compared to before the pandemic



**68%** say that staffing was inadequate over the last three months



## HEALTH IMPACTS

**82%** say their mental health has worsened during the pandemic

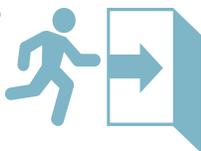


**65%** say their physical health has worsened



## INTENT TO LEAVE

**35%** of all nurses said that the experience of the pandemic made them more likely to leave nursing in the next two years.



**51%** of Emergency and ICU nurses said the same

## PPE, WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY

**36%** report that the employer has restricted access to PPE at their worksite



**73%** of those say PPE is placed under lock and key



**59%** say the government is not doing enough to ensure nurses are safe throughout the pandemic



# OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

## PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT



Over one-third of nurses told us that their employer had **restricted access to PPE** at their worksite, and often placed it under lock and key.

### > Has your employer restricted access to PPE at your worksite?



#### Of those who said PPE was restricted...

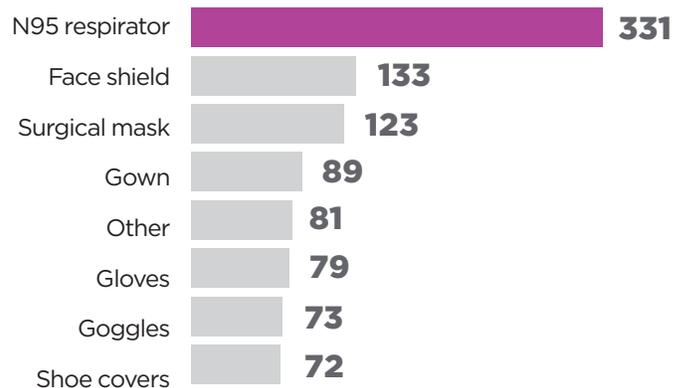
**73%** said it was placed under lock & key  
**80%** said it was restricted day & night

“ Keeping the PPE behind lock and key was insulting.”

One in every seven nurses told us they had been denied access to PPE when they requested it. **N95 respirator masks were the most commonly cited item denied to nurses**, followed by face shields, surgical masks, gowns, gloves, goggles and other necessary items. Nurses also described having been directed to re-use their PPE and being provided with low-quality items such as surgical masks with chemical smells or gloves that tear.

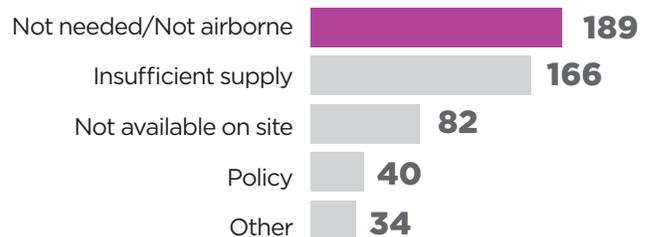
“ The PPE we have been receiving lately is very poor quality. I keep hearing that our usual equipment is on back order. The gloves I pull on break as you are donning them about 25% of the time.”

### > Of those who were denied PPE, what were you denied?



“ I'm still worried about adequacy of PPE use like supplies of N95. We are still limited in terms of supplies for N95s.”

### > Of those who were denied PPE, what reason were you given for the denial?



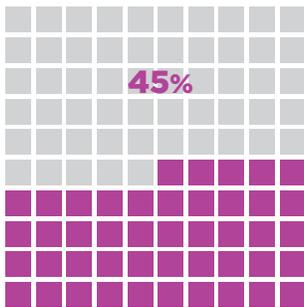
Although nurses reported that overall safety precautions had improved since the beginning of the pandemic, 21% told us that precautions remained inadequate to keep them safe, and 11% still report a lack of access to high quality PPE on their last shift.

**> Were health and safety precautions in your workplace adequate to keep everyone safe?**



Nearly half of all respondents had worked at a worksite where a COVID-19 outbreak had been declared, and nearly one-quarter had worked directly on an outbreak unit.

