

HSU Special Report

A NSW Health Workforce at Breaking Point



About the Health Services Union

HSU members work in public and private health, ambulance, aboriginal health, aged care, disability, and mental health sectors. They include pathologists, paramedics, aged care workers, physiotherapists, cooks, radiographers, clinical psychologists, cleaners, administrators, laundry staff, dental assistants, disability support workers, health education and promotion officers, theatre technicians, ward clerks, aboriginal health workers, occupational therapists, security officers, alcohol and drug workers, and many other health professionals. The HSU is a rapidly growing union with over 50,000 members.

HSU members work in big cities and remote towns, often being the first on the scene and the last to be seen in a patient's healthcare journey. Without them, there is no health system. They are proud of their work, and their dedication and professionalism are essential to the health system.

Mission

A defining aspect of HSU's mission is to continuously advocate to ensure citizens and residents have access to high-quality, timely, equitable, and affordable patient-centred health services in New South Wales. We note that access to appropriate healthcare is, and should always be, a protected right afforded to all. Furthermore, we note that best practice health care is predicated on an **adequately staffed, supported and equipped workforce** to meet increasing levels of complexity and expanding demand for healthcare services.

About this report

In July 2024, HSU surveyed **1,256 health workers** across NSW Health to inform workforce hearings of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Healthcare Funding in NSW. Respondents were drawn from general and allied health fields across all LHDs and SHNs. The average age of the respondents was **46.4 years**, with **69.8%** identifying as women, **29.8%** as men, and **0.4%** as other. On average, they had 16 years of service in the health sector. Employment status was **72.1% full-time**, **23.9% part-time**, and **4% casual or temporary**. This data accurately reflects current trends in the healthcare workforce and provides insights not readily available through government analyses.

