**PressGaney**

INDUSTRY INSIGHTS

# Safety in healthcare 2024

Healthcare is at a pivotal moment. As many safety metrics trend upward, the industry has a golden opportunity to capitalize on the momentum and accelerate progress toward zero harm.

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# Executive summary

Safety is the foundation of healthcare. It anchors all experiences—for patients and the workforce. Just as patients expect to not be harmed while receiving care, so do the healthcare workers delivering that care.

Prioritizing safety goes beyond measuring outcomes and incidents. A robust safety culture—where employees believe safety is a core value, feel empowered to report concerns, and know that their organization is committed to continuous improvement—is the foundation of a thriving healthcare system. This also translates to higher employee engagement and a better patient experience, impacting organizational metrics like retention and "Likelihood to Recommend" (LTR). Ultimately, a strong safety culture powers a virtuous cycle that impacts both patient and employee experience, leading to better outcomes for everyone.

While a robust culture of safety is vital at every healthcare organization, for the past three years, safety culture performance and safety outcomes deteriorated—a likely effect of COVID-19. But the latest data in Press Ganey's **"Safety in healthcare 2024"** report shows promising signs of recovery, with many key measures beginning to return to pre-pandemic levels.

This report analyzes Press Ganey's integrated dataset of patient and employee experience, clinical, and safety measures—the largest of its kind in the industry—to paint a picture of the state of safety today, from workforce culture to patient perceptions, event reporting, and outcomes.

## 2024 patient and workforce safety landscape: Obstacles and opportunities

**Analyzing patient perceptions of safety across the inpatient and outpatient experience reveals a tale of two cities.** While outpatients felt substantially safer in 2023 (81.9%) compared to pre-pandemic levels (78.1%), safety perceptions in hospitals fell in 2020—and haven't recovered. In 2023, only 68.5% of hospital patients felt very safe, a 5.1% decline over the same period. The gap in safety perception between inpatient and outpatient settings is now 2.5x wider than before the pandemic.

**Among employees, the pendulum for safety culture is swinging back up.** Safety culture within an organization is a leading indicator of safety outcomes. After an all-time low in 2021 (3.96 out of 5), safety culture has increased over the last two years, rising 1.2% (to 4.01). The component that saw the biggest improvement was perceptions of resources and teamwork, with employees' views on adequate unit staffing jumping +0.16 to 3.30 in 2023. While this overall improvement is encouraging, nearly half of employees reported low perceptions of safety culture within their organization.*

**Patient safety outcomes show improvement—but gaps still exist.** Data from safety events collected in Press Ganey's National Database of Nursing Quality Indicators (NDNQI) show continued rebound from the pandemic. Notably, catheter-associated urinary tract infection (CAUTI) and fall rates have improved to better than 2019 levels. Rates of ventilator-associated events (VAE), central line-associated bloodstream infections (CLABSI), and hospital-acquired pressure injuries (HAPI) also improved in 2023, but have yet to fully recover to their pre-pandemic baseline.

**Reported assaults against nursing personnel climbs, but employees sense a positive safety shift.** The rate of reported assaults against nurses increased 5% to 2.71 per 100 nursing personnel, from 2.59 in 2022. While this might also indicate a growing willingness to report incidents, the number of assaults on record totaled 16,975—around 1.89 per hour. By far, most events occurred in psychiatric units, followed by the emergency department, adult, pediatric, and, lastly, perioperative units. Despite the growing reports of violence, an industry focus on workplace safety is making an impact: Employee perceptions of their organization caring about their safety improved significantly from 2022—up +0.03 to 4.15 (out of 5).

The tide is turning, inspiring optimism across healthcare. However, while many measures of safety have rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, 2019 was never the gold standard for safety. Even before COVID, patient safety was a public health issue, with a dire need for improvement. But viewing safety holistically—that is, through a lens of both patient and employee experience, and how it's all intertwined—and implementing high reliability practices, will propel healthcare toward its ultimate goal: zero harm.

# Patient perceptions of safety

Safety is the foundation of a positive patient experience. Patients should not only receive error-free care, but they should also feel that staff are providing care in a safe manner. Many factors can shape patients' perceptions of safety, including employee communication and teamwork, room cleanliness, and specific observed behaviors, such as staff washing their hands.

In 2023, safety perceptions in the ambulatory setting saw substantial progress, eclipsing pre-pandemic levels. Nationally, 81.9% of outpatients gave the top rating ("very good") to how well staff protected their safety—a significant improvement from 78.1% in 2019.

