Careers for nurses: Opportunities and options

Jennifer Chi | March 2020

If you've ever received medical treatment, you've met a nurse. These healthcare specialists work day and night to provide direct care to patients. Their job duties and opportunities vary, depending on the type of nurse they are.

In 2018, there were more than 4 million jobs in 5 nurse occupations, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Moreover, employment of nurses is projected to grow much faster than the average for all occupations through 2028.

Some nurses manage patient care; others help with treatment. Keep reading to find out how their tasks, education and licensure requirements, and wages differ—and to learn more about the employment and outlook in these occupations.
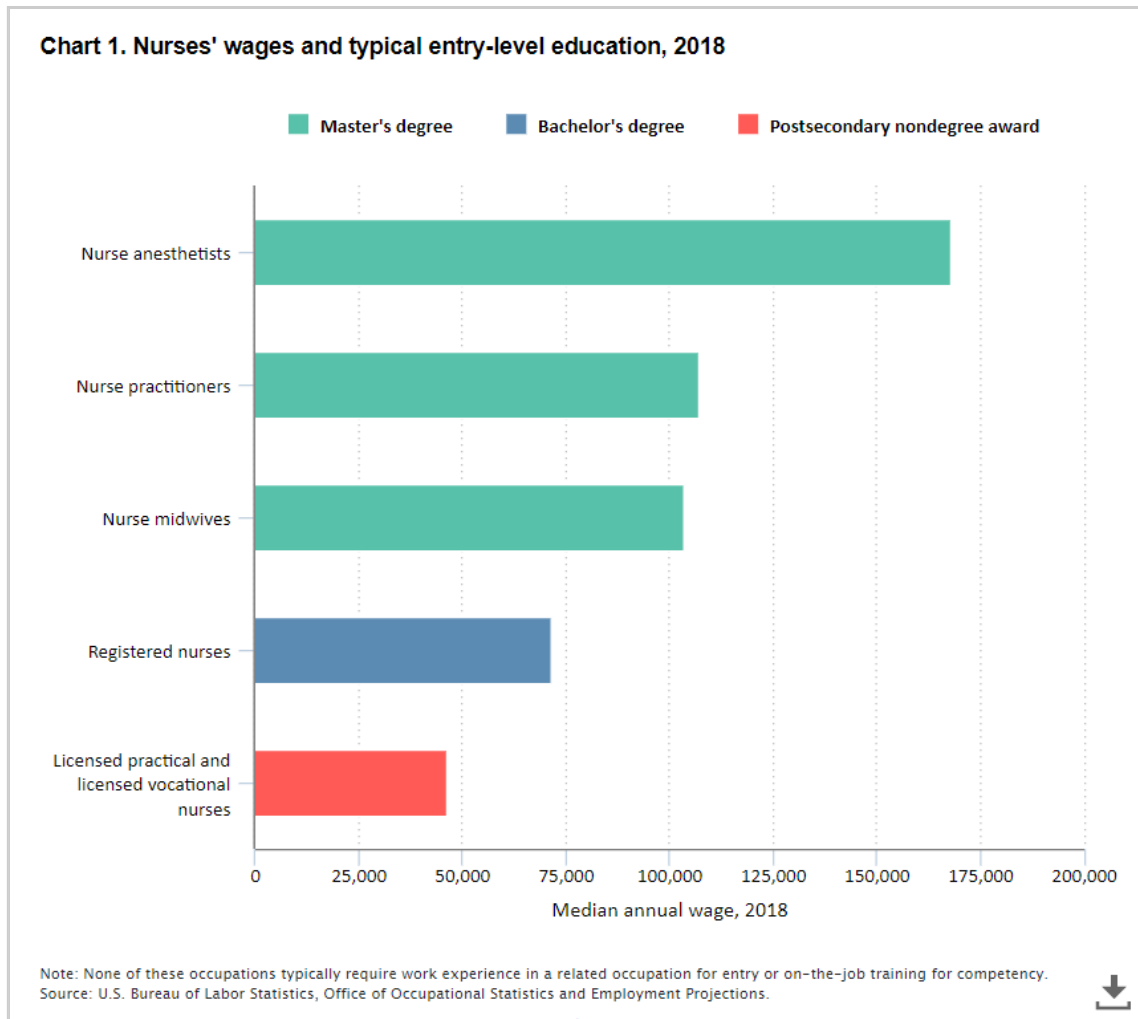
Different nurses, different roles

Nurses have a special role in providing healthcare to patients. They work in settings such as hospitals, doctors' offices, and nursing and residential care facilities.