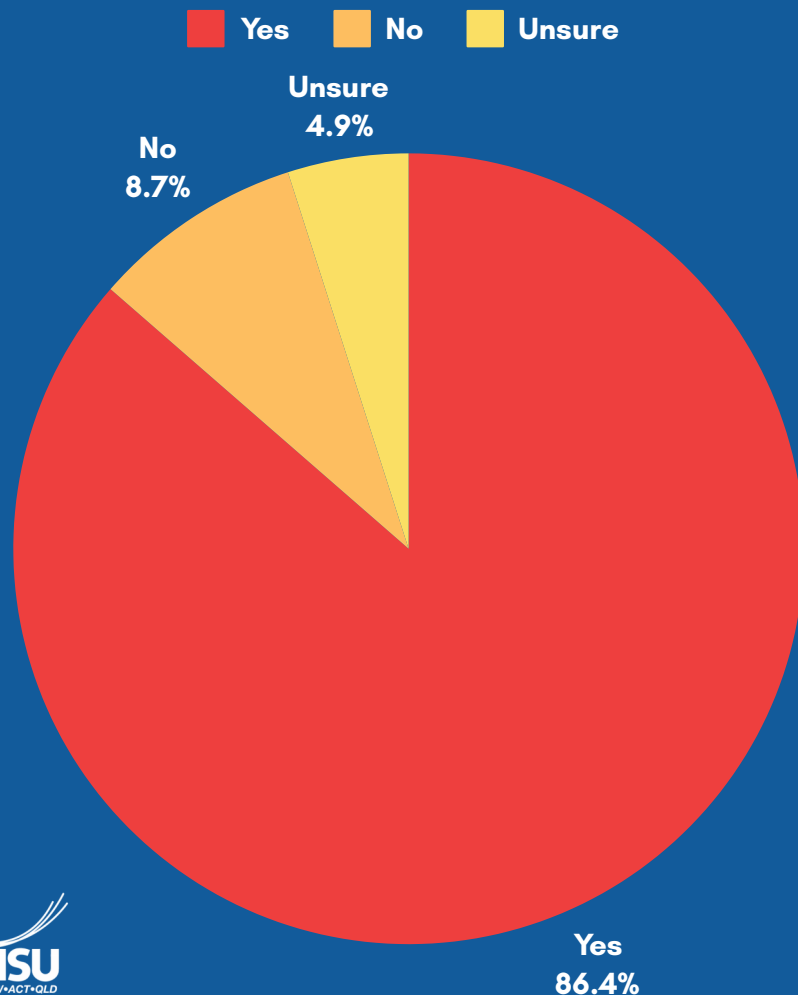
Executive Summary

1. **Staffing Shortages:** Over 86% of surveyed health workers reported staffing shortages in their departments. This critical issue has directly impacted patient care, with more than half indicating that understaffing has contributed to adverse patient outcomes in the past year.
2. **Safety Concerns:** 61.65% of respondents stated that current staffing levels have created safety risks for themselves and their colleagues. This highlights an urgent need for increased staffing to ensure a safe working environment and quality patient care.
3. **Resource Deficiencies:** More than half of the health workers surveyed reported not having all the necessary resources to perform their jobs effectively. This includes medical equipment, training, and IT support, which are crucial for maintaining high standards of care.
4. **High Turnover Intentions:** A significant portion of health workers are considering leaving their jobs, with nearly 60% indicating that the current workplace culture makes them less likely to stay. This underscores the need to improve working conditions and support to attract and retain health workers.

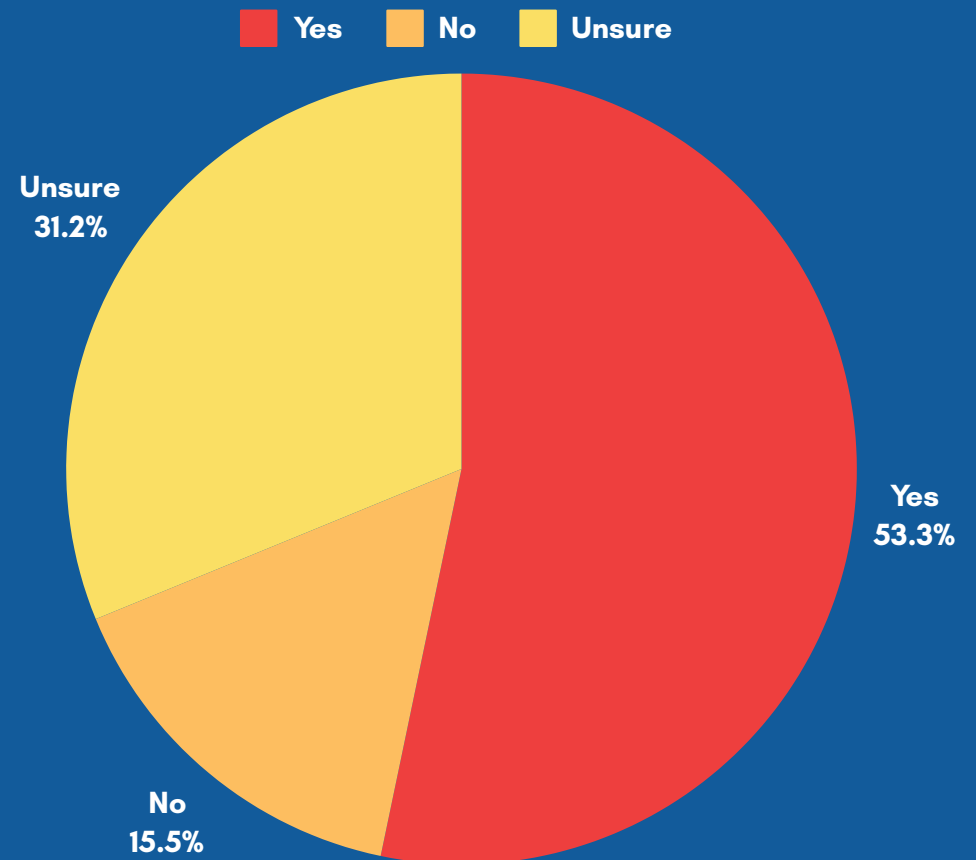
What NSW Health Workers Report – The Data

Survey results from 1,236 NSW Health workers reveal the following:

Staffing shortages in your department:



