



Essential work: Employment and outlook in occupations that protect and provide

Elka Torpey | September 2020

During a crisis, like a hurricane or the COVID-19 pandemic, some organizations close temporarily while others continue—perhaps even changing their mission. Which workers stay on the job in chaotic times, and what’s the long-term outlook in their occupations?

Workers in hospitals, food manufacturing plants, and utilities are among those who may be required to report in person. Exactly which workers are considered “essential” may differ, depending on where they live and other factors. But the goods or services that they provide are nearly always vital, in some way, to life and welfare.

This article highlights U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data for selected occupations in which workers help to carry out critical tasks. Keep reading to learn more about the employment, projected openings, wages, and typical entry requirements for these occupations.

Defining “essential”

What’s considered essential work in emergencies may vary, depending on where you live. [Guidelines](#) from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) suggest that the essential workforce includes those who provide:

- [public health and safety](#),
- [essential products](#), and
- [other infrastructure support](#).

The occupations selected for this article are just a few of the hundreds of occupations that the Labor Market Information (LMI) Institute identifies as being part of the [critical infrastructure workforce](#), as outlined by the DHS Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA). (See illustration 1.)

Illustration 1.



Essential occupations, by task

Workers in essential occupations have a variety of duties. Not all workers in these occupations are called on during a crisis, but some are. And they often must risk their own health or safety in such circumstances.

For selected occupations, tables in each section that follows show 2019 employment, 2019 median annual wages, and the entry-level education and training typically required. (Compare wages in these occupations with \$39,810, the median annual wage for all occupations in 2019.)

The tables also show the number of occupational openings BLS projects each year, on average, from 2019 to 2029. BLS projections focus on long-term trends that capture structural change in the economy, such as growth in online sales or increased demand for healthcare. The projections do not consider events that impact short-term conditions, such as a stock-market surge or natural disaster. (Any long-term economic changes that may result from the COVID-19 pandemic had not yet been determined at the time the 2019–29 projections were developed.)

Public health and safety

Helping people stay or get well and keeping them safe is the job of many workers in career fields such as [healthcare](#) and [protective service](#). Selected occupations involved in this work are shown in table 1. [Physicians and surgeons](#) includes detailed occupations such as anesthesiologists, internal medicine physicians, and pediatricians.

Table 1. Selected occupations that provide public health and safety
 Openings, projected 2019–29; employment and wages, 2019; and typical entry-level education and training



Occupation	Openings, projected 2019–29 annual average	Employment, 2019	Median annual wage, 2019[1]	Typical entry requirements[2]	On-the-job training
Janitors and cleaners, except maids and housekeeping cleaners	305,600	2,374,200	\$27,430	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Registered nurses	175,900	3,096,700	73,300	Bachelor's degree	None
Police and sheriff's patrol officers	51,000	688,400	63,150	High school diploma or equivalent	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Medical and health services managers	47,000	422,300	100,980	Bachelor's degree and less than 5 years work experience in a related occupation	None
Physicians and surgeons	23,300	752,400	≥208,000	Doctoral or professional degree	Internship/ residency
Clinical laboratory technologists and technicians	21,600	337,800	53,120	Bachelor's degree	None
EMT's and paramedics	17,400	265,200	35,400	Postsecondary nondegree award	None
Radiologic technologists	12,000	212,000	60,510	Associate's degree	None
Pharmacists	11,200	321,700	128,090	Doctoral or professional degree	None
Emergency management directors	700	10,400	74,590	Bachelor's degree and 5 years or more work experience in a related occupation	None

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections.

[1] Wage data do not include self-employed workers. The median annual wage for physicians and surgeons was greater than or equal to \$208,000, the highest median annual wage published by the BLS Occupational Employment Statistics program.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, no work experience in a related occupation is typically required for entry.

[Janitors and cleaners](#) is the occupation in table 1 that's projected to have the most openings—about 305,600 each year, on average, from 2019 to 2029. With nearly 2.4 million workers in 2019, this occupation had the second-largest employment of those shown in table 1. It is surpassed in the table only by [registered nurses](#), which had more than 3 million workers.

Median annual wages for the occupations in table 1 ranged from \$27,430 for janitors and cleaners to \$208,000 or more, the highest median wage published by the BLS Occupational Employment Statistics program, for physicians and surgeons. Education requirements also varied, with occupations that pay more typically requiring higher levels of education than ones paying less.

Essential products

Making sure millions of people in crisis have what they need, such as food and medication, is a big undertaking. Workers in [farming and fishing](#), [production](#), and [transportation and material moving](#) occupations are among those who help to get essential products to consumers. Table 2 shows some of these occupations. Food processing workers includes occupations such as [bakers](#), [butchers](#), and [others in food production](#). [Agricultural workers](#) includes farmworkers and laborers, agricultural equipment operators, and related occupations.