## Nearly a third (31.5%) of inpatients don't give safety top ratings.

Hospital inpatients, on the other hand, still need focused attention. Only 68.5% gave top marks to "staff provided care in a safe manner" at the end of 2023 (compared to 73.6% pre-pandemic).
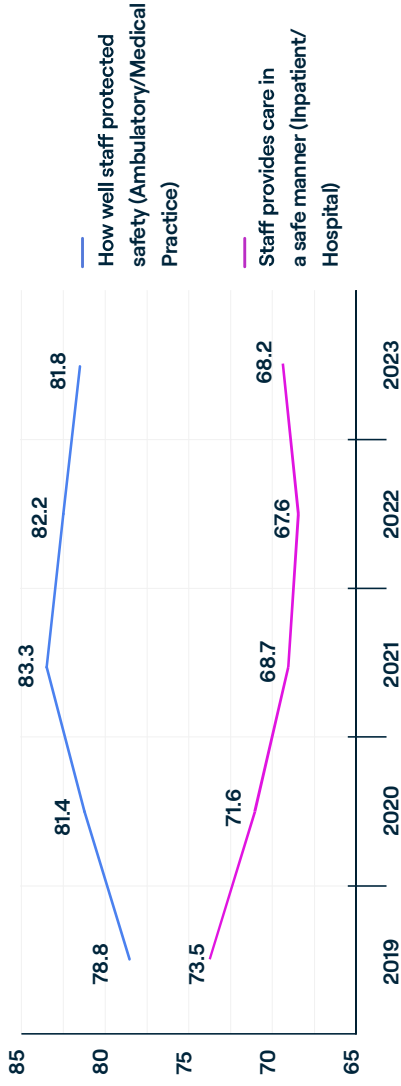
Ambulatory and hospital settings carry their own unique patient experiences and safety risks. Patients in hospitals are typically dealing with more serious conditions and more stressful situations, which can account for differences in their expectations of safety. While a gap between inpatient and outpatient settings might be expected, the diverging trend should prompt a closer look at the data.

Sentiment and text analysis of open-ended questions on patient surveys can provide organizations with a deeper understanding of patient concerns on safety. In 2023, when patients in the hospital or medical practice setting wrote about negative experiences related to safety, they most often described concerns related to staff skill or knowledge, and specifically mentioned staff forgetting something or making a mistake.

Understanding this feedback on a facility or unit level is important because different concerns require different improvement strategies. For example, extra training and learning opportunities can help address any gaps in knowledge or skills. But errors like forgetting a step in care may require other types of interventions, such as process-based checklists or peer coaching.

The gap in safety perception between inpatient and outpatient settings is now 2.5x wider than 2019.

## The power of presence: Rounding makes a difference

The frequency of staff rounding significantly impacts inpatient perceptions of safe care delivery. Patients rounded on hourly reported optimal safety perceptions 79% of the time, compared to 49.1% for those rounded on less frequently.

## Patient perceptions regarding safety



| | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How well staff protected safety (Ambulatory/Medical Practice) | 78.8 | 81.4 | 83.3 | 82.2 | 81.8 |
| Staff provides care in a safe manner (Inpatient/Hospital) | 73.5 | 71.6 | 68.7 | 67.6 | 68.2 |

**How well staff protected safety (Ambulatory/Medical Practice)**

**Staff provides care in a safe manner (Inpatient/Hospital)**

## Patient perceptions of safety are strongly linked to "Likelihood to Recommend"

Being safe isn't enough. Patients must also *feel* safe. Not feeling safe, in and of itself, is a form of emotional harm.

People who feel safe are more likely to have a more positive care experience overall. In both the hospital and ambulatory settings, top safety ratings on patient experience surveys are highly correlated with "Likelihood to Recommend" scores. 84% of patients who report optimal safety experiences are likely to recommend a facility, vs. 34% among those who don't.

