

American Worker in Crisis:

Understanding Employee Mental Health in Unprecedented Times



Introduction

From the ongoing coronavirus pandemic to the racial justice movement sweeping across America, the historic upheaval of the past several months has challenged U.S. workers in unprecedented ways. The fallout from the ongoing public health crisis, economic downturn, and nationwide reckoning with racism has taken a clear toll on employees' mental health.

This spring, more than a third of Americans experienced symptoms of clinical anxiety or depression—a stark warning sign of our national mental health crisis. This state of affairs follows preexisting increases in anxiety, major depression, and suicide across age groups pre-pandemic. Employees' mental health struggles have an outside impact on U.S. businesses, too, with mental illness the leading cause of disability in the country, accounting for some 217 million days of lost work annually.

At the same time, signs of progress for U.S. workers' mental health have emerged in recent years: Americans are talking more openly about mental health, and growing numbers of employers are taking action to support their employees' psychological well-being. To continue that forward progress despite the unprecedented circumstances we now face, it's essential to first understand how American employees are faring.

In a new survey, leading mental health care provider [Lyra Health](#) and the [National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions](#), a nonprofit network of employer coalitions, set out to deeply understand how the dual crises of the coronavirus pandemic and racial injustice are affecting U.S. workers' mental and emotional health. We asked more than 1,200 U.S.-based employees who receive health insurance through their employers to tell us about their mental health symptoms, how they're coping, and any employer support they receive for their mental well-being. Their responses provide surprising and valuable insights into the collective mental health challenges Americans face that can help inform the path forward for U.S. employers and employees alike.

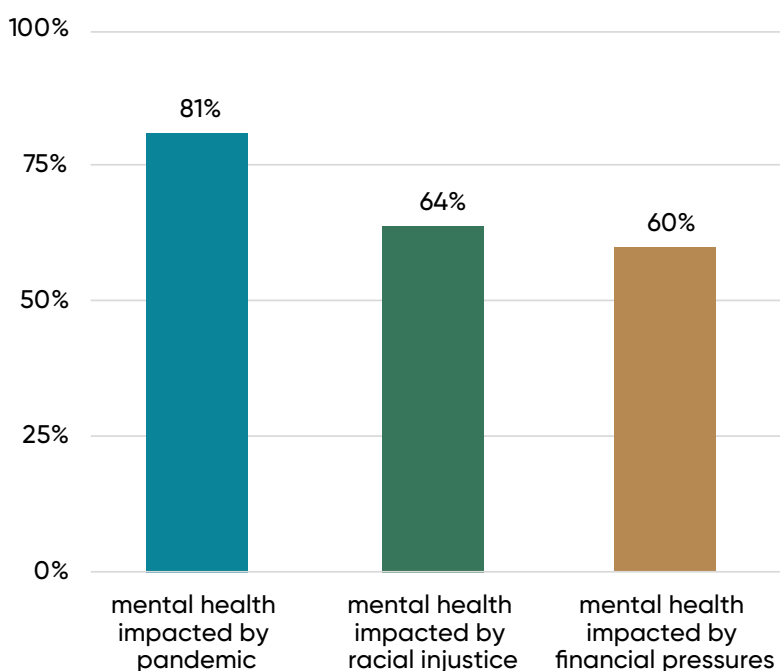
Full-time U.S. employees like those we surveyed spend most of their waking hours on the job. Regardless of where that work now takes place, the workplace can be a primary source of mental health support for many Americans. And, though there are many events outside of employers' control, especially in these tumultuous times, organizations still have a crucial role to play in providing the support their employees need to weather this difficult period. In addition to the survey findings, this report includes best practices to help employers rise to this unprecedented challenge.

Survey findings

The coronavirus pandemic, financial pressures, and a national reckoning with racism have all had a major impact on U.S. workers' mental health across demographics.

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic, along with recent instances of racial injustice and related social unrest, has greatly affected U.S. workers' mental health, with 83% experiencing negative emotions associated with poor mental health.

