

# LongStanding Problems with Unsafe Staffing in Healthcare

Conner Wyman  
Oberlin College  
*BA, Political Science*



Julia Gavriilidis  
University of Bridgeport  
*BS, Medical Laboratory  
Science*

American Federation of Teachers Connecticut

# Background

- Chronic understaffing in CT hospitals leading to some reported patient:nurse ratios of 7:1 and higher
- Healthcare employees being forced to work mandatory overtime with no prior warning
- As a result, patient care professionals experiencing burnout and finding other employment in record numbers



Photos of Hartford Healthcare and Yale-New Haven buildings which are the two largest healthcare providers in Connecticut

# Objectives

- Investigating the impact of unsafe staffing on the mental health of healthcare workers
- Investigate mitigation techniques to address unprecedented amounts of staff turnover
- Survey and interview healthcare workers from across the state



Photo taken at AFT CT healthcare organizing meeting

# Methods

- Attended CT healthcare council meetings to talk directly to union presidents
- Wrote and conducted survey highlighting effects of unsafe staffing practices on the mental health of workers
- Interviewed 6 nurses from across the state

## 2022 Healthcare Worker Health and Safety Survey

**Scan Here!**

\*Created in partnership  
with AFT Connecticut  
and Occupation Health  
Internship Program\*

- Only takes 10 minutes  
to complete
- Open to anyone working  
in healthcare
- Personal information  
remains confidential



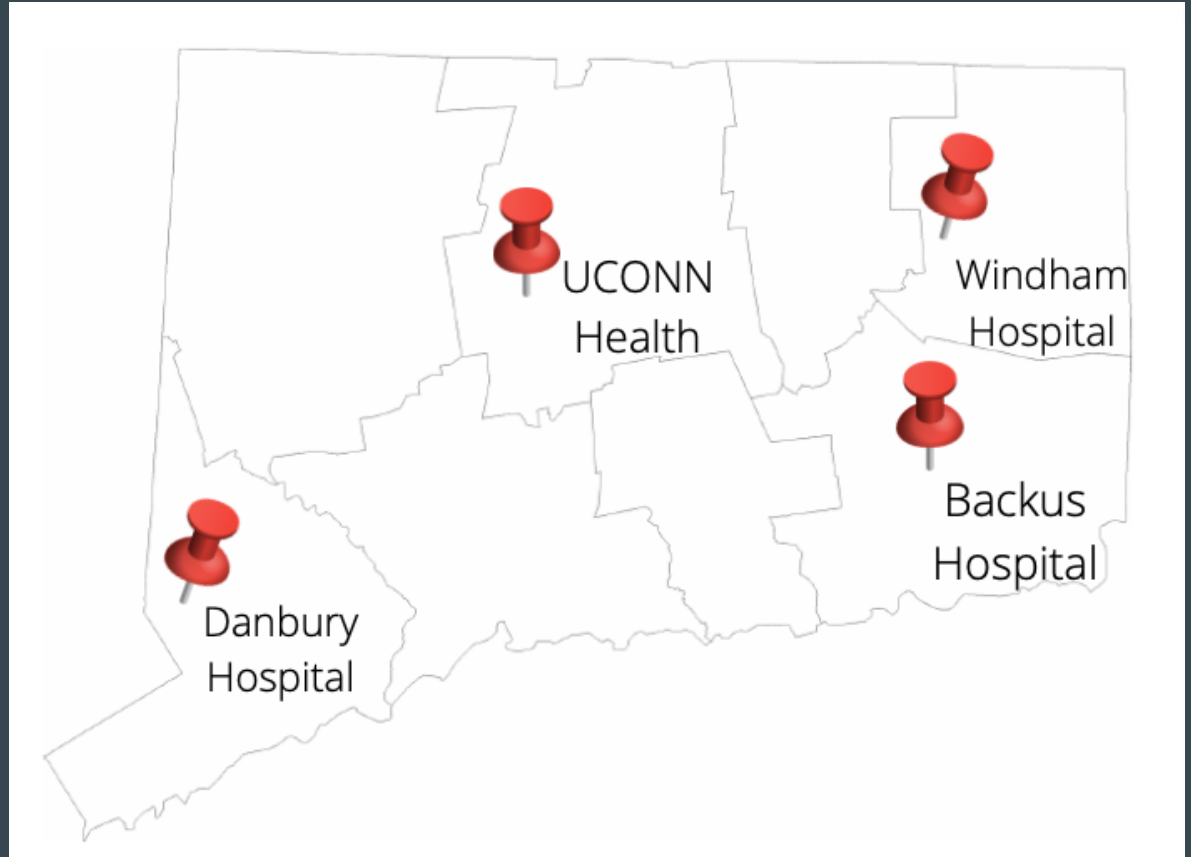
AFT Connecticut  
*A Union of Professionals*



