
**Abstract**

Researchers explored travel nurses' and permanent staff nurses' COVID-19 pandemic work experiences, seeking to understand, “How do these experiences influence nurses' motivation, happiness, stress, and career decisions?” The COVID-19 pandemic took a heavy physical and psychological toll on healthcare providers. Demand outweighed resources as nurses accepted the monumental task of caring for communities affected by the catastrophe. We aimed to gain insight into nurses' lived pandemic experiences in the United States, while exploring the impact of these experiences on their motives to remain in current positions or alter their career paths. In this descriptive, phenomenological study, interview data collected from 30 nurses were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Physical and emotional trauma experienced during the early and peak months of the pandemic led nurses to evaluate their current work arrangements and to ponder alternatives. Our results suggest that pandemic work environments contributed to a change in nursing workforce distribution and exacerbated widening nurse shortage gaps. A call-to-action bids leaders to institute retention measures based on factors influencing nurses' career trajectory decisions in the current environment. Our findings led to recommendations for leadership approaches to promote nurses' emotional healing and mental wellness.

**Discussion Questions:**

Findings reported by the authors in this study indicate the pandemic has driven a major shift in the career path choices of nurses. For permanent nursing staff, most indicated they would continue in their role for the following reasons: 1) Team is like family, 2) Financial compensation (salary and benefits) are secure, and 3) current life circumstances do not accommodate travel. However, certain driving factors are influencing some nurses to switch to travel nursing.

- The authors identified the hospital culture and perceived unpleasant work environment as contributing to individual stress. A “perceived lack of support from hospital leadership” and the “effects of hospital politics” were identified as factors driving some nurses to switch to travel nursing.
  1. What patterns/trends of employment decisions by your permanent staff are you observing?
  2. What supportive leadership strategies could be implemented to address the identified employment decisions?
  3. Are there particular “hot-spots” in your organization; units or services lines where the work environment is perceived by permanent staff as unpleasant. What leadership strategies could be implemented to target these “hot-spots” that better convey a supportive leadership culture?