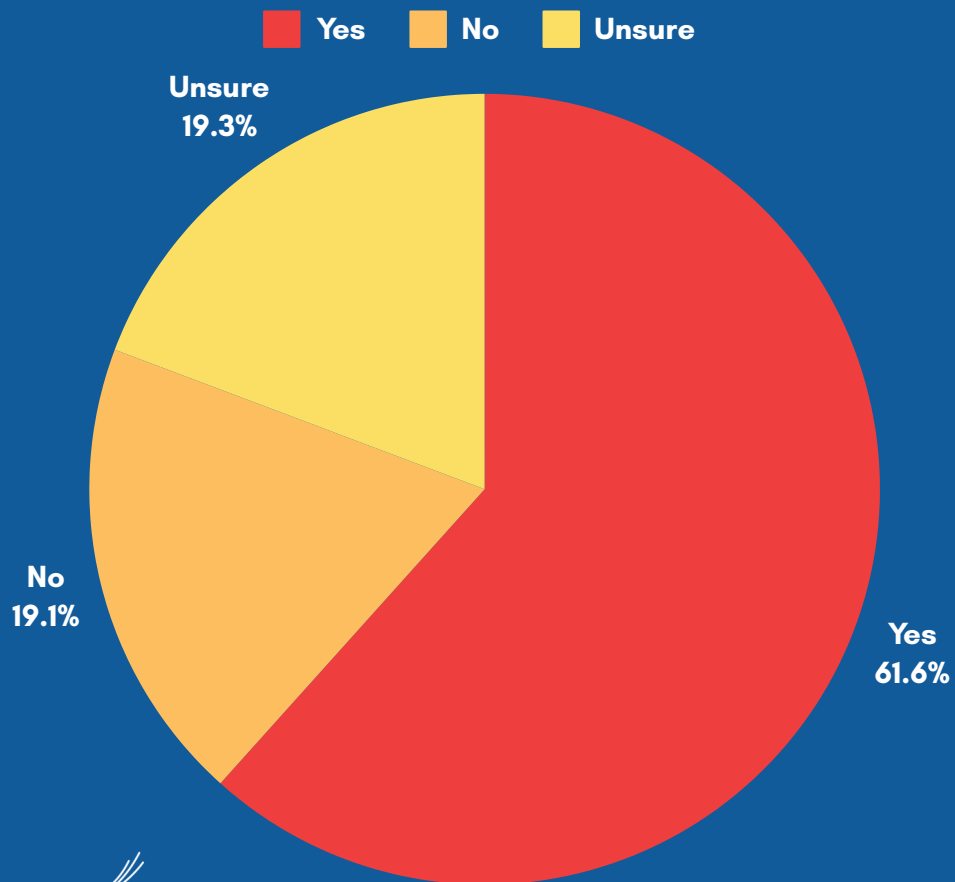
Understaffing leading to adverse patient outcomes:



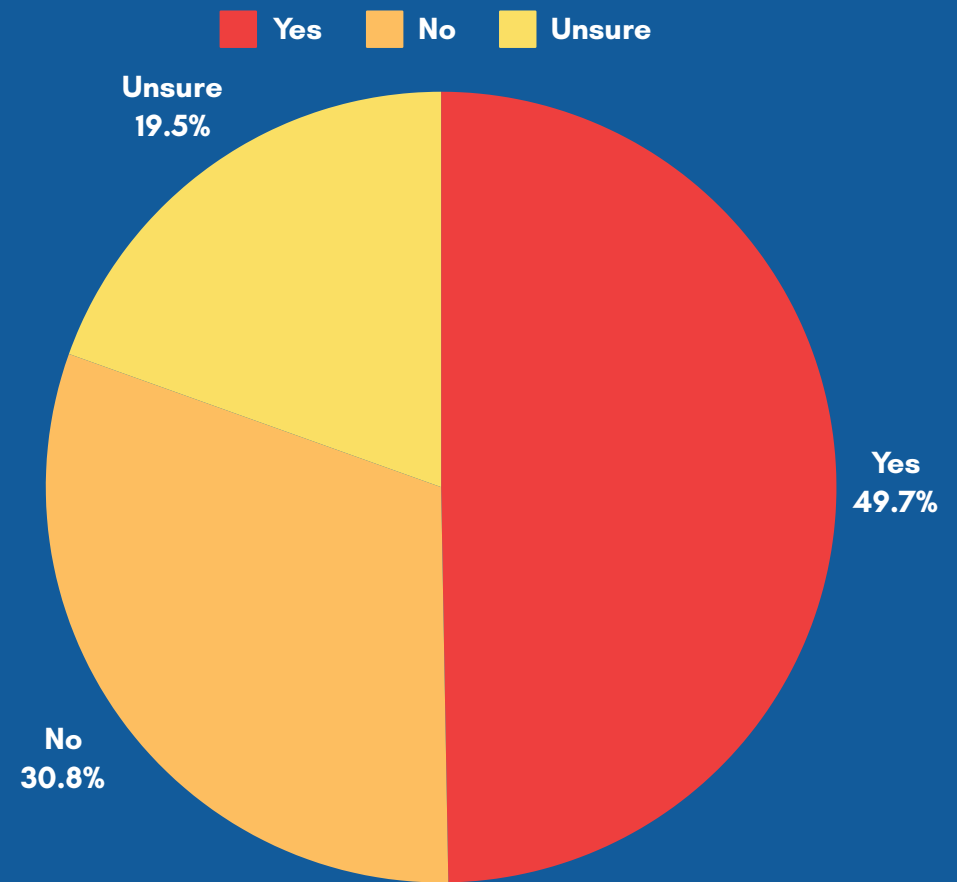
What NSW Health Workers Report – The Data