**> Has a COVID-19 outbreak been declared at your primary worksite?**



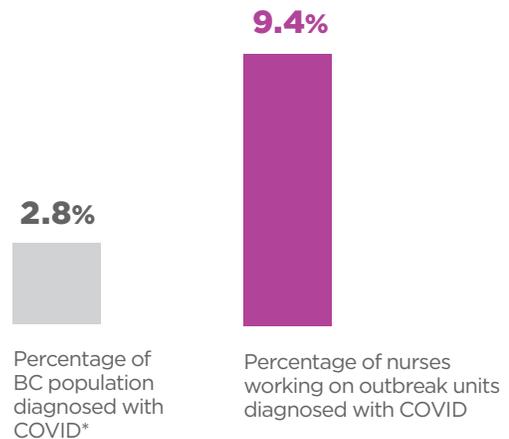
Nurses who have worked at a COVID outbreak worksite



*As a nurse, I am always aware of the risk of contracting COVID-19 from a patient or a co-worker. We hear stories of nurses and doctors contracting COVID-19 at work and becoming sick and it definitely wears on our mental health.*

Even with all of the ongoing protocols in place to prevent transmission in health-care settings, 67% of nurses told us that they were concerned about contracting COVID-19 at work. And that concern seems to be justified — nurses working on outbreak units were 3.4 times more likely to report being diagnosed with COVID-19 than the general population.

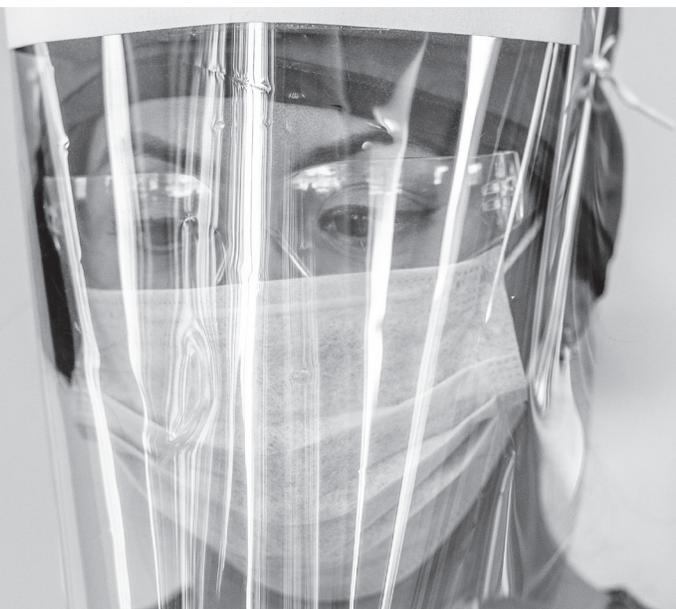
**> Have you been diagnosed with COVID-19?**



\*at time of survey close



*We need unfettered access to PPE. Nurses are not wasteful and will for the most part be able to make educated decisions about the PPE we need to practice safely.*





*I have little faith we will see a decrease in our workload anytime soon.*



## STAFFING AND WORKLOAD

Staffing was already in crisis before the pandemic. Now the cracks in the system have widened into worrisome gaps — nurses are at a tipping point. More than two-thirds of nurses who responded to this survey said that staffing was inadequate over the last three months, and more than three-quarters said their workload has increased since the beginning of the pandemic.

We know that inadequate staffing negatively impacts patient care — and this is reflected in the 74% of nurses who told us that their practice standards have been compromised due to staffing issues.

> **How would you rate staffing at your worksite over the last three months?**



> **How much has staffing impacted your practice standards in the last three months?**



**We need more staff.** I haven't worked days or evenings for over two months not short. This is a crisis! We are all getting burnt out and corners are being cut. It's unsafe.



*Working short staffed full-time for the last four months has left me not wanting to be a nurse anymore.*

# HEALTH IMPACTS

Two-thirds of respondents told us that they have experienced a high amount of stress at work during the pandemic, and only 5% of nurses said that their work-life balance had not been affected.

## > How would you rate the level of stress you have experienced in your job during the COVID-19 pandemic?

### HIGH STRESS

Nurses diagnosed with COVID-19

80%

ER & ICU nurses

78%

Nurses working on outbreak units

75%

All respondents

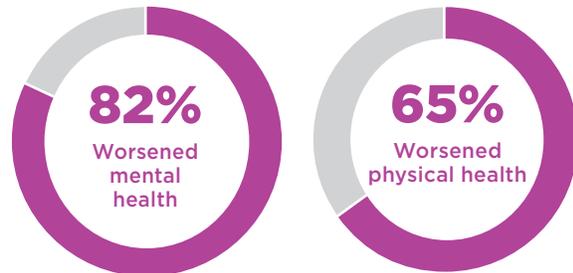
66%

The unrelenting nature of working through the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the exacerbation of the existing staffing crisis has taken a tremendous toll on the health of nurses. 65% of respondents said that their physical health has worsened during the pandemic, and 82% said they had experienced a decline in their mental health.