The survey data suggest that both the pandemic and racial injustice have had a significant impact on the U.S. workforce over the past three months. While more respondents reported negative mental health effects due to the coronavirus, the majority of those surveyed also experienced adverse effects related to racial injustice. There was significant overlap among those who felt negative impacts from these two major events. For example, 46% of respondents whose mental health was "extremely affected" by the pandemic also reported being "extremely affected" by the racial justice movement. Meanwhile, most employees are also feeling the mental health repercussions of financial pressures amid the economic downturn.



→ 81% have experienced mental health issues due to the coronavirus pandemic, with one in four significantly or extremely impacted

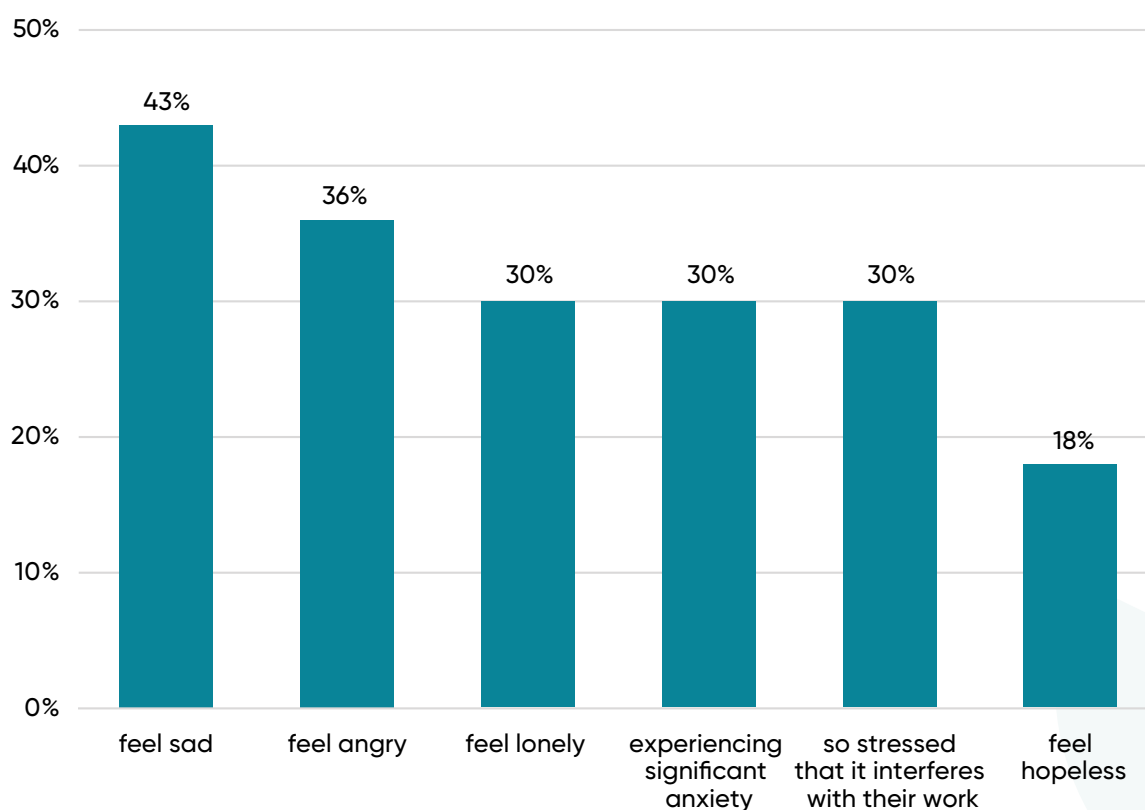
→ 64% experienced mental health issues due to the racial justice movement, but nearly one in four were significantly or extremely impacted

→ 60% report that financial stress is negatively impacting mental health

Top mental and emotional issues affecting U.S. workers

About two-thirds (62%) of U.S. workers said they are worried about their own future or their family's future—by far the most often reported concern. Employees are also grappling with a range of difficult emotions and signs of distress amid the uncertainty and disruption of the past several months.