Survey results from 1,236 NSW Health workers reveal the following:

Safety risks due to inadequate staffing levels:



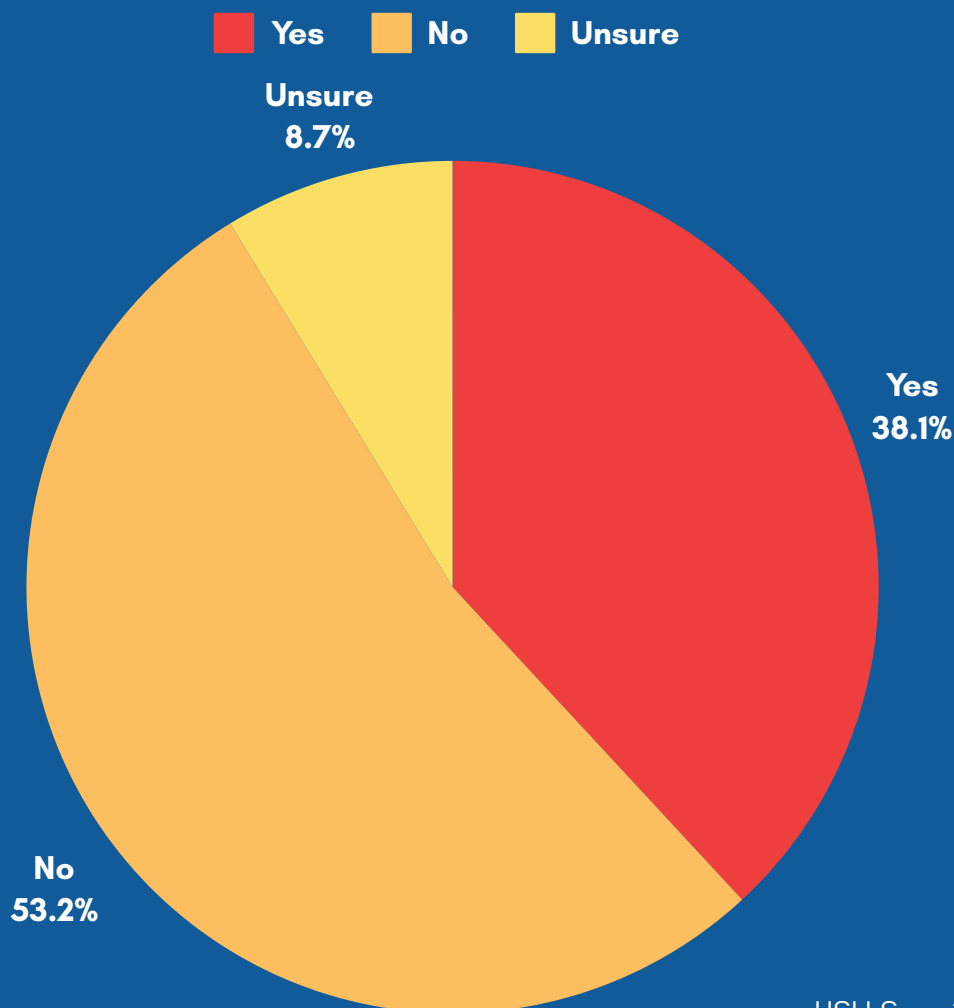
With no staff shortages, is there adequate staff to provide safe and timely care to all patients?