“ I don't think anyone is prepared for the tsunami of mental health challenges that are coming as we recover from this pandemic. Nurses need access to dedicated mental health professionals for support.

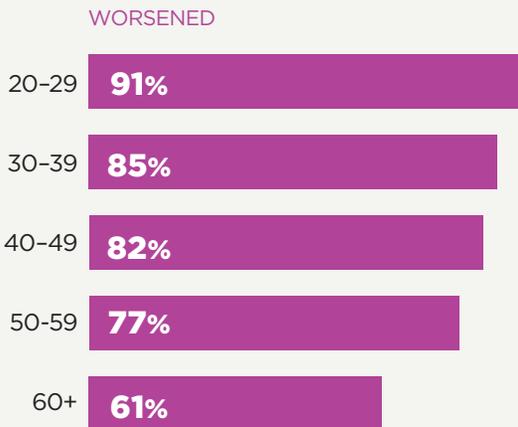
“ This pandemic has affected my overall mental health and physical health. I don't know how long it will take for me to get better.

## > Has your health improved or worsened during the pandemic?



### Younger nurses' mental health was disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

91% of nurses aged 20 to 29 reported a decline in their mental health.



“ Burnout has reached a level I have never seen. This has and will take a toll.

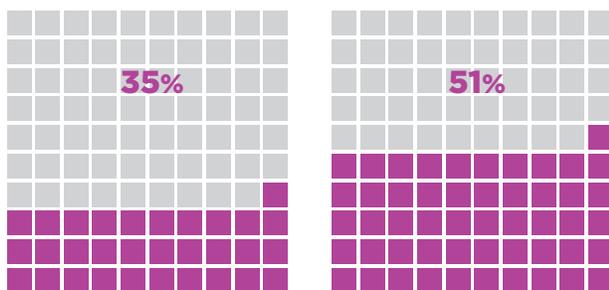
# LEAVING THE PROFESSION

These impacts have nurses rethinking their career choices. 35% of respondents said the experience of the pandemic has made them more likely to leave nursing in the next two years. Even more concerning, 51% of ICU and emergency trained nurses said the pandemic has made them more likely to leave their specialty. This is an alarming statistic given these highly trained nurses are especially difficult to replace.

“ I’m tired of fighting. I need to move on for my well-being. ”

## > Has the experience of the pandemic made you more or less likely to leave nursing\*?

Proportion of nurses who are more likely to leave.



All respondents

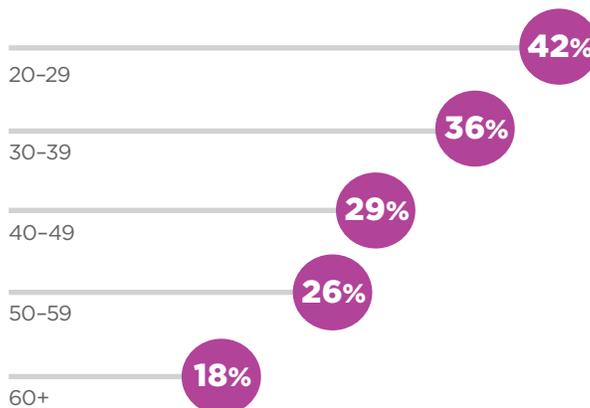
ICU & ER nurses

\*ICU & ER nurses were asked about leaving their specialty area

“ Nursing was a profession I feel I was called to and it saddens me that the system and the way we are treated has completely broken me mentally, physically and emotionally. I no longer feel I can sustain this as a career anymore. ”

## > How likely are you to leave nursing for a different occupation post-pandemic?

Proportion of nurses who are extremely likely or somewhat likely to leave nursing by age.



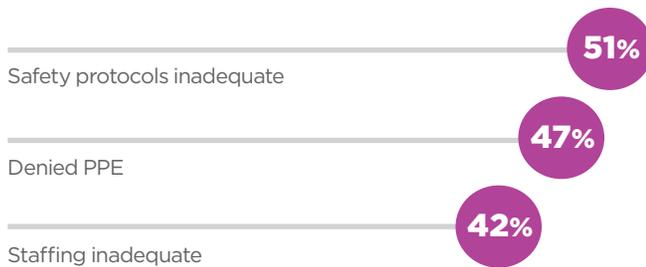
Younger nurses more often said that the pandemic has made them more likely to leave their specialty or to leave nursing altogether. This finding is important, because provincial planning for staffing in health care depends on the assumption that nurses will stay in the profession; if younger nurses leave, we won't have enough new students to replace them.