The survey found the following:



The American worker in severe mental health crisis

1 in 10 employees have thought about harming themselves or others



An alarmingly high number of U.S. employees—about one in 10—say they have thought about harming themselves or others over the past several months. This figure parallels Lyra's own data: In the early days of the pandemic, as areas throughout the country shut down, the mental health care provider saw a 33% increase in reports of suicidal ideation or thoughts of self-harm among Lyra members.

Resilience

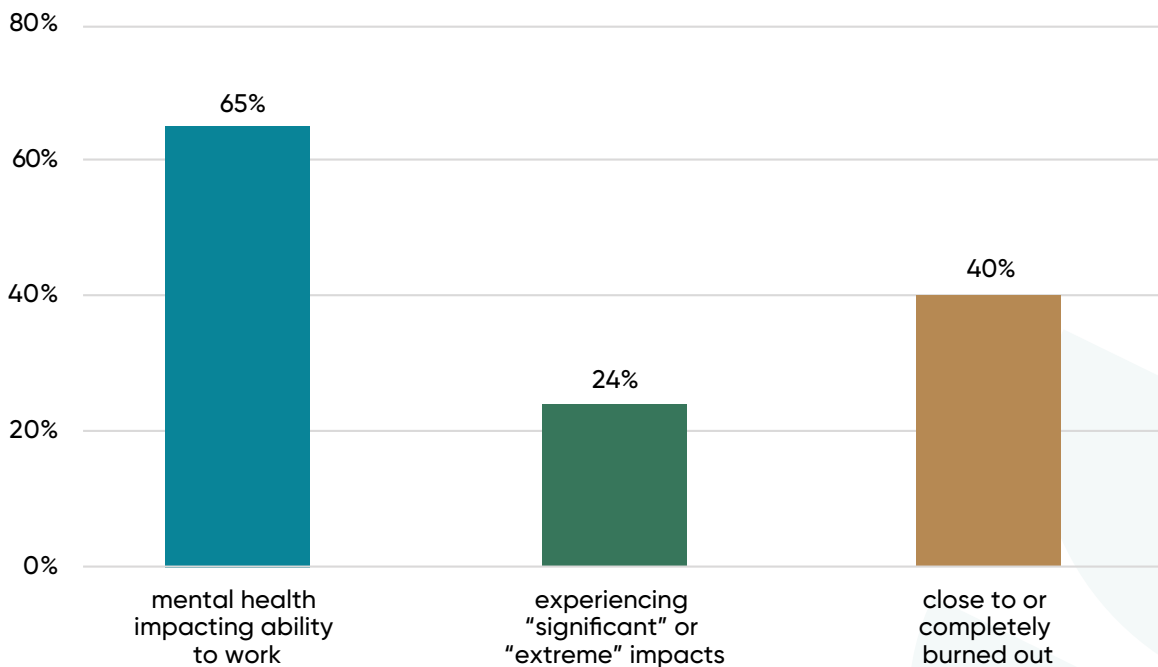
Despite the distress many employees are feeling, there is hope on the horizon: **A majority (58%) believe their negative feelings will improve in the near future**, demonstrating the American worker's optimism and resilience.

Mental health issues are making it difficult to work and leading to high rates of burnout

As employees nationwide are still adjusting to working during a pandemic, mental health struggles are significantly affecting them on the job.

- **65% report** that mental health issues have directly impacted their ability to work
- **24% report** either significant or extreme impacts
- **40% said** they have felt or come close to feeling completely burned out

These findings reinforce what we already know about the impact of untreated mental health problems on presenteeism, or when someone is on the job but not fully functional due to an underlying health condition.



Few are receiving treatment, and most who do pay out of pocket

Despite most respondents reporting mental health challenges in recent months, only one in seven (14%) said they'd received treatment from a mental health professional during that time. Of those who did receive care, nearly 60% paid for it out of pocket, despite being insured through their employer.