What NSW Health Workers Report – The Data

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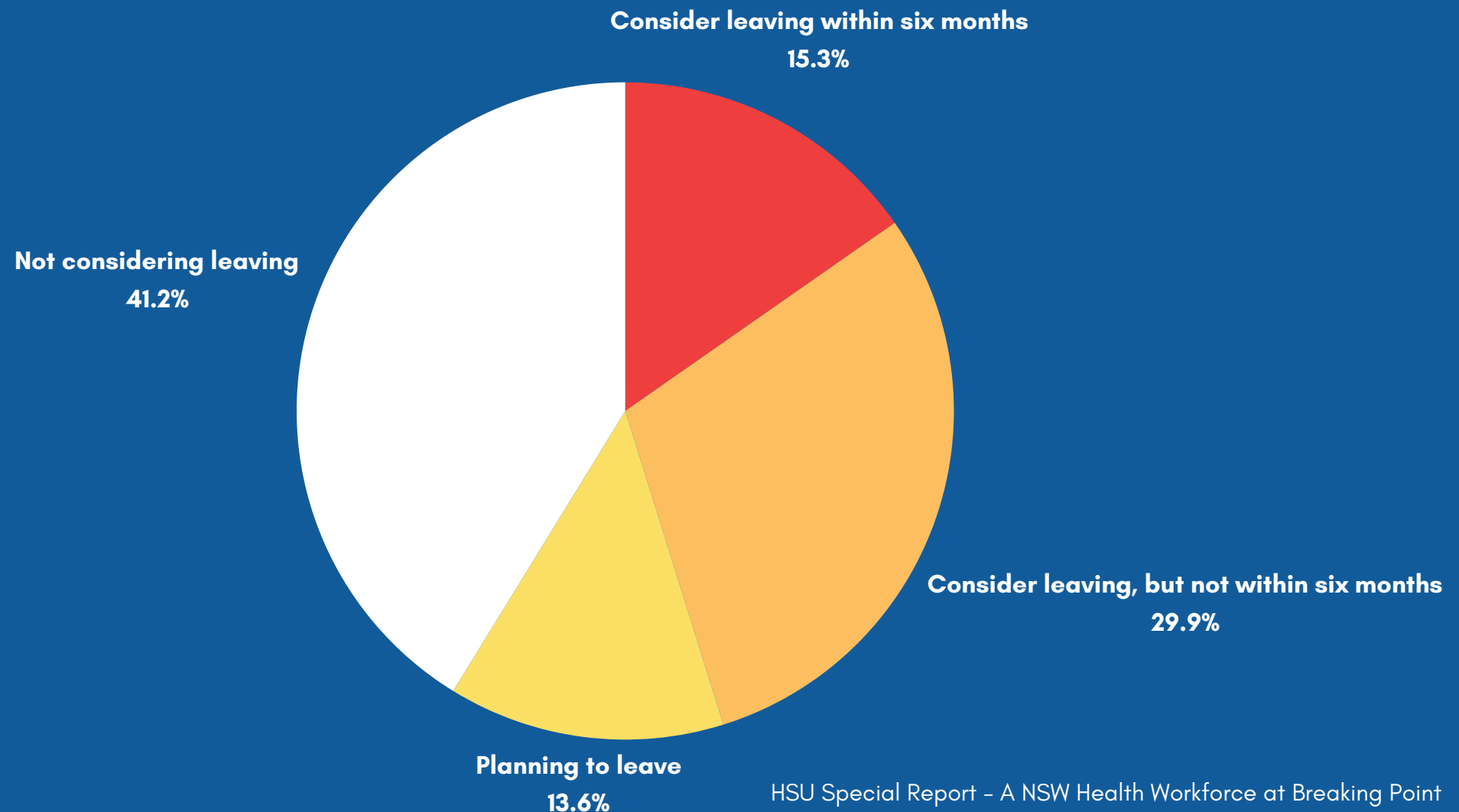
Availability of required resources to perform role:



What NSW Health Workers Report – The Data

Survey results from 1,236 NSW Health workers reveal the following:

