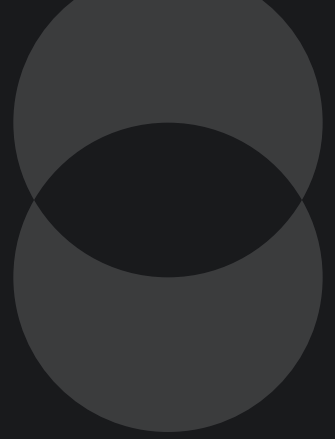




# Retention in Healthcare

## System Perspectives and Costs of Migration

Canada's healthcare workforce faces growing pressure from staff shortages, rising demand for care, and an aging population. This research examines the financial and system impacts of healthcare worker turnover and migration. It draws on quantitative analysis and consultations with regulators, educators, and professional stakeholders across Canada.

### Workforce movement creates measurable costs

Healthcare professionals move within provinces, between provinces, and across borders. These movements affect workforce capacity and service delivery. Canada does not maintain standardized national data on migration patterns, turnover, or their underlying causes. Fragmented data collection limits workforce planning and weakens governments' and organizations' ability to respond.

### Turnover presents a larger system challenge than migration

While migration receives considerable attention, turnover appears to create broader workforce pressures. Every departure triggers recruitment, onboarding, training, and productivity costs. These costs arise whether workers change employers, provinces, or countries. Estimated replacement costs range from:

- \$118,000–\$159,000 per physician
- \$38,000–\$140,000 per nurse

Turnover also reduces continuity of care, increases workloads for remaining staff, and contributes to burnout. It lowers morale and raises risks to patient outcomes.

### Outmigration leads to the loss of public investment

When domestically trained healthcare professionals leave Canada, provinces lose public investments in education and training.

- Public education investment per physician ranges from \$553,000 to \$1.01 million.
- In 2023, physician migration generated about \$36 million in turnover-related costs, while physician outmigration resulted in more than \$66 million in lost provincial education investments.

Measured international migration levels remain relatively low, but each departure carries a high cost.

### Recruitment alone will not resolve workforce shortages

Canada relies increasingly on internationally educated healthcare professionals to address workforce shortages. Domestic supply gaps remain large. International recruitment also faces barriers, including complex and inconsistent licensing requirements across provinces. International recruitment remains necessary, but must be complemented by retention and long-term workforce sustainability strategies.

## Common drivers of workforce movement remain consistent

Interviews and focus groups with educational organizations, regulatory bodies, and professional associations identified several factors that influence decisions to stay, move, or leave:

- compensation and wage differences across jurisdictions
- differences in scope of practice and professional autonomy
- access to professional development and mentorship
- availability of stable, full-time employment
- workplace culture, including burnout, workload pressures, bullying, and psychological safety
- demand for flexibility among newer generations of healthcare workers

Financial incentives can shift workers between jurisdictions without increasing overall workforce capacity.

## Accountability for retention remains fragmented

Our interviews show a clear accountability gap. No single organization is responsible for monitoring healthcare workforce retention or coordinating national retention strategies. Employers, regulators, educators, governments, and immigration authorities all share responsibility. This fragmentation limits coordinated action. Regulators hold much of the workforce data needed to support retention monitoring, but they lack clear mandates and resources to lead this work.



## Key recommendations

### For policymakers

- Establish clear provincial and territorial accountability for retention strategies and outcomes.
- Strengthen coordination across governments, regulators, employers, and data organizations.
- Modernize funding approaches to address staffing shortages, wage pressures, and workplace conditions.
- Include turnover and migration costs in workforce planning and investment decisions.

### For employers

- Expand mentorship and transition programs for new graduates and internationally educated professionals.
- Improve workplace conditions by addressing burnout, workload pressures, bullying, and harassment.
- Strengthen community integration supports to improve long-term retention of internationally educated healthcare professionals.

### For regulators

- Standardize the collection and reporting of workforce movement and retention data across jurisdictions.
- Identify and address scope-of-practice differences that contribute to workforce mobility.
- Improve consistency and transparency in credential recognition and licensure processes.

### For educational institutions

- Use clinical placements, regional training models, and community-based education opportunities to encourage graduates to remain in underserved regions and communities.

For the full research, see our impact paper [Retention in Healthcare: Migration Costs and System Perspectives](#).

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