“ I feel our health-care system is collapsing under all the pressures it has faced over the last five years and the pandemic has only made it so much worse. More nurses are leaving — both those able to retire and those just beginning their career. ”

“ It's too bad I spent all that time and money to go to school and at 38 I'm going to find a new career. ”

Other factors made a difference as well — nurses who said that safety protocols were inadequate on their last shift, nurses who had been denied PPE and nurses who rated staffing as inadequate were more likely to say they would leave nursing. Government and health employers need to pay close attention to these findings, as they point to things that can be changed to keep nurses in the profession.

**Proportion of nurses who are extremely likely or somewhat likely to leave nursing by risk factor.**



“ Short staffing and increased violence caused me to have a psychological crisis and develop frightening physical symptoms. I felt that if I didn't leave my job, my job was going to kill me.

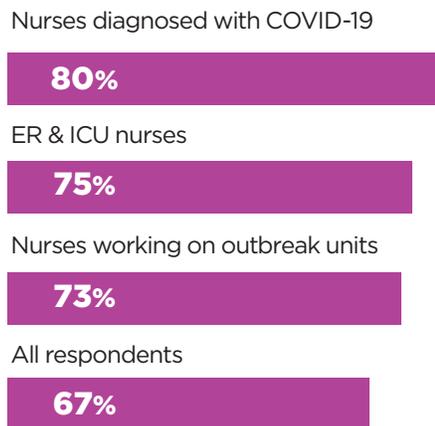
“ My children have asked me to stop working. I am actively trying to leave my unit. My heart races and I shut down when I encounter certain situations now.

Losing nurses isn't the only risk to staffing levels currently faced by the BC nursing workforce; 37% of respondents also said they would like to reduce their hours after the pandemic is over. Again, the same factors that proved important for keeping nurses at work (safe workplaces with adequate staffing and unfettered access to PPE) also impacted nurses' willingness to maintain or increase their hours.

“ With the stress, anxiety, physically and emotionally taxing duties, plus risks to my family and myself of going to work, the reasons to stay in this profession are few and far between.

**> To what extent has the pandemic affected your work-life balance?**

**AFFECTED TO A GREAT EXTENT / GOOD DEAL**



**> How many hours per week do you want to work post-pandemic?**



“ The amount of burnout and stress I'm seeing in myself and my colleagues is the highest I've ever seen in my 16-year nursing career. Watching my colleagues suffer is heartbreaking. We are at risk of a huge exodus of experienced critical care nurses.

# THE FUTURE OF NURSING IN BC

There is no light switch solution to the issues faced by nurses and our health-care system. However, it's clear that providing nurses with the support they require to maintain their practice standards should be a top priority for health employers and government who have the power to make the changes necessary to ensure the sustainability of our health-care workforce.

A healthy future requires investing in more nurses. The BC Nurses' Union insists the government provides short and long-term solutions that focus on the health of the system as a whole. As the pandemic wears on, we are asking that a plan be developed that addresses the crippling staffing shortage, unrealistic working conditions, and recruitment and retention of nurses in every part of this province.

The results show us that nurses are more willing to stay in the profession if they are better protected from violence in the workplace, if they have unfettered access to PPE and have enough nursing colleagues to meet the demands of the health-care system. Nurses are telling us what they need. Now the government and health employers need to listen.

It's time for swift action to support the dedicated nurses and health-care workers who are providing world-class care every single day, whether it's in a global pandemic, or in years to come.