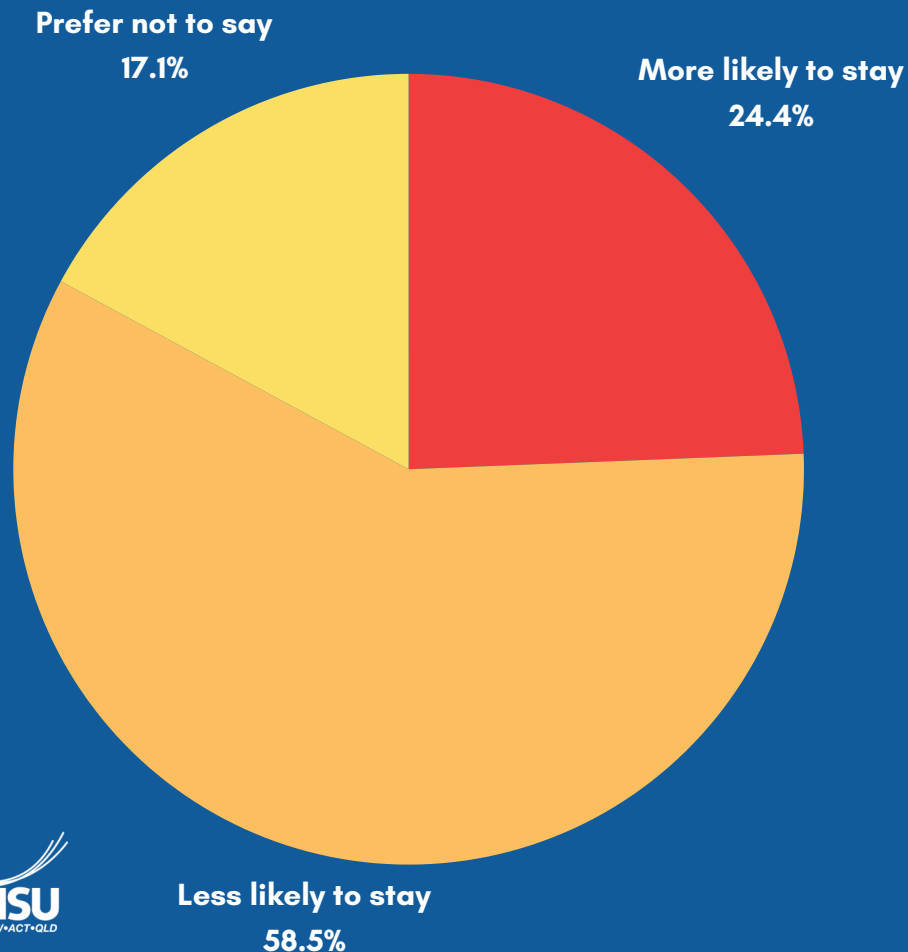
Job Intentions:



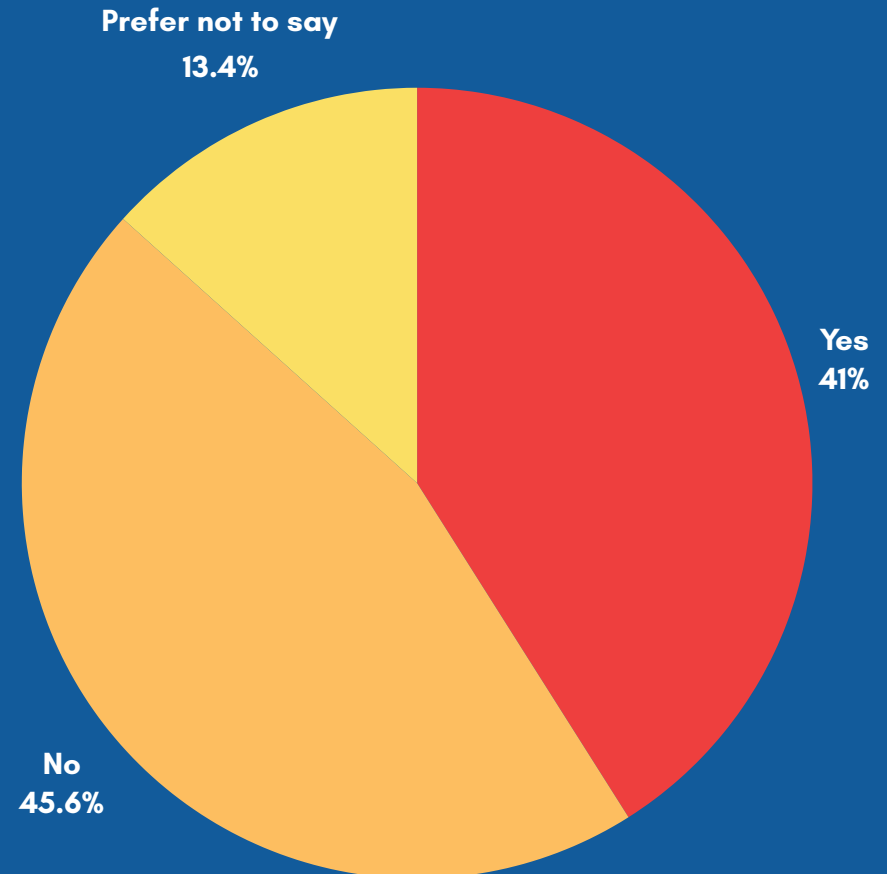
What NSW Health Workers Report – The Data