# Numbers Served

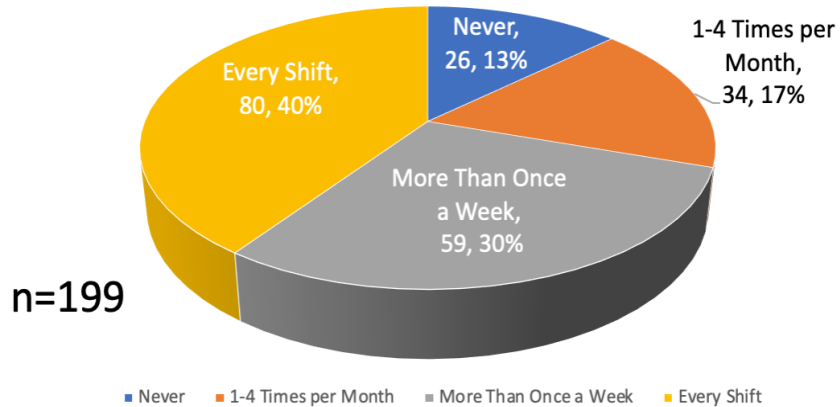
221 Workers  
Surveyed

6 Workers  
Interviewed

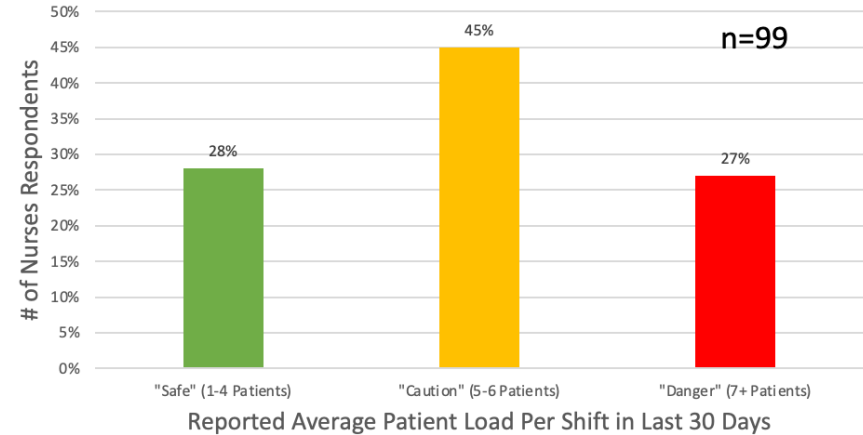


# Results

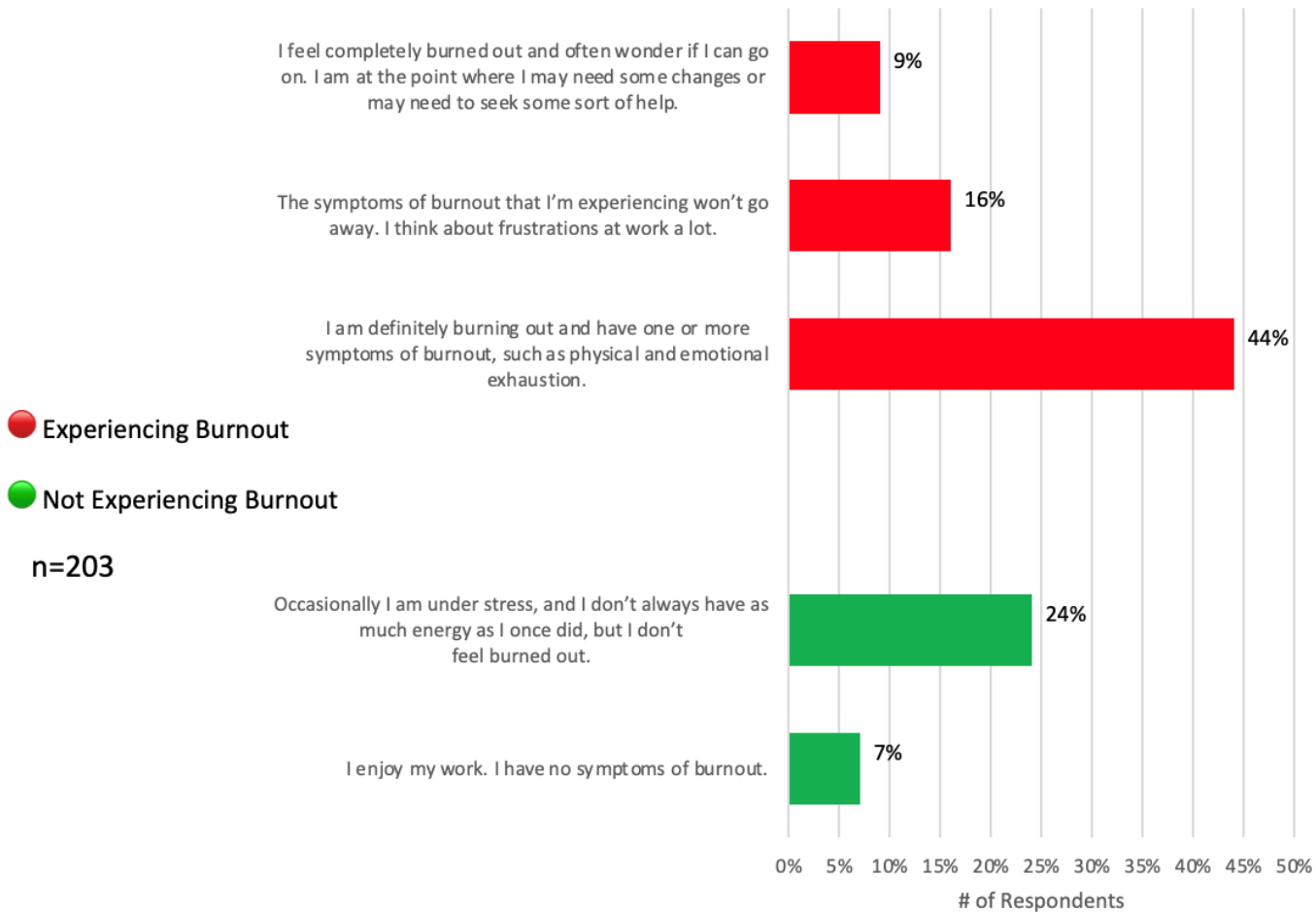
On Average, How Often is Your Unit Understaffed?



In the Last 30 Days, What Was Your Average Patient Load Per Shift?



## Reported Feelings of Burnout Symptoms



# Interview Quotes

“Unsafe staffing is like drunk driving, it is always unsafe but it doesn’t always end in tragedy.”

“It has been devastating going in to work lately because I feel this moral dilemma of I want to do the best thing for my patient but I also want to keep my job.”

“The goal isn't just to keep them alive to the end of the shift...it makes you wonder what you're doing even on a good day.”