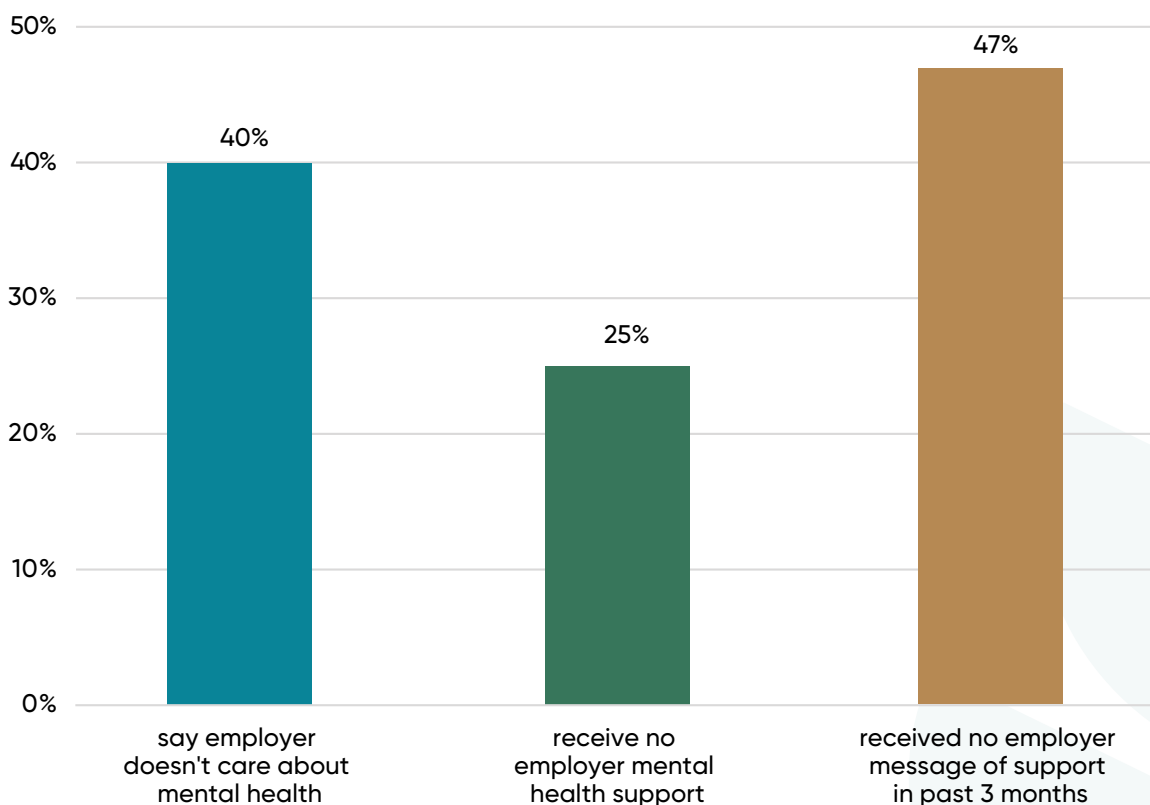
This finding underscores the prevalence of common barriers to mental health care in the U.S., including a lack of available mental health care providers in traditional insurance networks. With out-of-pocket costs for therapy sessions as high as \$250 per session in some parts of the country, many employees who need care may be hesitant or unable to seek help in a time of economic uncertainty.

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Levels of employer support for mental health

The survey also asked respondents to share how they view their employers' support for mental health amid the uncertainty and turmoil of the past three months. While some organizations do appear to provide support for employee mental health, a significant number of workers felt that was not the case.

- **40%** don't believe their employer cares about their mental health, beyond their ability to be productive
- **One in four** respondents said their employer does not support their mental health at all
- **Nearly half (47%)** said their employer has not communicated any message of support in the past three months, whether related to the pandemic or the racial justice movement.



Workers without employer mental health support are more likely to leave

Employers that don't provide adequate mental health resources or support to their workforces could find themselves losing employees, the survey findings suggest. Thirty-eight percent of respondents said their stress levels are so high that they're considering a career change.