Survey results from 1,236 NSW Health workers reveal the following:

Influence of workplace culture on intention to stay in NSW Health:



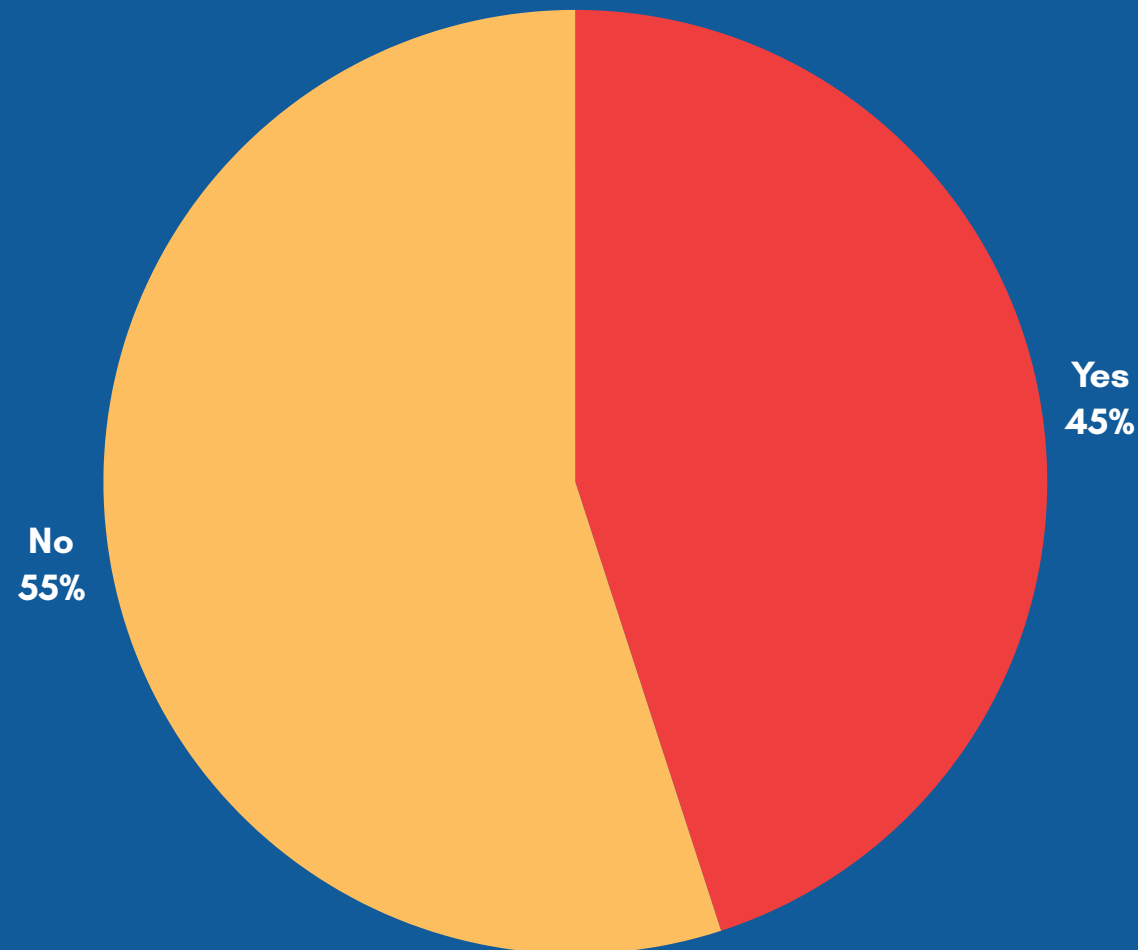
Affordability of housing within 15km of workplace:



What NSW Health Workers Report – The Data

Survey results from 341 NSW Health workers reveal the following:

