



Public Health's Youngest: Perspectives of the Workforce Age 35 and Under

One quarter (25%) of state and local government public health employees are age 35 years and under. Concerningly, nearly a third of these employees (29%) said they intend to leave in the next year, a proportion higher than other employees.

Introduction

Between 2017 and 2021, nearly half of state and local public health department employees (46%) left their organizations. **Among those who were age 35 and under or had five or fewer years of experience, that rate rose to 75%.** By understanding and responding to the needs, characteristics, and strengths of the young workforce, public health departments can improve the retention of this population of future leaders.

This research brief highlights key findings from a national survey of the state and local government public health workforce, focusing on the perceptions and experiences of employees age 35 and under. The 2024 Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS), conducted by the de Beaumont Foundation and the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO), collected the individual-level perceptions of almost 60,000 state and local health department staff, nearly 15,000 of whom were age 35 and under. The survey included a set of questions specifically exploring the motivations and pathways of these younger employees.

PHWINS
PUBLIC HEALTH WORKFORCE
INTERESTS AND NEEDS SURVEY

The Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS) supports the government public health workforce by measuring strengths and gaps to inform future investments in funding, training, recruitment, and retention. Conducted in 2014, 2017, 2021, and 2024, PH WINS is the only nationally representative source of data about the government public health workforce.

Introduction, continued

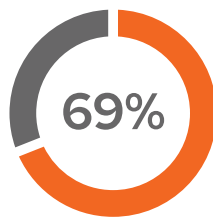
Since it was first administered in 2014, PH WINS has seen exponential growth in the number of respondents. The 2024 survey reflects feedback from 48 state health agencies and nearly 1,200 local health departments across

49 states. Respondents anonymously shared insights about their satisfaction and engagement, training strengths and needs, workplace well-being, intent to stay or leave, community engagement, and general demographics.

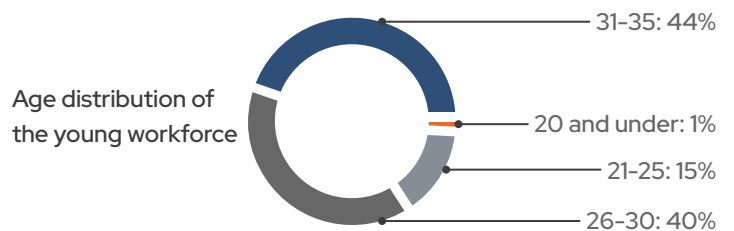
Key Findings

One quarter (25%) of the state and local government public health workforce is 35 years of age and younger. The age groups most represented in the young workforce are those between the ages of 26 and 30 (40%) and 31 and 35 (44%). A quarter of these individuals (25%) worked in

Most (69%) of the young workforce have worked in public health practice for five years or fewer.



state health agencies, while the remaining three-quarters (75%) worked in small, medium, and large local health departments. Almost half (47%) worked in large local health departments.



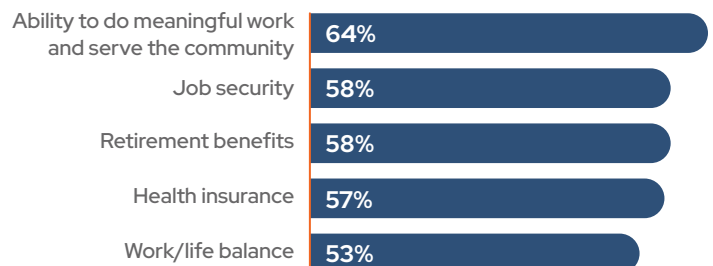
Many young professionals come to government public health from other industries.

A majority of young public health professionals (70%) joined their health department from another job, and among that group, half (50%) came from positions outside of public health and government. About one in five young professionals (22%) had been in academia, fellowship, internship, or volunteer programs six months before joining their health department. Of those coming from academia, fellowships, internships, or volunteer programs, a third (33%) were between the ages of 20 and 25, and two-thirds (67%) were between the ages of 26 and 35.

Respondents cited many factors that drew them to a career in government public health. In particular, 64% of young professionals said they want to make a difference

in the populations they serve. Other factors that attracted this population to government public health included retirement benefits, job security, health insurance, and work/life balance.

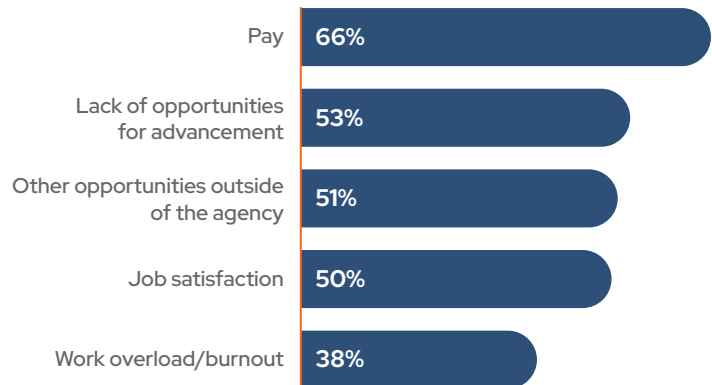
Top Reasons Young Professionals Are Attracted to Government Public Health



Nearly one in three young public health employees (29%) said they intend to leave their organization in the next year.