More than a third of respondents (35%) who were considering a new career said they did not believe their employer cared about their mental health beyond their ability to be productive. Employees who don't think their employer supports their mental health were almost twice as likely to be considering a career change.

This data aligns with Lyra's own findings on mental health support and employee retention: Among companies that partner with Lyra to provide comprehensive mental health benefits, employees who use the benefit are twice as likely to stay at their jobs than those who do not.

35% said they did not believe their employer cared about their mental health beyond their ability to be productive

Conclusion

U.S. workers across age groups, regions, and industries are shouldering the mental health impacts of the extraordinary upheaval caused by the coronavirus pandemic and nationwide racial justice movement. The distress they're feeling is affecting employees' ability to function both on and off the job—leading to stress, anxiety, and burnout for many, and potentially life-threatening symptoms for some.

These findings shed light on the gap in employer-provided mental health support and resources at a time when employees urgently need it. The results suggest that workers without this support are floundering. While we can't forecast what the next months or years will bring, we do know that the right mental health support can be life-changing, and that employees who are struggling are unlikely to get better without help.

Where employers can go from here

While there are a number of factors outside of employers' control, especially in such unprecedented circumstances, organizations have a crucial opportunity to provide their employees with mental health care resources. This type of support can make a life-altering difference in employees' mental health and well-being, both on and off the job.

Break the silence

Experts say that simply talking about mental illness can help normalize it and help create an environment where others feel safe to discuss the mental health issues affecting their lives. And, when company leaders broach the topic or share their own experiences, it can be even more influential in dispelling stigma than having the message come from human resources or individual team managers alone. Sharing personal experiences signals that it's OK to struggle and that it's safe to ask for support.

Whether your workforce is mostly remote or in their usual workplaces, company emails, virtual or in-person meetings, and workshops can all be good forums to discuss mental health. This type of communication helps foster a culture of trust, accountability, and transparency—especially during turbulent times.

Communicate openly and often

Communicating with your workforce consistently, and with as much transparency as possible, can help allay some of the anxiety many employees are feeling during this stressful time. It's important to provide clear rationale for business decisions. This could include your office's return-to-work timeline; your company's diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts; or tough financial decisions such as furloughs or layoffs.

Sharing information can have a powerful impact on employee well-being since it serves as an antidote to anxiety. This is because uncertainty breeds and worsens anxiety, and having only limited information creates uncertainty.

Take the pulse of your employees

Your efforts to support employee mental health will be more successful and well formed if you can first understand workers' immediate needs and worries. Consider launching a pulse survey to capture feedback and give people a chance to voice their concerns. These types of surveys can go a long way in making employees feel their voices are heard, especially when they may be feeling disconnected or even disenchanted at work. Once you've gathered their feedback, be sure to share a summary of the results and information about how the company will address key themes reported in the survey.

Be on the lookout for mental health conditions

Mental health struggles aren't always readily apparent—and, when everyone is working remotely, they can be even harder to detect. Additionally, people tend to be uncomfortable divulging a mental health condition at work. Yet, as these survey findings demonstrate, many employees are experiencing mental health struggles amid the pandemic and its disruption to daily life. Review [our guidance](#) for how to identify signs of distress in the workplace (plus [best practices to do so remotely](#)) and connect employees to appropriate support resources.

Encourage managers to check in with their team on a personal level

In addition to responding to signs of concern, managers should consider strategies that make employees more comfortable with speaking up if they're facing challenges.

- **Individually:** Check in casually with team members throughout the week about how they're doing, how they're managing their work, and what support you can offer. This demonstrates your care and concern while also providing opportunities for them to share unseen struggles.
- **For team meetings:** Consider using the first five to 10 minutes to conduct a "wellness check" by asking people to share how they're feeling and what they're doing to support themselves and one another in these difficult times. You could start with something like, "What's something you've tried this week for self-care?"