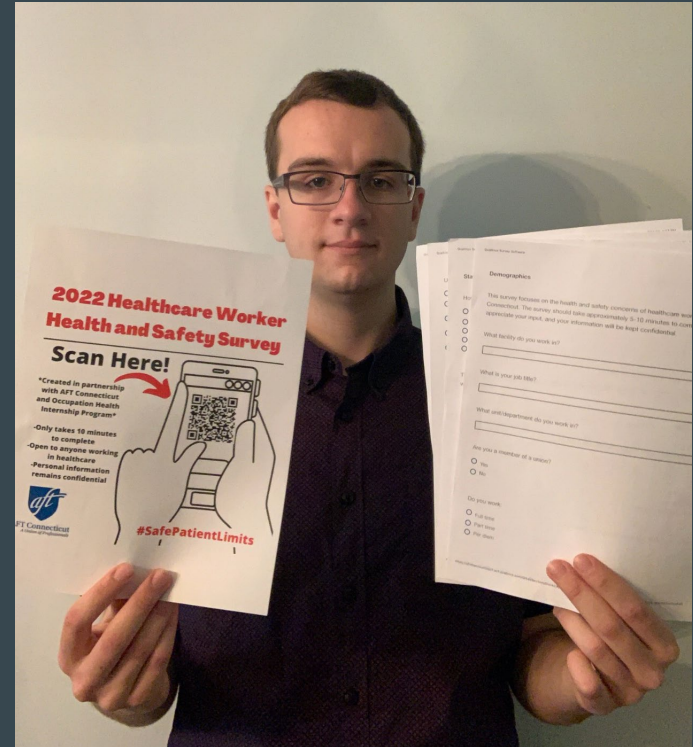
# Challenges

- Developing the survey took more time than anticipated
- Delays getting survey to action networks because of AFT National Convention
- Unable to survey nonunionized workers



# Successes

- Surveyed over 300 Workers
- Interviewed 6 RNs & got to meet many others
- Healthcare worker cooperation and general excitement
- Cooperation with AFT organizers



Holding copies of our survey and flyers we handed out to workers

# Recommendations

## Short-Term Goals

- Stronger nurse staffing committees
- Focus on negotiating regular market increases/longevity bonuses

## Long-Term Goals

- Safe staffing legislation
- Posting of staff ratios
- Revision of overtime law
  - Cool-down periods
  - Revise “unless bargained clause”
  - Require prior warning of mandation

# Give Back Project

## BACKGROUND & DEMOGRAPHICS

- **221 respondents** from UConn Health, Windham Hospital, Backus Hospital, & Danbury Hospital

- **58% of respondents** were **Registered Nurses**

- **76% of respondents** reported **more than ten years experience** in the healthcare field

- **84% of respondents** work **Full-time**

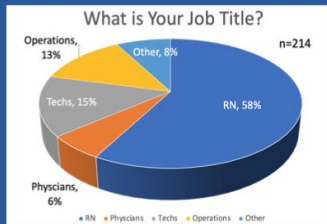
- **27% of respondents** currently have **mandatory overtime** clauses in their contracts

- **All respondents** were **members of AFT CT**

### Survey Development

In the summer of 2022, the American Federation of Teachers in Connecticut (AFT CT) in partnership with researchers from the Occupational Health and Safety Internship Program conducted a survey of healthcare workers from across the state of Connecticut to investigate impact of unsafe staffing on the mental health of healthcare workers & mitigation techniques to address unprecedented amounts of staff turnover.

The 27-question survey was developed by researchers Conner Wyman and Julia Gavrilidis with guidance from AFT Staff, SHIFT Project Researchers, University of Connecticut Professor Dr. Jennifer Cavallari and input from healthcare workers across the state. More than 200 respondents filled out the survey, with an additional 6 nurses being formally interviewed.



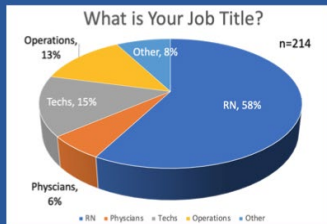
-RN, Backus Hospital

“I definitely still have a drive and passion for nursing but for my own mental health and physical safety I need to find something away from the bedside or where [mandatory overtime] is completely off the table.”

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### Connecticut's Staffing Crisis

Healthcare workers face significant health and safety hazards ranging from violence to verbal abuse along with high levels of stress, chronic illnesses, and burnout. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely exacerbated these health hazards and have contributed to a wave of healthcare workers seeking to leave the profession entirely. A recent study by the Department of Health and Human Services found that 10% of Connecticut hospitals were critically understaffed as of January 2022, with some hospitals reporting vacancy rates as high as 35%<sup>2</sup> The Connecticut Hospital Association also acknowledges that vacancy rates in CT hospitals have “increased significantly over the past five years.” Despite these high vacancy rates, the number of registered nurses in the United States has never been higher. In Connecticut, there are 86,483 registered nurses but only about half actively practice in the state (ref). A study conducted by the Connecticut Data Collaborative found that 20% of registered nurses in Connecticut choose to practice out of state (ref).

The impacts of under-staffing on patient care have also been well documented at the national level (ref). Every one additional patient assigned to a nurse's workload increases the risk of 30-day in-hospital mortality by 7 percent (ref).

