
THE PROFESSIONAL AND TECHNICAL WORKFORCE: BY THE NUMBERS

Highlights

- Professionals were 59.8 percent of the total workforce in 2020, with 88.4 million people working across a wide variety of occupations.
- 6.31 million union members worked in professional occupations in 2020, an all-time high.
- Women, Black, and Latinx professionals continued to be underrepresented in the highest paying professional occupational groups, including architecture and engineering and computer and math.

Quantifying the Professional and Technical Workforce

While the professional and technical workforce can be hard to define, available data demonstrates that professionals play a greater part in our economy than ever before. Over the past few decades, the increase in the number of professionals has created interest in analysis of professionals and the unique issues they face in the workplace. While professional jobs are diverse, professionals often have a strong occupational identity, advanced education and training, and above average compensation.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) defines the professional workforce as including all workers in the “management, professional, and related occupations” group. The BLS goes on to divide this broad category into 10 distinct occupation groups. These groups, and the number of people working in them in 2020 are:

- Management occupations (18,564,000);
- Business and financial operations occupations (8,578,000);
- Computer and mathematical occupations (5,603,000);
- Architecture and engineering occupations (3,169,000);
- Life, physical, and social science occupations (1,627,000);
- Community and social service occupations (2,717,000);
- Legal occupations (1,882,000);
- Education, training, and library occupations (8,902,000);
- Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media occupations (3,042,000); and
- Healthcare practitioner and technical occupations (9,559,000).¹

In total, there were 63,644,000 professionals working in these occupations in 2020, representing 43 percent of the total U.S. workforce.

However, a number of professionals are employed in occupations that are not included in the BLS classification of “management, professional, and related occupations,” due to the way the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) system was constructed. For example, the “sales and office occupations” group includes many professionals who are well-educated and may be well-compensated, including securities, commodities and financial services sales agents, and accounting clerks. The same is true in nearly every other occupational group, including firefighters and fire inspectors in the protective service occupations group and aircraft pilots and flight engineers in the transportation occupations group.

Therefore, the second way to identify who is a professional is through educational attainment. This method for identifying professionals also has flaws, since it would also count those who are underemployed in occupations that would not be considered to be part of the professional or technical workforce. However, given the fluidity of professional identity, the increasing use of technological tools in various occupations, and absent other methods to count ALL professionals, this fact sheet counts employees in all occupation groups as professionals if they have at least an associate’s degree in an academic program. Thus, professional employment outside of the professional occupation groups in 2020 totaled 24,708,000, including:

- Healthcare support occupations (1,397,000);
- Protective service occupations (1,298,000);
- Food preparation and serving related occupations (1,376,000);
- Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations (819,000);
- Personal care and service occupations (1,201,000);
- Sales and related occupations (6,417,000);
- Office and administrative support occupations (6,382,000);
- Farming, fishing, and forestry occupations (131,000);
- Construction and extraction occupations (1,127,000);
- Installation, maintenance, and repair occupations (892,000);
- Production occupations (1,526,000); and
- Transportation and material moving occupations (2,141,000).²

Using these two methods, we can count over 88 million professionals working in the U.S. in 2020, making up 59.8 percent of the total workforce.³

The third and final definition of a professional includes all working people who self-identify as professionals. However, as this definition is not quantifiable, it will not be included in this factsheet.

Gender, Racial, and Ethnic Makeup

As seen in the chart below, except for Asian-American and Pacific Islanders, racial and ethnic minorities were underrepresented in the professional and technical workforce in 2020.⁴

Professional Women

While women made up 46.8 percent of the total workforce, they represented 50.9 percent of all professionals in 2020. However, women are not distributed equally across all professional occupations. They are overrepresented by more than 10 percent in six out of 22 occupational groups and are underrepresented by more than 10 percent in nine out of 22 occupational groups.⁵