Young employees' intention to leave is 10% higher than that of employees over age 35. Additionally, while pay, lack of opportunities for advancement, and job satisfaction all appear in the top five reasons for leave, as identified by employees older than 35, a larger proportion of the young workforce identified each as a reason for leaving. For example, more than half (53%) of the young workforce selected lack of opportunities for advancement as a reason for leaving, compared with 35% of employees over age 35. Importantly, work overload/burnout was cited at nearly equal rates by both age groups.

Top 5 Reasons Young Employees Intend to Leave Their Agency

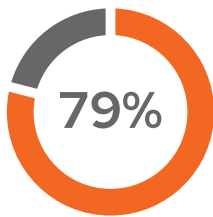


Burnout is a key concern for employees who are 35 and under.

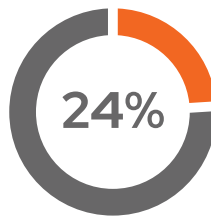
More than a third of young employees (38%) identified work overload/burnout as one of the top five reasons for leaving. More than half (55%) of those age 35 and under reported having one or more symptoms of burnout that

come and go away. Furthermore, 19% reported one or more symptoms that won't go away, and an additional 5% reported being completely burnt out.

79% of young employees reported experiencing one or more symptoms of burnout.



Nearly a quarter (24%) reported near constant symptoms of burnout.



Nearly one in four young employees (23%) rated their mental or emotional health as either "fair" or "poor."



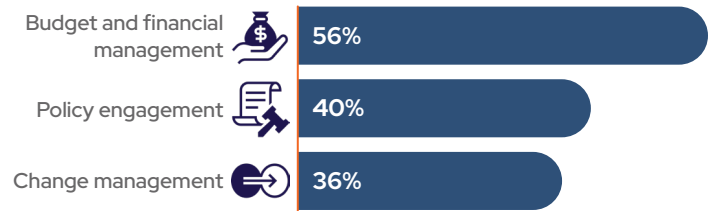
Young professionals reported strong programmatic expertise but said they lack the necessary skills to drive projects, programs, and plans forward.

Respondents to PH WINS were asked to rate the importance of approximately 25 skills to their day-to-day jobs. Then, they were asked to rate their proficiency level for the skills identified as very important or moderately important. Training needs are defined as skills that are of high importance but where employees report low proficiency. Most workers age 35 and under (90%) stated

that expertise in their program area is important to their day-to-day work and that they are highly skilled in the content area and technical skills needed to perform. They also stated they are highly proficient in communicating effectively (93%) and making sense of data in order to make decisions (90%).

However, some gaps remain. Young employees reported lacking the skills needed to effectively manage budgets and finances (56%), engage with policy development (40%), and manage change in their jobs or organization (36%), even though they identified those skills as highly important to their day-to-day work.

Top Training Needs



Formal public health training is more common among young professionals than those over age 35.

Young employees increasingly earn post-secondary public health degrees (36%) compared to their older counterparts (17%). This difference has existed since PH WINS launched in 2014, and the gap in 2024 is the largest to date. Since 2017, the proportion of state and local government public health employees with formal public health training, as reported by PH WINS, has held steady at 14%. This was

despite a 300% increase in graduate public health degrees conferred from 1992 to 2016 and an 1100% increase in undergraduate public health degrees conferred between 2001 and 2020. However, this nearly 10% increase in public health training among young professionals since PH WINS 2021 has the potential to change that.

Employees are generally satisfied and engaged at work. However, pay continues to be a common pain point.

Employees age 35 and under said they are generally satisfied with their work, with large majorities reporting satisfaction with their job (85%), organization (77%), benefits (80%), supervisors (87%), and work unit (87%). In addition, 80% felt a sense of belonging at their agency,

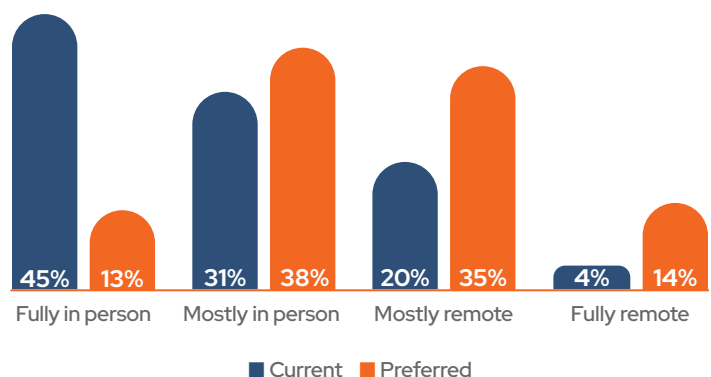
and 88% felt a sense of belonging within their work unit. However, only about half of employees age 35 and under (52%) are satisfied with their pay, and only 59% agreed with the statement, "I am paid fairly for the job that I do."