Table 2. Selected occupations that provide essential products

Openings, projected 2019–29; employment and wages, 2019; and typical entry-level education and training



Occupation	Openings, projected 2019–29 annual average	Employment, 2019	Median annual wage, 2019[1]	Typical entry requirements[2]	On-the-job training
Cashiers	562,300	3,622,500	\$23,650	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Hand laborers and freight, stock, and material movers	380,600	2,986,000	29,510	No formal educational credential	Short-term on-the-job training
Stockers and order fillers	254,900	2,135,800	27,380	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Delivery truck drivers and driver/sales workers	163,100	1,506,000	32,020	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Assemblers and fabricators	156,300	1,883,700	33,710	High school diploma or equivalent	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Agricultural workers	132,400	902,900	26,030	Varies	Varies
Food processing workers	98,100	832,800	29,320	Varies	Varies
Farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers	80,900	952,300	71,160	High school diploma or equivalent and 5 years or more work experience in a related occupation	None
Postal service workers	25,600	503,100	52,060	High school diploma or equivalent	Short-term on-the-job training
Transportation, storage, and distribution managers	10,000	139,400	94,560	High school diploma or equivalent and 5 years or more work experience in a related occupation	None

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections.

[1] Wage data do not include self-employed workers.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, no work experience in a related occupation is typically required for entry.

Of the occupations in table 2, [cashiers](#) is projected to have the most openings—about 562,300 each year, on average, from 2019 to 2029. Despite projected declines in employment for cashiers, which is due to the greater use of self-service checkout stands and increased online sales, BLS still expects many openings over the decade because of the need to replace workers who leave this large occupation.

[Transportation, storage, and distribution managers](#) had the highest median annual wage (\$94,560) in 2019 of the occupations in table 2. Nearly all of the occupations in the table typically require a high school diploma or less education for entry.

Other infrastructure support

Utilities, information technology systems, banks, and other vital infrastructure require support from a variety of workers. (See table 3.) For example, there are several types of plant and systems operators, such as those who work at [chemical](#), [power](#), and [water treatment](#) plants. Similarly, engineering occupations include [civil](#), [industrial](#), and [mechanical](#) engineers.

Table 3. Selected occupations that provide other infrastructure support

Openings, projected 2019–29; employment and wages, 2019; and typical entry-level education and training



Occupation	Openings, projected 2019–29 annual average	Employment, 2019	Median annual wage, 2019[1]	Typical entry requirements[2]	On-the-job training
General maintenance and repair workers	139,400	1,516,400	\$39,080	High school diploma or equivalent	Moderate-term on-the-job training
Engineers	117,500	1,810,100	94,500	Bachelor's degree	None
Electricians	82,200	739,200	56,180	High school diploma or equivalent	Apprenticeship
Computer support specialists	68,400	882,300	54,760	Varies	None
Financial managers	59,600	697,900	129,890	Bachelor's degree and 5 years or more work experience in a related occupation	None
Plant and system operators	24,800	311,000	60,330	High school diploma or equivalent	Varies
Claims adjusters, examiners, and investigators	21,000	332,900	66,790	High school diploma or equivalent	Long-term on-the-job training
Line installers and repairers	20,700	238,600	65,700	High school diploma or equivalent	Long-term on-the-job training
Information security analysts	13,900	131,000	99,730	Bachelor's degree and less than 5 years work experience in a related occupation	None
Hazardous materials removal workers	5,600	45,300	43,900	High school diploma or equivalent	Moderate-term on-the-job training

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections.

[1] Wage data do not include self-employed workers.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, no work experience in a related occupation is typically required for entry.

In table 3, the three largest occupations—[general maintenance and repair workers](#), engineers, and [electricians](#)—together are projected to have about 339,100 openings each year, on average, from 2019 to 2029. That's more than the projected openings of all other occupations in the table combined.

In 2019, [financial managers](#) had the highest median annual wage (\$129,890) of the occupations in table 3. A bachelor's degree plus related work experience is typically required to enter this occupation. Many of the other occupations in the table typically require a high school diploma or equivalent for entry.

More information

Learn about the occupations in this article, and hundreds of others, in the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) (OOH). The OOH has information about what workers do, along with their wages, job outlook, and more.

Visit [CareerOneStop](#) for online resources to help find a job, explore careers, and locate training programs near you. Jobseekers can get free help with a variety of employment-related needs from their local [American Job Center](#).

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