Occupation Group	2020 Percentage Women	2010 Percentage Women
Management	40.4%	39.4%
Business and Financial Operations	53.9%	55.1%
Computer and Mathematical Science	25.2%	28.2%
Architecture and Engineering	16.5%	15.6%
Life, Physical, and Social Science	49.4%	45.4%
Community and Social Service	68.9%	63.1%
Legal	51.9%	51.6%
Education, Training, and Library	73.5%	74.3%
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	51.3%	48.5%
Healthcare Practitioner and Technical	74.3%	75.0%
Healthcare Support	81.6%	83.5%
Protective Service	25.1%	21.1%
Food Preparation and Serving Related	53.4%	56.1%
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	42.0%	33.4%
Personal Care and Service	75.0%	73.9%
Sales and Related	44.1%	42.6%
Office and Administrative Support	72.7%	71.9%
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	34.9%	26.9%
Construction and Extraction	7.6%	5.4%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	5.6%	6.5%
Production Occupations	33.0%	29.2%
Transportation and Material Moving	23.2%	17.1%

Black and African American Professionals

In 2020, there were approximately 9.25 million Black professionals employed in the U.S. This is an increase from 7.52 million in 2010 and represents a positive 1.5 percent change in density (from 9.0 percent density in 2003 to 10.5 percent in 2020).⁶ Out of the 22 BLS occupation groups noted above, Black professionals were overrepresented by more than two percent in five occupation groups and underrepresented by more than two percent in 12 groups, when compared to the total workforce, which was 12.1% Black in 2020.⁷ This widespread occupational segregation is a significant factor contributing to racial income inequality.

Occupation Group	2020 Percentage Black	2010 Percentage Black
Management	8%	7.2%
Business and Financial Operations	10.5%	9.3%
Computer and Mathematical Science	9.1%	7.5%
Architecture and Engineering	6%	4.8%
Life, Physical, and Social Science	6.5%	5.8%
Community and Social Service	19.9%	18.2%
Legal	8.6%	6.6%
Education, Training, and Library	10%	9.6%
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	8.5%	6.8%
Healthcare Practitioner and Technical	12.1%	9.9%
Healthcare Support	20.8%	15.7%
Protective Service	17.4%	14.4%
Food Preparation and Serving Related	10.0%	7.0%
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	15.1%	9.1%
Personal Care and Service	8.7%	10.9%
Sales and Related	8.2%	6.4%
Office and Administrative Support	13.1%	12.0%
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	3.7%	3.2%
Construction and Extraction	9.7%	6.0%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	13.0%	8.3%
Production Occupations	12.1%	10.1%
Transportation and Material Moving	18.4%	13.9%

Latinx Professionals

In 2020, there were over 10 million Latinx professionals in the workforce. This is up from 6.95 million Latinx professionals in 2010, a 46 percent increase. Overall, Latinx professionals have gone from 8.3 percent density in professional occupations in 2010 to 11.5 percent in 2020.⁸ However, they continue to be underrepresented in almost all professional occupations as the total workforce is 17.6 percent Latinx.⁹

Occupation Group	2020 Percentage Latinx, of any race	2010 Percentage Latinx, of any race
Management	10.7%	8.2%
Business and Financial Operations	11.2%	7.8%
Computer and Mathematical Science	8.4%	5.9%

Architecture and Engineering	10.6%	7.0%
Life, Physical, and Social Science	8.5%	6.3%
Community and Social Service	13.5%	9.6%
Legal	8.3%	7.4%
Education, Training, and Library	10.9%	8.6%
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	11.2%	9.2%
Healthcare Practitioner and Technical	9.4%	6.7%
Healthcare Support	15.1%	11.0%
Protective Service	12.2%	9.6%
Food Preparation and Serving Related	20.8%	12.5%
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	23.5%	18.2%
Personal Care and Service	12.0%	9.6%
Sales and Related	11.4%	7.3%
Office and Administrative Support	12.8%	8.9%
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	5.5%	12.4%
Construction and Extraction	20.1%	12.4%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	17.7%	10.2%
Production Occupations	16.9%	9.7%
Transportation and Material Moving	17.0%	9.9%

