



## New International Survey: Primary Care Physicians in U.S. and Nine Other High-Income Countries Report High Levels of Stress and Burnout, Declines in the Quality of Care They Provide

**Amid Ongoing Pandemic, 61 Percent of Younger Primary Care Doctors in U.S. Report Feeling Anxious, Sad, or Hopeless; Regardless of Age, Most Physicians Do Not Seek Help for Their Mental Health Needs**

With the COVID-19 pandemic well into its third year, large numbers of primary care doctors around the world say they are burned out and stressed, and many feel the quality of care they are able to provide has worsened, according to results from the 2022 Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Survey, published today.

The survey of more than 9,500 primary care physicians in 10 nations (Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States) is the first of its kind to compare country-specific data on the effects of the pandemic on primary care doctors in high-income countries. Questions explore physicians' workload, stress and burnout, career plans, and quality of care delivered since the start of COVID. The survey also examines differences in outlook by age — comparing the feelings of younger physicians, under age 55, to those of older physicians, age 55 and up. The study is part of the Commonwealth Fund's ongoing series of international health comparisons.

Among the key findings:

- **More than half of primary care physicians surveyed in most countries have experienced job stress since the onset of the pandemic.**
  - In most countries, more than half of physicians reported feeling job stress or emotional distress since the pandemic began. Over a third of physicians in seven of the 10 countries said they were burned out.
  - In the U.S., 58 percent of primary care physicians reported their job was stressful, 54 percent felt emotional distress, and 44 percent were burned out.

**EMBARGOED**  
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*The Commonwealth Fund is a private, nonprofit foundation supporting independent research on health policy reform and a high-performance health system.*

- **Younger primary care doctors are more likely to experience job stress, emotional distress, and burnout.**
  - In all countries, at least two in five younger primary care physicians reported emotional distress, including feelings of anxiety, sadness, anger, or hopelessness since the pandemic began. In the U.S., 61 percent of doctors under age 55 said they had experienced emotional distress — the fourth-highest rate among the 10 countries surveyed.
  - In the U.S., 50 percent of younger primary care doctors said they are burned out, compared to 39 percent of older doctors. In fact, with the exceptions of France and the Netherlands, younger physicians in all countries had significantly higher rates of burnout than their older counterparts.
  - Physicians in the Netherlands and Switzerland reported the lowest burnout rates: only 11 percent of younger and 13 percent of older doctors in the Netherlands, and 15 percent of younger and 21 percent of older doctors in Switzerland, said they were burned out.
- **Physicians who experienced stress, emotional distress, or burnout are more likely to feel that the quality of care they provided to their patients had worsened during the pandemic.**
  - In the U.S., 28 percent of doctors who were stressed, had emotional distress, or felt burned out during COVID reported that the quality of medical care they were able to deliver had worsened “somewhat” or “a lot” since the pandemic began, compared to just 8 percent of doctors who had not experienced these difficulties.
  - More than half of doctors in the U.K. (52%) and Sweden (55%) who reported stress, emotional distress, or burnout felt that the quality of care they delivered to patients had worsened since the onset of COVID. But among doctors in those countries who did not experience those problems, 32 percent in Sweden and 39 percent in the U.K. felt the quality of care they were able to deliver declined.
- **Most primary care physicians with emotional distress, regardless of age, did not seek professional help.**
  - While younger primary care doctors with emotional distress were generally more likely than older ones to get mental health counseling, at least three of four younger physicians did not seek such help.
  - In the U.S., 16 percent of primary care doctors under age 55 who had emotional distress received professional attention for a mental health problem since the pandemic began, compared to 6 percent of older doctors. In Germany, which has one of the highest levels of physician stress, fewer than one in 10 physicians accessed mental health services.

## FROM THE EXPERTS:

Reginald D. Williams II, study coauthor and Commonwealth Fund Vice President for International Health Policy and Practice Innovations

*“The pandemic is taking an alarming toll on the well-being of our primary care workforce at home and around the world. It’s especially concerning here in the U.S., where the health care system already lags behind those of our peer nations in almost every way. That’s why having an international perspective is so important — we find out that we are not alone in the challenges we face and that we can learn from one another as we seek solutions.”*

David Blumenthal, M.D., Commonwealth Fund President

*“Primary care is the backbone of a high-performing health care system. But our survey shows that the world is facing a crisis of physically and mentally overburdened primary care doctors. As a physician who practiced general medicine for 35 years, I find these trends alarming. If our frontline doctors, both here in the U.S. and around the world, are overstressed and don’t feel like they’re doing their best work, that should raise serious concerns for us all. We must act now to address this growing problem before it reaches a tipping point.”*

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

For at least two decades, the United States and other countries around the world have been bracing for a shortage of primary care physicians. Physician burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbates this shortage. The result is that patients' access to high-quality primary care services has been compromised at a time when the mental health needs of communities across the globe are at an all-time high.

The authors note that policymakers and health system leaders can take steps to ensure that physicians practice in healthy work environments, including by investing more in their primary care systems. In the U.S., increasing Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement for primary care services and supporting more loan forgiveness programs could help draw more medical school graduates into the field and keep physicians from leaving it.

## HOW WE CONDUCTED THIS SURVEY

The 2022 Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Survey of Primary Care Physicians was administered to nationally representative samples of practicing primary care doctors in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. These samples were drawn at random from government or private lists of primary care doctors in each country except France, where they were selected from publicly available lists of primary care physicians. Within each country, experts defined the physician specialties responsible for primary care, recognizing that roles, training, and scopes of practice vary across countries. In all countries, general practitioners (GPs) and family physicians were included, with internists and pediatricians also sampled in Switzerland and the United States.

The questionnaire was designed with input from country experts and pretested in most countries. Pretest respondents provided feedback about question interpretation via semistructured cognitive interviews. SSRS, a survey research firm, worked with contractors in each country to survey doctors from February through September 2022; the field period ranged from eight to 31 weeks. Survey modes (mail, online, and telephone) were tailored based on each country's best practices for reaching physicians and maximizing response rates. Sample sizes ranged from 321 to 2,092, and response rates ranged from 6 percent to 40 percent. Across all countries, response rates were lower than in 2019. Final data were weighted to align with country benchmarks along key geographic and demographic dimensions.

**The full report will be available after the embargo lifts at:**  
[commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2022/nov/stressed-out-burned-out-2022-international-survey-primary-care-physicians](https://commonwealthfund.org/publications/issue-briefs/2022/nov/stressed-out-burned-out-2022-international-survey-primary-care-physicians)

## ADDITIONAL PERTINENT RESEARCH

[Commonwealth Fund International Health Policy Surveys](#)