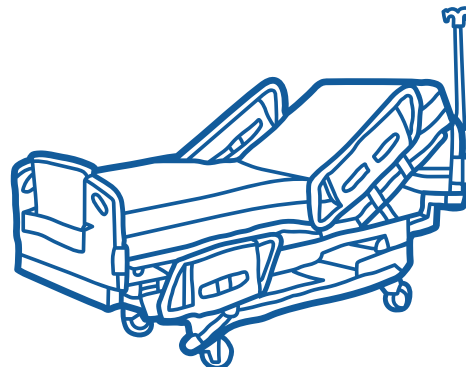
Access and affordability of childcare:



In their words – Reflections from Health Workers

“Not all necessary tests are performed daily as there is not enough staff—we now have had to schedule testing every second day, which **delays patient care** and creates further **health complications.**”

Pathology Officer



In their words – Reflections from Health Workers

“Significantly reduced staffing and resources within my physiotherapy department have resulted in reduced therapy time for patients across the hospital. There is a reduced volume of therapy for patients recovering from strokes, geriatric patients who rapidly decondition from inactivity, and postoperative patients who now take longer to recover. This has had broader impacts of **increasing length of stay, reducing bed flow,** and **reducing the number of available beds** for ED admissions.”

Physiotherapist

In their words – Reflections from Health Workers

“Chronically high caseloads have led to **high levels of fatigue and stress**. I cannot provide the service that I would like to, which impacts my job satisfaction, affects my morale, and undermines the overall work environment. I work outside of paid job hours and through lunchtime breaks. At times, I have no option but to come to work unwell. Long-term, this is leading to **severe physical and mental health implications for me**—it’s not an uncommon story; ask a health worker.”

Psychologist

In their words – Reflections from Health Workers

“We do the caring, but who cares for us? There are no programs to properly support the emotional and physical well-being of staff, or our overall safety – just a hotline to call and a glossy flyer; **we deserve better.**”

Aboriginal Health Worker

In their words – Reflections from Health Workers

“Listen to people on the front lines, don’t sit in high managerial positions and tell us what’s happening, we know what’s happening, we are the system,
we live it everyday.”

Social Worker

In their words – Reflections from Health Workers

“Increased wages for staff to reduce turnover, improve conditions, improve training and workplace support, allow us to afford to do our jobs, which we love and are passionate about.”

Dental Assistant

In their words – Reflections from Health Workers

“Give us enough staff to do the job, it’s very important for cleanliness and infection control practices in hospital wards. If I don’t do my job, the surgeon can’t do theirs, and the patient suffers.

We need to work together.”

Cleaner

HSU Observation

HSU highlights a crucial issue in NSW's public health sector: the lack of an independent body to capture real-time data on the health workforce, vacancies, and service demand. Policymakers face challenges in gathering comprehensive data due to the system's complexity, resulting in inefficiencies.

To effectively address workforce issues, it's essential to include health workers in the conversation and **amplify their voices**. Accurate data and insights from those on the front lines are vital for planning service provision and addressing staff shortages. Engaging health workers directly is **key to understanding their needs** and improving the NSW health system for all.

Conclusion

This report highlights the critical issues faced by health workers in NSW, including staffing shortages, safety risks, and resource inadequacies. It also highlights the strain many health workers faced in accessing and affording housing and childcare and highlights pervasive cultural challenges across NSW Health.

The data underscores the urgent need for health reform and further supportive measures to ensure that a robust and effective healthcare workforce can be maintained in NSW.

Acknowledgements

*HSU would like to thank the 1236 dedicated and passionate health workers across NSW who contributed to this report.

*Full list of survey questions:

- Are there any staffing shortages in your department?
- Has understaffing contributed to adverse patient outcomes in your department in the past 12 months?
- In the past 12 months, has the staffing level in your department created a safety risk for yourself or your colleagues?
- With no staff shortages, is there adequate staff to provide safe and timely care to all patients?
- Do you have all the resources required to do your job? (i.e. e.g. medical equipment, education, training, IT equipment, other)

Which of the following statements best reflects your intention?

- a) I am considering leaving my job in the next six months.
- b) I am considering leaving my job, but not in the next six months
- c) I am planning to leave my job
- d) I am not considering leaving

- Does the current culture within your workplace make you more likely or less likely to stay in a role within the NSW health system?
- Can you afford housing within 15 kilometres of your workplace?
- Can you access and afford childcare?

Contact for further information

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