# Employee perceptions of patient safety

Safety culture—i.e., employees' perceptions of patient safety—is a leading indicator of safety outcomes, meaning that the workforce can often provide early signals of organizational challenges in safety. Regularly asking employees about safety culture lets organizations identify and address potential weaknesses before they impact actual results, while positively influencing future performance.
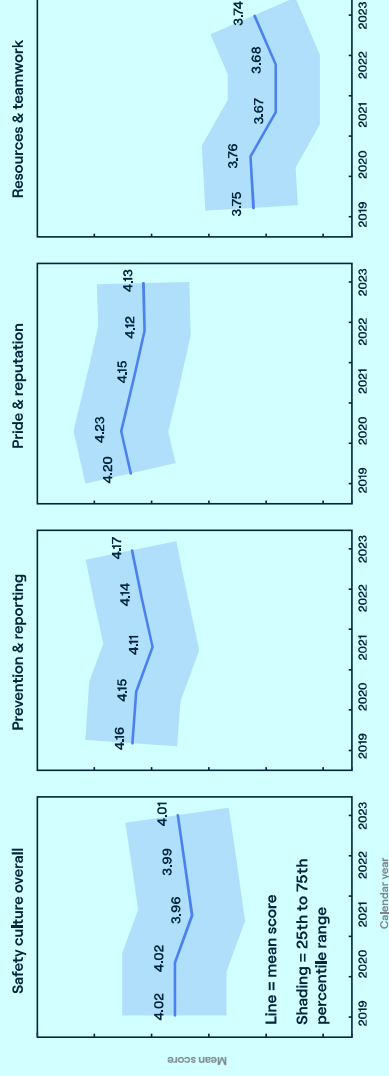
Employee perceptions of safety also impact much more than safety itself. When healthcare workers feel confident that their organization delivers safe care—as well as feel safe themselves—it fosters a positive work environment, leading to higher morale, employee engagement, and retention.

## Safety and engagement: A two-way street

Safety culture and employee engagement go hand in hand, and reinforce each other. When team members' perceptions of safety culture are high (4.00 or above), engagement ranks in the 98th percentile. Conversely, when perceptions of safety culture are low (less than 4.00), engagement ranks in the 2nd percentile.

In the past year, improvements in safety culture were seen across all domains. Overall safety culture scores are up, from 3.99 out of 5 in 2022 to 4.01 in 2023. The most significant improvement came in employee perceptions of Resources & Teamwork (up from 3.68 to 3.74): Employees felt a significant increase in adequate unit staffing, with ratings jumping from 3.14 to 3.30.

## Safety culture is starting to see upward trends



**Safety culture overall**

4.02 4.02 3.96 3.99 4.01

Line = mean score

Shading = 25th to 75th percentile range

**Prevention & reporting**

4.16 4.15 4.11 4.14 4.17

**Pride & reputation**

4.20 4.23 4.15 4.12 4.13

**Resources & teamwork**

3.75 3.76 3.67 3.68 3.74

Mean score

Calendar year

2019 2020 2021 2022 2023

While these improvements are encouraging, there's still a lot of work to do. Pre-pandemic rates were never the desired end state, and it's important to note that nearly half (48.5%) of employees still have a low perception of safety culture, rating it below 4.00 on a 5-point scale.
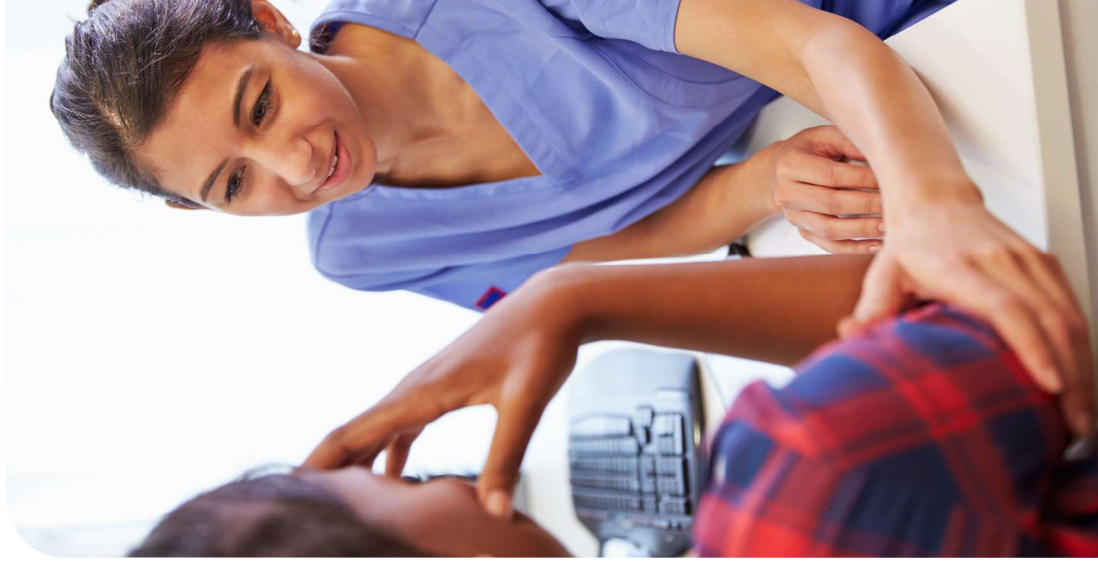
## Employee benchmark: Safety culture