Although the details of their jobs may vary, the general tasks for the occupations discussed in this article are as follows:

- Licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses give patients basic care and monitor and record their health, such as by checking their vital signs. They may be supervised by a registered nurse.

- Registered nurses evaluate patients' health, provide and coordinate patient care, and educate patients about health conditions.

- Nurse anesthetists give anesthesia and any related care before, during, and after medical procedures.

- Nurse midwives assist in labor and delivery and provide gynecological exams, family planning services, and prenatal care to women.

- Nurse practitioners work as primary and specialty care providers. They may make diagnoses, order medical tests, and prescribe medications.

The more they learn, the more they earn

Nurses' education helps define their roles and duties—as well as pay. Chart 1 shows the typical entry-level education requirements and 2018 median annual wages for nurses. (The median wage is the amount at which half of the workers in the occupation earns less, and half earns more.)
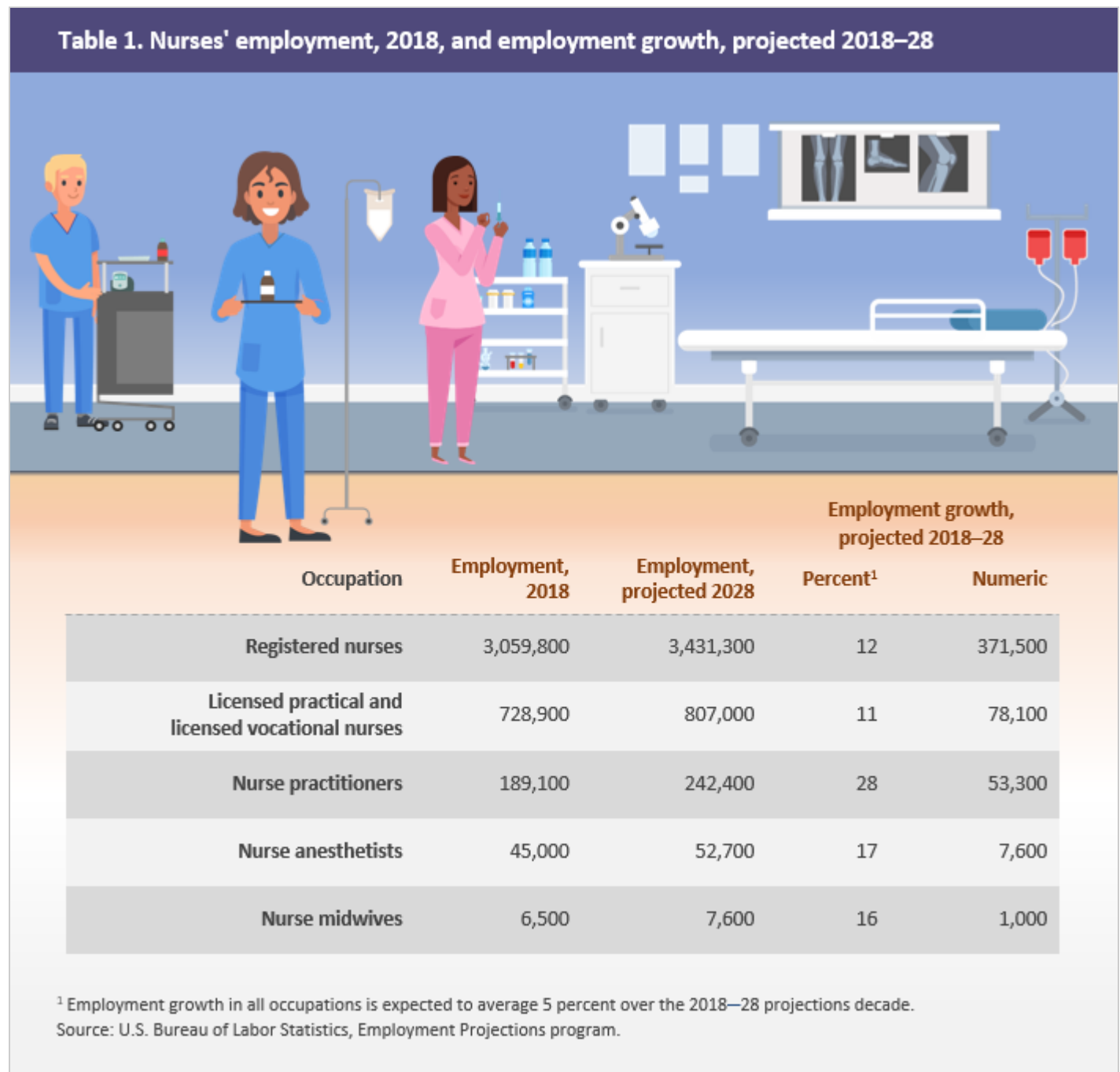
Chart 1. Nurses' wages and typical entry-level education, 2018