Asian-American and Pacific Islander Professionals

In 2020, there were 7.5 million professionals who identified as Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), comprising 8.5 percent of the total professional workforce. While Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders make up only 6.8 percent of the total U.S. workforce, there are large and growing concentrations of AAPI professionals in several occupational groups including science, technology, engineering, and mathematics occupations.¹⁰ However, AAPI professionals are significantly underrepresented in many other occupation groups, including community and social service occupations, education, training and library occupations, protective service occupations, farming, fishing and forestry occupations, and construction and extraction occupations.¹¹

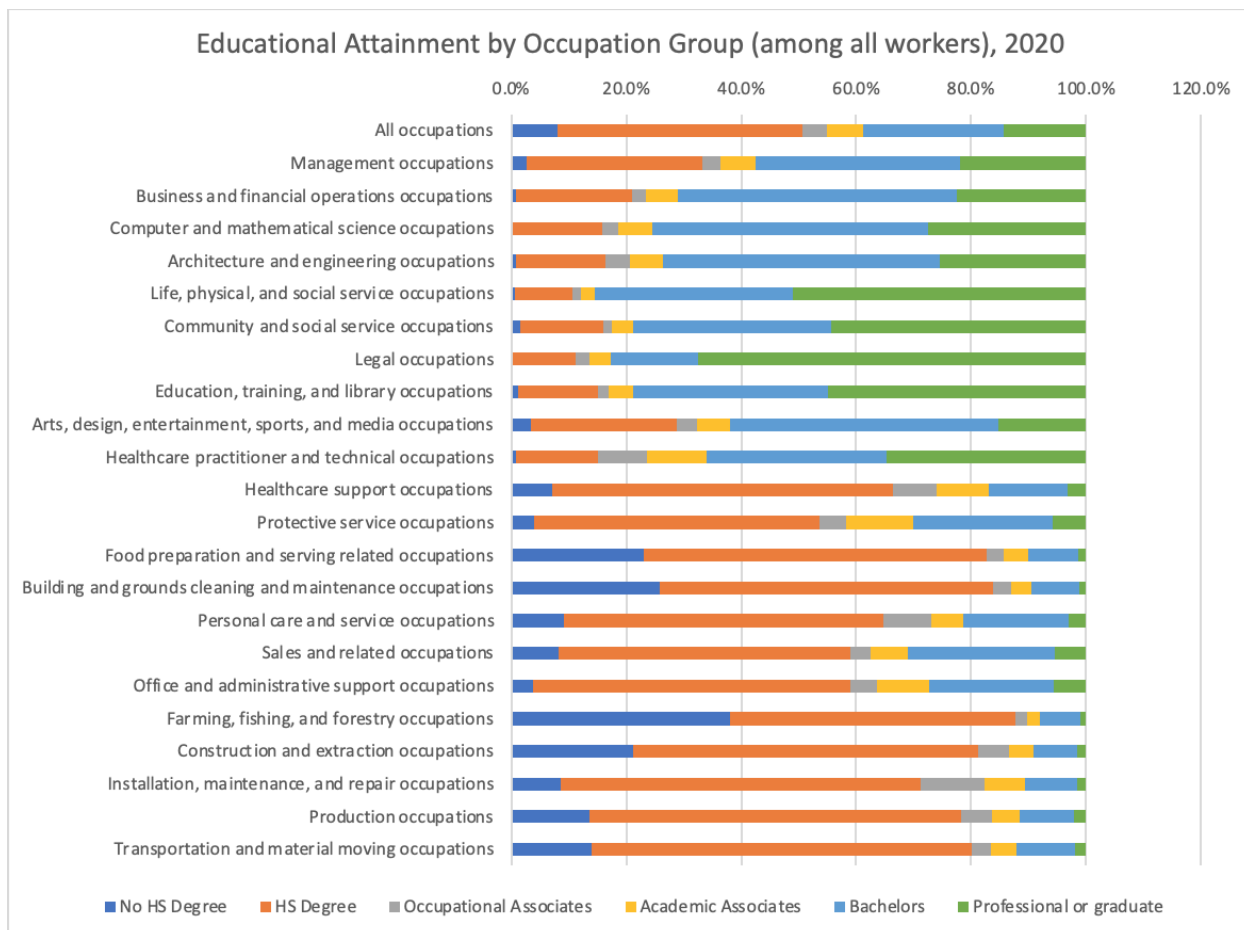
Occupation Group	2020 Percentage Asian-American or Pacific Islander	2010 Percentage Asian-American or Pacific Islander
Management	5.8%	5.1%
Business and Financial Operations	8.7%	7.2%
Computer and Mathematical Science	23%	16.7%
Architecture and Engineering	13.6%	11.1%
Life, Physical, and Social Science	14.9%	13.2%