# APPENDIX

## DEMOGRAPHICS

QUESTIONS	CATEGORY	PERCENT
What is your age?	20-29	15%
	30-39	31%
	40-49	25%
	50-59	21%
	60+	8%
How many years have you worked a nurse in BC?	Less than 2 years	9%
	2-5 years	17%
	6-10 years	20%
	11-20 years	30%
	More than 20 years	24%
What is your primary work status?	Full-time	57%
	Part-time	29%
	Casual	11%
	Other	4%
Which sector do you work the most hours in?	Acute	65%
	Community	23%
	Long-term care	12%
What is your classification?	LPN	20%
	RN	75%
	RPN	4%
	Other	1%

## OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY

QUESTIONS	CATEGORY	PERCENT
Has a COVID-19 outbreak been declared at your primary worksite/facility?	Yes	45%
	No	51%
	Unsure/not applicable	4%
Have you worked on a unit where a COVID-19 outbreak was declared?	Yes	24%
	No	73%
	Unsure/not applicable	3%
Have you been diagnosed with COVID-19?	Yes	4%
	No	96%
	Prefer not to answer	0%
On your last shift, do you agree that health and safety precautions were adequate to keep everyone safe?	Strongly agree	21%
	Agree	58%
	Disagree	15%
	Strongly disagree	6%
Thinking back over the last 12 months, do you agree that health and safety precautions were adequate to keep everyone safe?	Strongly agree	11%
	Agree	45%
	Disagree	33%
	Strongly disagree	10%
How concerned are you about contracting COVID-19 at your workplace?	Extremely concerned	14%
	Somewhat concerned	53%
	Not very concerned	27%
	Not at all concerned	6%

## OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY

QUESTIONS	CATEGORY	PERCENT
In the last three months, has the amount or severity of violence in your workplace increased, decreased or stayed the same?	Increased	34%
	Stayed the same	63%
	Decreased	3%
Do you feel that the overall quality and availability of PPE in your workplace has been adequate (on your last shift)?	Strongly agree	34%
	Agree	55%
	Disagree	7%
	Strongly disagree	4%
Do you feel that the overall quality and availability of PPE in your workplace has been adequate (in the last year)?	Strongly agree	15%
	Agree	47%
	Disagree	28%
	Strongly disagree	10%
Has the employer restricted access to PPE at your worksite?	Yes	36%
	No	54%
	Unsure	10%
What time of day is the PPE restricted?	Day	12%
	Night	7%
	Both	80%
Is it placed under lock and key?	Yes	73%
	No	16%
	Unsure	12%
Have you been denied any PPE that you have requested?	Yes	14%
	No	86%

## OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY

QUESTIONS	CATEGORY	PERCENT
In the last three months, how often have you had direct contact with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 patients?	Never	24%
	Less than once a month	22%
	Once a month	8%
	A few times a month	18%
	Once a week	4%
	A few times a week	9%
	Almost every day	8%
	Daily	7%

## STAFFING AND WORKLOAD

QUESTIONS	CATEGORY	PERCENT
Thinking back on the last three months, how would you rate the adequacy of nurse staffing in your workplace?	Extremely inadequate	35%
	Somewhat inadequate	32%
	Somewhat adequate	25%
	Extremely adequate	7%
In the last three months, to what degree has inadequate staffing impacted your ability to meet your practice standards?	Not at all	9%
	Not much	17%
	Somewhat	46%
	Very much	28%
Compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic, my overall workload has increased.	Strongly agree	40%
	Agree	35%
	Neither agree nor disagree	18%
	Disagree	4%
	Strongly disagree	2%

## STAFFING AND WORKLOAD

QUESTIONS	CATEGORY	PERCENT
Has the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic made it more or less likely that you will leave nursing within the next two years?	More likely	35%
	No more or less likely	60%
	Less likely	5%
Have you worked in a specialty area during the COVID-19 pandemic?	Yes	40%
	No	60%
Has the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic made it more or less likely that you will leave your specialty nursing area (ICU & emergency nurses)?	More likely	51%
	No more or less likely	45%
	Less likely	5%
How many hours would you like to work in an average week post-pandemic?	Fewer	39%
	About the same	53%
	More	7%
How likely are you to leave nursing for a different occupation post-pandemic?	Extremely likely	7%
	Somewhat likely	24%
	Not very likely	37%
	Not at all likely	32%

## HEALTH IMPACTS

QUESTIONS	CATEGORY	PERCENT
To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your work-life balance as a nurse?	To a great extent	35%
	A good deal	32%
	Somewhat	28%
	Not at all	5%
How would you rate the level of stress you have experienced in your job due to the pandemic?	Very high	32%
	High	34%
	Moderate	29%
	Low	5%
	Very low	1%
Has your physical health improved or worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic?	Improved	6%
	No change	29%
	Worsened	65%
Has your mental health improved or worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic?	Improved	1%
	No change	17%
	Worsened	82%
Do you think the government is doing enough to keep nurses safe during the COVID-19 pandemic?	Yes	41%
	No	59%



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