Offer benefits that make it easy to access care

Unfortunately, many traditional health insurance plans and employee assistance plans (EAPs) include friction—from provider shortages to months-long wait times for an appointment—that creates barriers to this much-needed care. If your company's EAP covers counseling sessions, make sure these services are readily available to employees when they need them. And, if your company doesn't already offer mental health benefits that make it easy to access care, now is the time to consider doing so.

When employees need more support

People's circumstances and reactions to stressful events will differ, and some employees may need additional support due to preexisting mental health conditions or stressors. For example, the news may be especially triggering for individuals with anxiety disorders, and social distancing can be extra challenging for those with depression. We also know that recent instances of anti-Black racism have spurred race-based traumatic stress, so it's essential to provide support to Black employees, both in response to highly publicized instances of racism, and on an ongoing basis.

Share information about your company's EAP, including what services are offered and how to access them, and emphasize that this care is confidential. Make sure to highlight behavioral health care options available through the health plan and how to seek reimbursement for out-of-network care.

Additional resources for employees

The National Domestic Violence Hotline

Call 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or visit www.thehotline.org

National Parent Helpline

Call 1-855-427-2736 or visit www.nationalparenthelpline.org

The National Alliance for Caregiving

Visit www.caregiving.org/resources/

Methodology

This survey was led by Lyra Health and the National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions. The goal of the study was to determine how both the coronavirus pandemic and the recent racial justice movement have affected the American workforce's mental health.

We gathered responses from 1,265 individuals via an online survey from independent brand intelligence firm Survata between June 25, 2020, and June 30, 2020. All respondents were at least 18 years of age, employed full-time, and living in the U.S. when the survey was completed. The survey gathered responses from a statistically significant number of respondents across genders, age groups, and regions of the U.S. (Midwest, Northeast, South, and West).

Survata collected survey data through its digital network, and consumers were interviewed in exchange for access to content or a service, such as free Wi-Fi. Respondents received no monetary compensation for their participation.