Legend: ■ Master's degree ■ Bachelor's degree ■ Postsecondary nondegree award

Occupation	Median annual wage, 2018
Nurse anesthetists	~168,000 (Master's degree)
Nurse practitioners	~107,000 (Master's degree)
Nurse midwives	~103,000 (Master's degree)
Registered nurses	~71,000 (Bachelor's degree)
Licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses	~46,000 (Postsecondary nondegree award)

Note: None of these occupations typically require work experience in a related occupation for entry or on-the-job training for competency.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections.

Nurse anesthetists, nurse midwives, and nurse practitioners are also called advanced practice registered nurses, or APRNs. These nurses require the most education (a master's degree) of the occupations in the table, and they also had the highest wages. All of the nursing occupations in the table had a wage that was greater than the $38,640 median annual wage for all occupations in 2018.

Although the chart shows the education level that is typically required to enter these occupations, there may be multiple paths to entry. For example, registered nurses typically need a bachelor's degree in nursing (BSN). But there are alternative educational routes to becoming a registered nurse, including earning an associate's degree in nursing (ADN) or a diploma from an approved nursing program. Depending on where they work, registered nurses may qualify for jobs by completing one of those three types of nursing programs. Nursing education includes clinical experience as part of its training.

In addition, all nurses need a license or certification, or both. License and certification requirements vary by occupation and by state but usually include completing an approved education program, passing a competency exam, and paying a fee.

Employment and outlook

Table 1 shows 2018 employment and projected employment in 2028 for the five nurse occupations. Overall, BLS projects these occupations to add about 511,500 jobs from 2018 to 2028.

Table 1. Nurses' employment, 2018, and employment growth, projected 2018–28

Occupation	Employment, 2018	Employment, projected 2028	Employment growth, projected 2018–28	
			Percent[1]	Numeric
Registered nurses	3,059,800	3,431,300	12	371,500
Licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses	728,900	807,000	11	78,100
Nurse practitioners	189,100	242,400	28	53,300
Nurse anesthetists	45,000	52,700	17	7,600
Nurse midwives	6,500	7,600	16	1,000