Connecticut hospitals have used practices like mandatory overtime as a solution to chronic under-staffing. In Connecticut, nurses can only be required to work mandatory overtime in emergencies or if it was collectively bargained into their contract. As a result, many nurses have been forced to work grueling hours which research has consistently shown increases the chance of error and in-hospital mortality (ref). One study found that if a nurse works more than 12.5 consecutive hours, the risk of error triples (ref). In addition, mandated employees often receive very little notice ahead of their shift, sometimes leaving them scrambling to find childcare or coordinate transportation at the last minute (ref).

“How many other patients would you want to share your nurse with?”

-RN, Backus Hospital

- **70% of respondents** reported their unit being **understaffed more than once a week**

- **40% of respondents** further reported their unit being **understaffed every shift**

- **72% of RN** respondents reported having a **dangerous patient:nurse ratio** in their department

- **27% of RN** respondents reported having **7 or more patients per nurse** on average every shift in the last month

## Impacts on Worker Mental Health

A Kaiser Family Foundation study found that 62% of healthcare workers nationally report their mental health has worsened due to stress during the pandemic (ref). One result of AFT's 2022 survey showed that the majority of healthcare workers (56%) report that worry or stress related to COVID-19 has caused them to experience trouble with sleeping, 31% report frequent headaches or stomach aches, and 16% report increased alcohol or drug use. In addition, 18% report feeling the need for mental health services. As a result of the rising toll of working in the healthcare profession, 40% of nurses nationally have considered leaving the profession (ref).

Policies like mandatory overtime, long work hours, and chronic under-staffing have significantly contributed to increased feelings of burnout among healthcare professionals (ref). As one study by the American Nursing describes it, “excessive work hours reduce staff morale, which in turn contributes to job burnout. Job burnout reduces staff retention and creates more nursing vacancies, forcing the remaining nurses to work more overtime.” (ref). A study by the International Council of Nurses found that 70% of nurses have been experiencing burnout since the pandemic, up from 40% before the pandemic (ref). Additionally there has been increased concern in recent years, especially since the pandemic, over nurses suffering moral injuries. These injuries refer “to situations in which a nurse “knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action.” Situations like these are often caused or exacerbated by under-staffing and take devastating tolls on healthcare workers

Of workers the 221 surveyed, 70% reported that their unit was understaffed at least once a week with 40% reporting their unit was understaffed every shift. In addition, 69% reported symptoms of burnout, 39% reported they have felt the need for mental health services as a result of work, and 59% reported they often consider leaving their job.

“They need to realize they are killing us, we are just so stressed out everyday mentally physically, we are drained. You go home, you go to bed, and you come back. That's it.”

-RN, Backus Hospital

- **40% of surveyed workers** reported they felt the **need for mental health services** as a result of work

- **27% reported difficulties receiving mental health services.**

- **69% of respondents** are experiencing significant symptoms of **burnout**

- **27% of respondents** agreed with the statement **“I am troubled by having acted in ways that violated my own morals or values.”**

- **59% of respondents** reported considering **leaving their jobs** often

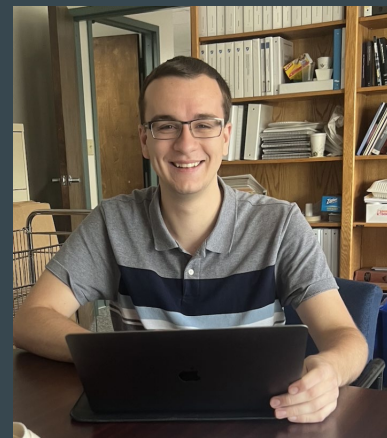
- **8% reported** having **poor or very poor mental health**



# Personal Reflections

“I want people to see the value that this is not an empty dream”

- Learned about legislative advocacy, organizing, & public outreach
- Significance of specific contract/legal language
- Motivation by personal sacrifice & resilience of CT's healthcare workers



Photos taken while working at AFT CT in Rocky Hill



Photo taken outside Windham Hospital where we attended a union meeting



# Acknowledgements

Thanks to the American Federation of Teachers, the Occupational Health and Safety Internship Program, and the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety for making this project possible. In addition, thank you to our mentors Jenn Cavallari, Sara MarkElder, and Eric Borlaug.