Community and Social Service	3.4%	3.1%
Legal	5.6%	3.9%
Education, Training, and Library	4.9%	4.4%
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	5.9%	5.1%
Healthcare Practitioner and Technical	9.4%	8.6%
Healthcare Support	12.4%	9.2%
Protective Service	3.6%	2.9%
Food Preparation and Serving Related	13.1%	8.4%
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	6.5%	5.2%
Personal Care and Service	11.1%	8.1%
Sales and Related	8.4%	7.0%
Office and Administrative Support	8.0%	7.2%
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	1.0%	4.0%
Construction and Extraction	4.0%	2.7%
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	5.9%	5.1%
Production Occupations	9.0%	9.0%
Transportation and Material Moving	7.5%	5.2%

Educational Attainment

In 2020, out of the 88.4 million working professionals, 60.5 million (65.6 percent) had a bachelor's degree or higher. Life, physical, and social science occupations had the highest concentration of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher, 85.4 percent, followed by legal occupations at 82.6 percent. Among BLS-designated professional occupations, management occupations had the lowest concentration of professionals with at least a bachelor's degree at 57.5 percent.¹²

Certain occupational groups also have high concentrations of professionals with master's, professional, and doctorate degrees, due to the education requirements of jobs within those categories or the advancement opportunities available to professionals with advanced degrees. For example, in 43 states, lawyers must earn a law degree from an accredited law school in order to practice, and earning a Juris Doctor is the most straightforward path to becoming an attorney, even in states where it is not required in order to pass the bar.¹³ Master's degrees or equivalent coursework are required in four states for teachers' professional licensure, four more states encourage degrees as a pathway to licensure, 14 additional states require master's degrees for optional advanced professional licenses, and the vast majority of school districts offer significant pay incentives to teachers who earn master's degrees.¹⁴ Other occupations with similar professional or regulatory requirements or other incentives include doctors and other medical professionals, post-secondary educators, social workers, scientists, and many others.



Older Professionals

In 2020, there were approximately 96.8 million Americans aged 55 or older. This includes members of the so-called “Silent Generation” (born before 1945), “Baby Boomers” (born between 1946-1964) and the oldest members of “Generation X” (born between 1965-1979). Among this age group, 35.3 million were employed in 2020 (23.9 percent of the workforce), including approximately 24 million professionals.¹⁵

Americans 55 and older make up a larger portion of the professional workforce (25.5 percent) than the workforce as a whole. They have particularly high rates of representation in management occupations, legal occupations, building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations, and farming, fishing and forestry occupations. They are severely underrepresented in computer and math occupations, life, physical and social service occupations, and food preparation and serving occupations.¹⁶ Older Americans are also underrepresented in protective service occupations, though this is likely a result of mandatory retirement ages for law enforcement officers and firefighters in many states and the robust pension plans that are often negotiated by their unions.¹⁷

Baby Boomers have been waiting longer than previous generations to leave the labor force. A 2018 Gallup survey showed that working Americans expect, on average, to retire at 66, two

years later than they reported 15 years ago. And Baby Boomers, who may have a more realistic picture of their retirement savings needs, expect to work even longer than the rest of the population does, reported an average expectation to stop working at age 67.¹⁸ However, the COVID-19 pandemic may have pushed some to retire earlier than previously planned. The number of Baby Boomers who retired in 2020 was more than double the number who retired in 2019.¹⁹