Remote work is a hot commodity for professionals age 35 and under.

The implementation of stay-at-home mandates during the COVID-19 pandemic led to many public health employees working from home. Five years later, remote work is still an option many employees age 35 and under want.

Almost nine in ten public health workers age 35 and under (87%) said they want to be able to work from home at least part of the time. While 45% said they currently work fully in person, only 13% prefer this arrangement. Most younger employees (83%) said they wanted the option of ad-hoc remote work, allowing flexibility to work from home for a scheduled medical appointment or to care for a sick child.

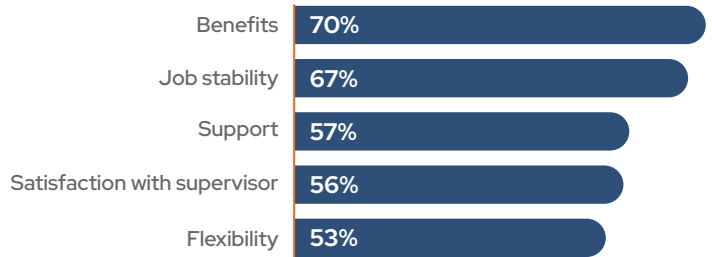
Current and Preferred Remote Work Status



Most young public health employees want to stay in government public health.

Along with the satisfaction many feel in their work, almost three-quarters of the young public health workforce (71%) planned to stay at their organizations. Traditional benefits—such as retirement plans and health insurance—and job stability are top reasons for staying. In addition, more than half reported being satisfied with their supervisor (56%) and feeling supported by colleagues (57%).

Top 5 Reasons for Staying in State and Local Government Public Health



Conclusion

The recruitment and retention of younger staff are critical to the sustainability and success of the government's public health workforce. Currently, employees age 35 and under represent just one-quarter of this workforce. Yet between 2017 and 2021, nearly three-quarters of them left their organizations—a loss that underscores the urgency of this issue. With state and local health departments already **understaffed**, the departure of these emerging leaders threatens the future stability of public health infrastructure.

The 2024 PH WINS results provide important insight into the mindset of younger workers and their journey into the field. With these findings, public health agencies can develop strategies to retain younger employees already in the workforce and recruit new talent into the field.

To strengthen retention efforts, agencies must prioritize addressing workplace burnout, which continues to be a significant driver of a depleting workforce. Agencies can also consider implementing different career pathways and leadership training to support the advancement of staff

age 35 and under into future leadership roles. With the right training and resources, the young workforce can sharpen their skills and expand their impact.

Encouragingly, more than half of the young workforce report being satisfied with their supervisor (56%) and feeling support from colleagues (57%). In addition, 80% feel a sense of belonging in their agency, and 88% feel a sense of belonging in their work unit. These findings underscore the value of cultivating strong interpersonal relationships and fostering inclusive, collaborative workplace cultures.

Ultimately, a growing, dedicated government public health workforce is paramount in **ensuring the health, well-being, and prosperity of the nation**. By investing in their development, the full potential of the young workforce can be unlocked, driving them to improve the health of communities, both now and as the nation's future health officials, health department directors, managers, and local leaders.

Methodology

The Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS) was developed by the de Beaumont Foundation and the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) to understand the interests and needs of the state and local government public health workforce in the United States, and was fielded in 2014, 2017, 2021, and 2024.

The 2024 survey was distributed online to 159,627 state and local government public health workers, representing 48 state health agencies and 1,178 local health departments of varying sizes across 49 states. In total, 219 large local health departments (staff size > 25 and serving a population > 250,000), 424 medium local health departments (staff size > 25 and serving a population of 25,000 to 250,000), and 535 small local health departments (staff size < 25 or serving a population < 25,000) participated in the survey. Through partnerships with the 10 Regional Public Health Training Centers, the Big Cities Health Coalition, and the State Associations of County and City Health Officials in North Dakota, Montana, and New Jersey, the PH WINS sample size of local health departments more than quadrupled from 2021 to 2024. The survey was completed by 56,959 employees, for a 37% response rate of eligible employees¹.

For more information, visit www.phwins.org.

¹ Employees whose emails bounced or failed, or those who left the agency during the administration of the survey, were deemed ineligible (n=6,075).

Next for PH WINS

Complete results from PH WINS 2024, including redesigned dashboards with dynamic data visualization, will be released in July 2025. Other topics covered in the survey include:

- The state of the epidemiology workforce, including training needs specific to the discipline;
- Demographics of the workforce by age, ethnicity, sex, tenure, education, and more;
- Workforce characteristics such as supervisory status, program area, and job type;
- Training needs and strengths based on the recommended [Strategic Skills for Public Health](#);
- Guidance for recruiting and retaining a skilled and effective workforce; and
- Strategic insights for developing skilled managers in government public health.

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