[1] Employment growth in all occupations is expected to average 5 percent over the 2018—28 projections decade.
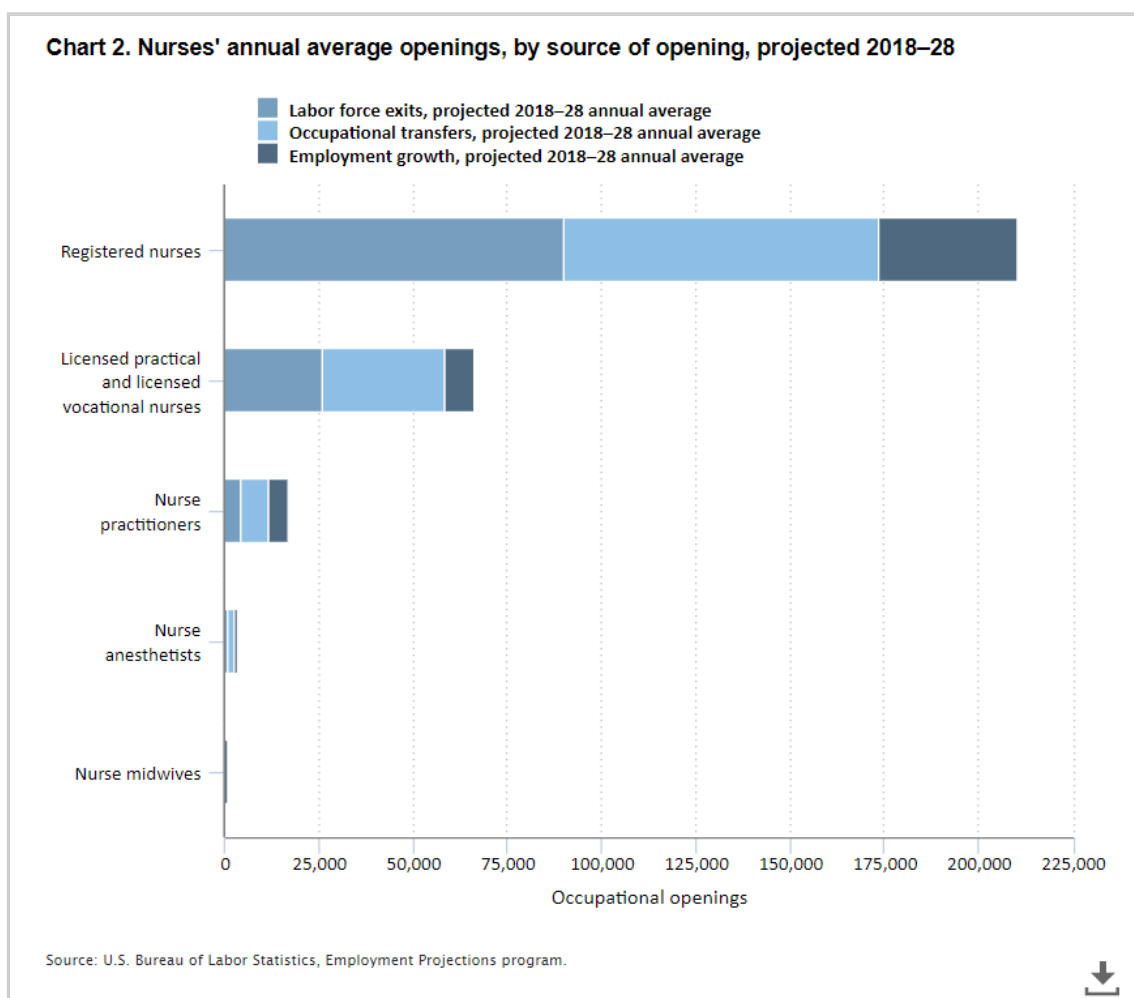Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program.

In 2018, there were more registered nurses than all other nurses combined. From 2018 to 2028, this occupation is projected to add the most jobs of all types of nurses and the third-largest number of jobs of any occupation: 371,500.

Of all the nurse occupations, nurse practitioners is projected to have the fastest rate of employment growth (28 percent) over the decade; it's also projected to be among the 10 fastest growing occupations in the economy. The projected rates of employment growth for each of the nursing occupations in table 1 are much faster than the 5-percent average rate for all occupations.

The rapid employment growth projected for nurses results from an emphasis on preventive care, rising rates of chronic conditions, and an aging population. These are the same factors that are expected to affect the healthcare industry in general.

Employment growth isn't the only source of job openings in these occupations. Most of the openings for nurses are expected to result from the need to replace those who leave the occupation permanently. Chart 2 shows the projected number of annual average openings for nurses arising from growth and from the need to replace nurses who are both exiting the labor force, such as to retire, and transferring to different occupations.

Chart 2. Nurses' annual average openings, by source of opening, projected 2018–28

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program.

For more information

Find detailed information in the Occupational Outlook Handbook (*OOH*) about the duties, education, licensing, and more for nurses and related occupations.

Detailed employment and wage data for nurse occupations by industry and geographic location are available from the [Occupational Employment Statistics](#) survey. [O*NET](#) has a searchable database with additional information on occupations, such as interests and work style. You can search the database by career cluster, outlook, and other criteria.

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