Baby Boomers are working longer than previous generations due to a multitude of factors, including longer life expectancies, changing eligibility requirements for Social Security benefits, and rising healthcare and long-term care costs, which increases the need for substantial retirement savings. And with the shift from employer-sponsored defined-benefit pension plans to defined-contribution 401(k)-type plans, Baby Boomers are the first generation who have had to save substantially for their own retirements. However, most Boomers have inadequate retirement savings, with a median household retirement account balance of \$202,000.²⁰

Young Professionals

In 2020, there were 28 million professionals between the ages of 18 and 34. These young professionals represent 30 percent of the professional workforce as a whole and 38 percent of the overall 18-34 workforce.²¹ Young professionals are overrepresented in computer and math occupations; life, physical and social science occupations; arts, design, entertainment, sports and media occupations; healthcare support occupations; food preparation and serving occupations; and personal care and service occupations. They are underrepresented in management occupations; legal occupations; and building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations.

The high concentration of 18-34 year olds with associate's and bachelor's degrees outside of the BLS-designated professional occupation groups is a sign of a labor market problem that has persisted for at least the last 30 years. This problem of underemployment can be hard to measure, though one calculation found that 33.5 percent of college graduates were underemployed as of March 2021, and that recent graduates were even more likely to experience underemployment (40.3 percent).²²

For many young professionals, entry into the professional workforce requires a post-secondary degree, leading increasing percentages of young people to seek out higher education. In the 2018-2019 academic year, institutions of higher education conferred 1.03 million associate's degrees, 2.01 million bachelor's degrees, 833,000 master's degrees, and 187,000 doctorates'.²³ In 2010, 42.3 percent of 25-34 year olds had an associate's, bachelor's, or higher degree, but by 2020 this number had risen to 51.8 percent.²⁴ While more education can translate into higher lifetime earnings, it also results in higher levels of student loan debt, especially when considering the rapidly rising cost of education. In the second quarter of 2021, total outstanding student loan balances rose to \$1.732 trillion, 92 percent of which was federal student debt.^{25,26}

While it is often associated with young graduates, student loan debt is not limited to the young. In the second quarter of 2021, 8.7 million Americans 50 and older owed a combined \$366.4 billion in federal student loans, representing 23 percent of all outstanding federal student debt.²⁷

Union Density

Union density varies widely depending on the particular occupation group. In 2020, there were 14.25 million union members in the United States, representing 10.8 percent of the workforce. There were 6.31 million union members working in BLS-designated professional occupations (11.3 percent density), and 8.48 million total union professionals across all occupations (11.2 percent density). While union density in professional occupations has decreased over time, the overall number of union members in professional occupations has increased by more than 1.3 million over the last 20 years, and professionals now make up 44.1 percent of all union members, a 13.6 percent increase in share over 20 years.²⁸

Occupational Group	Professionals' Union Density ²⁹
Management occupations	4.3%
Business and financial operations occupations	4.5%
Computer and mathematical science occupations	3.8%
Architecture and engineering occupations	6.2%
Life, physical, and social science occupations	9.6%
Community and social service occupations	15.6%
Legal occupations	6.9%
Education, training, and library occupations	35.9%
Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media occupations	6.2%
Healthcare practitioner and technical occupations	11.9%
Healthcare support occupations	8.7%
Protective service occupations	46.0%
Food preparation and serving related occupations	4.3%
Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations	12.6%
Personal care and service occupations	5.5%
Sales and related occupations	2.7%
Office and administrative support occupations	8.7%
Farming, fishing, and forestry occupations	3.5%
Construction and extraction occupations	20.5%
Installation, maintenance, and repair occupations	16.9%
Production occupations	11.9%
Transportation and material moving occupations	18.8%

Wages, Hours, and Benefits

As of the second quarter of 2021, the median weekly salary for full-time workers in management, professional, and related occupations was \$1,366, while the median for all full-

time employees was \$990.³⁰ Professionals working in non-professional occupation groups earned significantly less, averaging \$1,071 per week in March 2021.³¹

However, professionals' weekly earnings vary greatly among education levels and occupational classifications. For example, legal professionals have the highest median weekly earnings among those working in professional occupations at \$1,733.67 while community and social service professionals have the lowest median weekly earnings at \$1,181.2. Professionals working in farming, fishing and forestry occupations have the lowest median weekly earnings of any occupational group at \$567.3³²