Respondent demographics

Gender identity

50.7%

female

49.3%

male

Age

4.5%

18-24

24.8%

25-34

28.2%

34-44

21.7%

45-54

17.2%

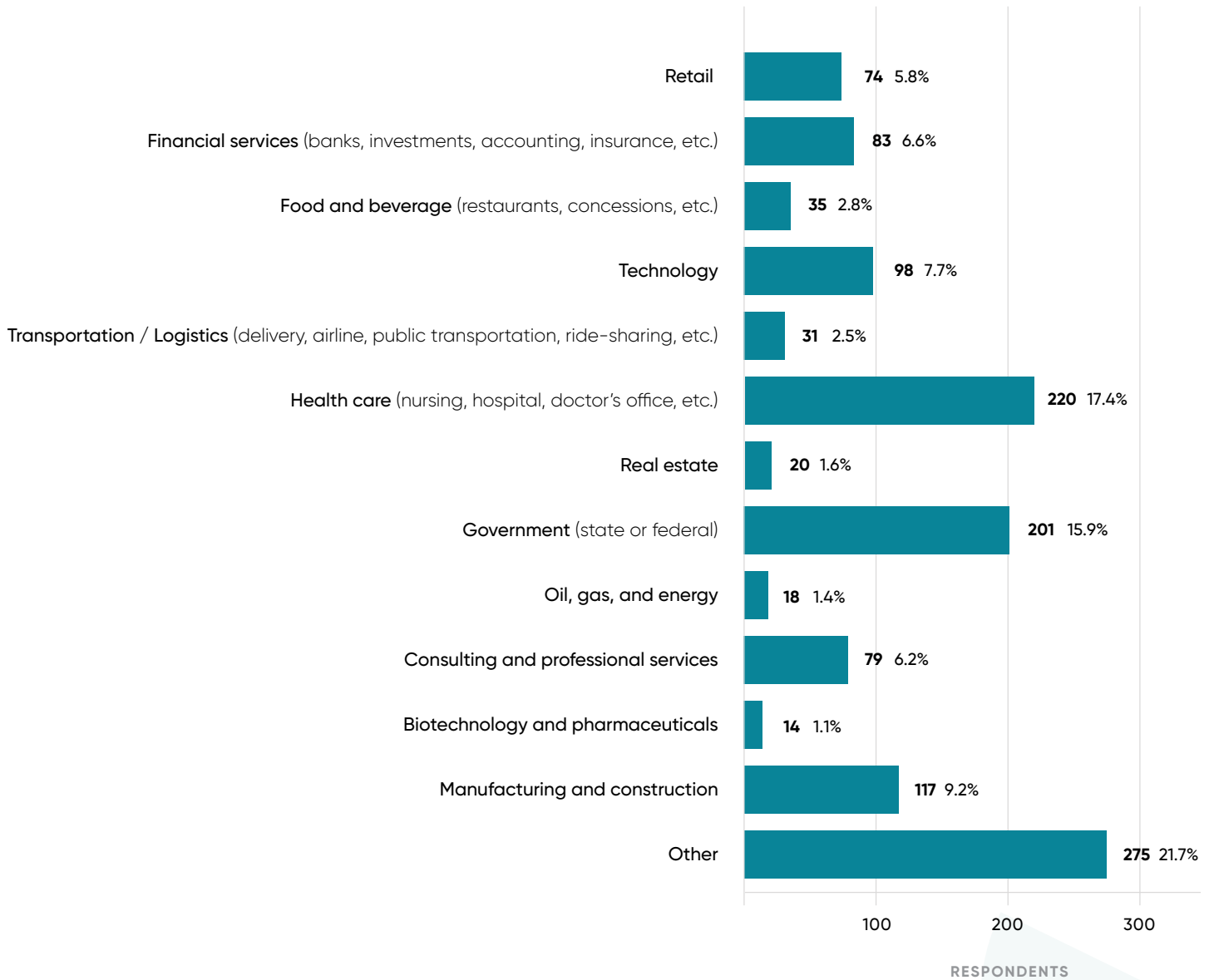
55-64

3.7%

65+

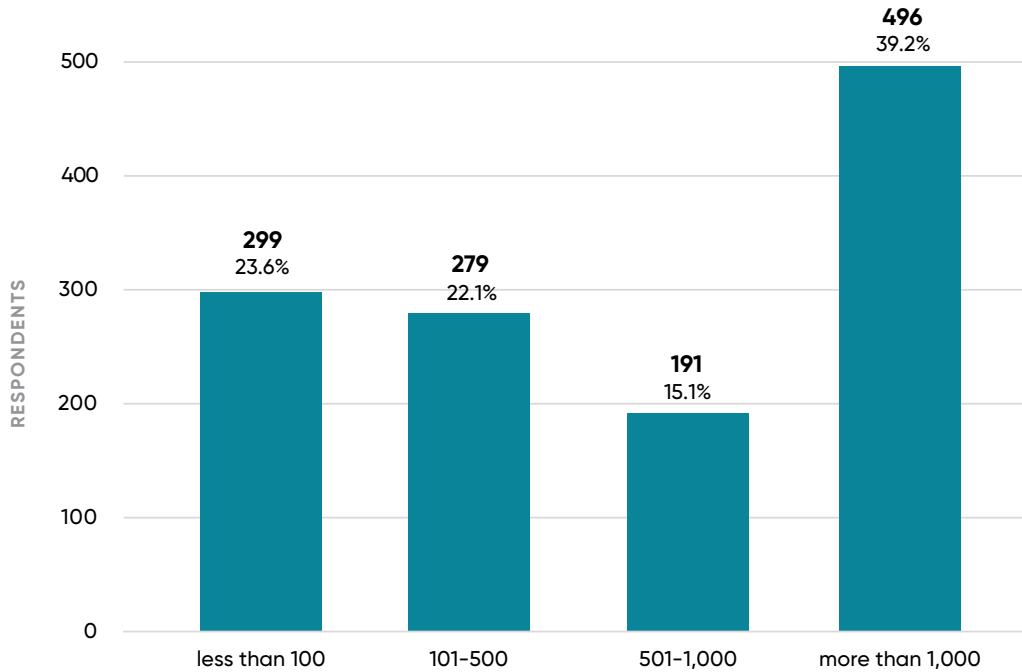
Industry

Which of the following best describes the industry of your employer?