Educational attainment pays off for professionals in all occupations. While professionals with an associate's degree earn a median weekly income of \$932.21, those with a bachelor's degree earn \$1,359.62, those with a master's degree earn \$1,592.49, professional degree holders earn \$1,945.27, and doctorate degree holders earn \$1,947.19.³³

Over 80 percent of the workforce working in professional occupations were employed full-time in 2020.³⁴

Pay Disparities

While progress has been made on some fronts, pay disparities continue to persist for women and people of color, especially in professional occupations. While the overall pay gap between men and women was 82 percent in 2020, women only made 74 percent of what men made in professional occupations in the same year. The professional occupational group with the largest wage gap was the legal occupations group, where women only made 55 percent of what men made. Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media occupations had the smallest pay gap, at 90 percent.³⁵

Pay disparities for African-American professionals (80.9 percent) were worse than the disparities faced by African-Americans in all non-professional occupation groups other than Protective service and sales and related occupations. Disparities for Latino professionals (83.2 percent) were worse than those faced by Latino workers in all non-professional occupations other than sales and related, construction and extraction, and production occupations.³⁶

Health Insurance and Retirement Benefits

In March 2020, 79.4 percent of professionals were offered health insurance through their employer, with union members having a significantly higher rate of coverage than nonmembers (90 percent versus 78.4 percent).³⁷

Additionally, professional union members are much more likely to be covered by an employer or union sponsored retirement plan. In March 2020, 72.8 percent of union professionals were eligible for an employer or union sponsored retirement plan while only 46.6 percent of non-union professionals were even eligible for any kind of workplace retirement plan.³⁸

Impacts of COVID-19

As the COVID-19 virus persists across the world, professionals are still feeling the pandemic's economic impacts. While the U.S. economy officially is no longer in the pandemic-induced recession, too many professionals remain out of work. In particular, professionals working in the arts, entertainment and recreation industry have experienced widespread unemployment as public health measures effectively shut down live events for over a year and TV and film productions were paused for many months. Overall employment in these industries was down 344,000 between March 2020 and June 2021.³⁹

Healthcare professionals including nurses, physicians, medical first responders, clinicians and support technicians have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic since March 2020. Though there is no official accounting, an investigation by *The Guardian* and *Kaiser Health News* identified 3,607 healthcare professionals who lost their lives to the virus in the first 12 months of the pandemic.⁴⁰ Many healthcare professionals report trauma, burnout, anxiety and fear as a result of the pandemic and the increasing workload placed on them, which is often compounded by insufficient safety standards.^{41 42}

Educators have also experienced widespread stress as a result of the pandemic and shifting public health guidance. All public schools closed in March 2020 as the pandemic took hold in the United States, and the 2020-2021 school year saw many schools experiment with remote-only and hybrid models, sometimes after abortive attempts to resume in-person instruction.⁴³ The rapidly changing nature of instruction and the risk of COVID-19 exposure has left a majority of educators with high levels of stress, fatigue, and anxiety at work.⁴⁴

For many other professionals, the pandemic meant transitioning to remote work as offices closed. In May 2020, 57.4 percent of those working in professional occupations reported working at home due to the coronavirus pandemic. By August 2021, driven by the prevalence of COVID-19 vaccines and employers' desire to return to normal operations, this rate had dropped to 24.6 percent.⁴⁵ Though the long-term future of expanded work from home arrangements remains uncertain, opinion polls of both employers and employees indicate that professionals have a desire for continued flexibility in both work hours and work location.⁴⁶ While the delta variant has delayed many plans for office reopenings, professionals who are union members will have more power than their non-union peers to shape the future of their telework options.

For more information on professional and technical workers, check DPE's website: www.dpeaflcio.org.

The Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO (DPE) comprises 24 national unions representing over four million people working in professional and technical occupations. DPE's affiliates represent teachers, physicians, engineers, computer scientists, psychologists, nurses, university professors, actors, technicians, and others in more than 200 professional occupations.

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