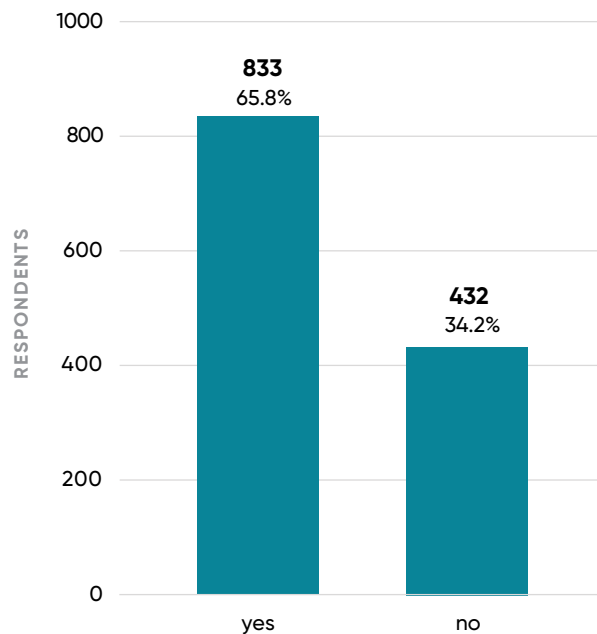
Company size

How many people work at your employer?



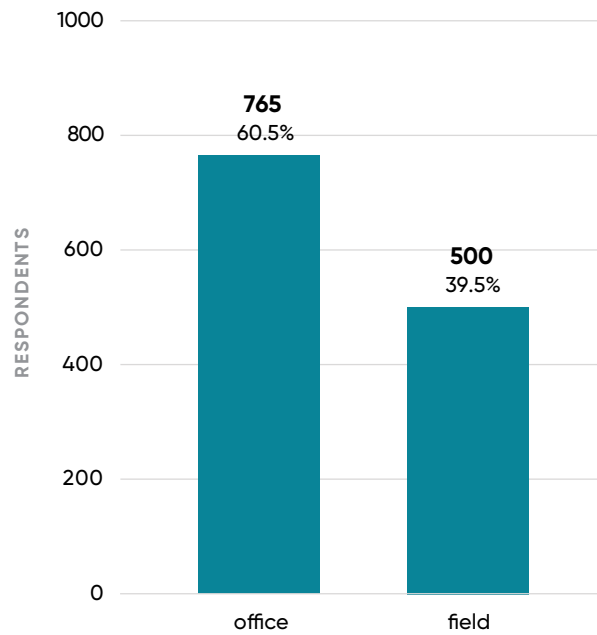
Essential workers

Are you considered an "essential worker"?



Work setting

Do you typically work in an office setting
(at a computer most of the day),
or do you work in the field
(not at a computer most of the day)?



About Lyra Health

Lyra Health, a leading provider of innovative mental health benefits for more than 1.3 million U.S. employees and dependents, is transforming mental health care by creating a frictionless experience for members, providers, and employers. Using matching technology and an innovative digital platform, Lyra connects companies and their employees—plus spouses and children—to world-class therapists, mental health coaches, and personalized medication prescribing. Leading self-insured employers partner with Lyra to tailor value-driven mental health benefits programs specific to their workforce. With Lyra, benefits leaders can offer employees fast, reliable access to clinicians who practice evidence-based mental health care approaches that have been proven effective. For more information, visit: lyrahealth.com, and follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#).

About The National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions

The National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions (National Alliance) is the only nonprofit, purchaser-led organization with a national and regional structure dedicated to driving health and health care value across the country. Its members represent private and public sector, nonprofit, and Taft-Hartley organizations, and more than 45 million Americans, spending \$300 billion annually on health care. To learn more, visit nationalalliancehealth.org or connect with us on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#).