**Change vs. 2023 benchmark**

# 48.5%
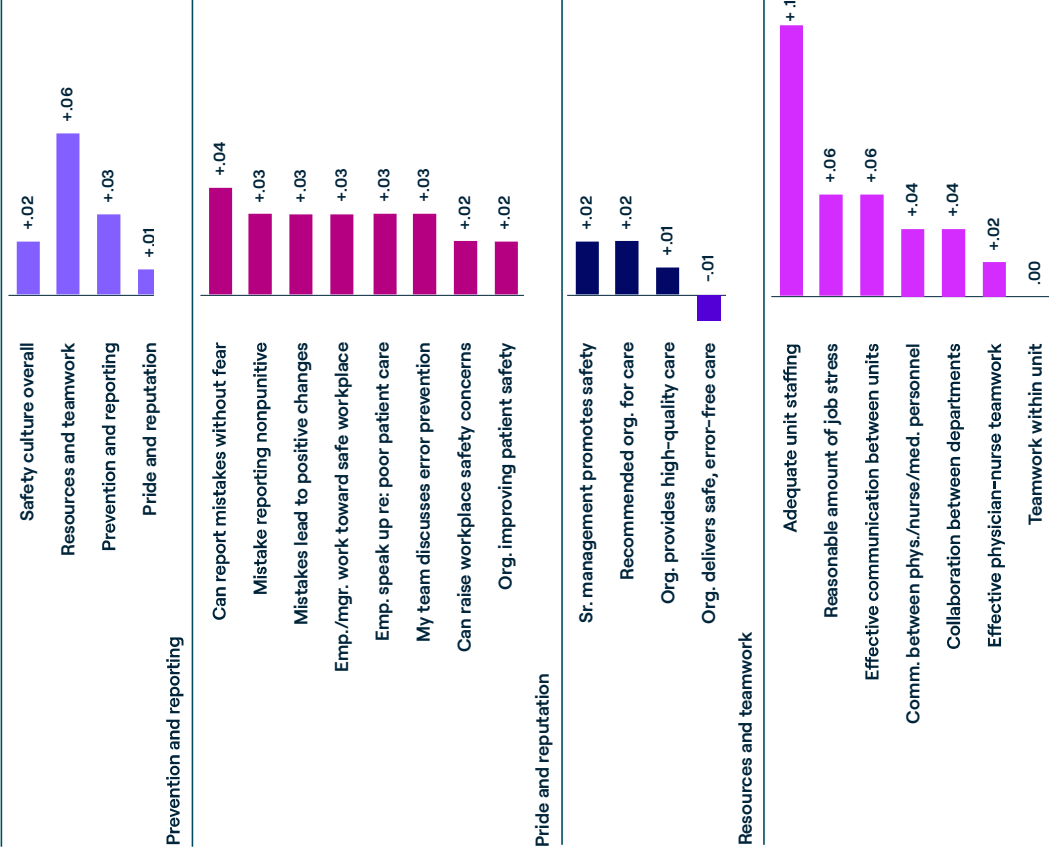
of employees still have a low perception of safety culture.

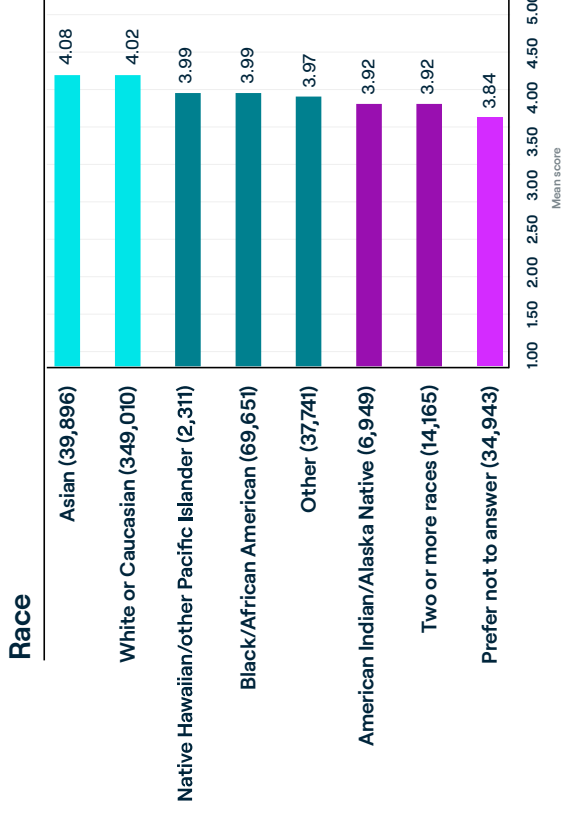## About the Press Ganey safety culture survey: What are we measuring?

Safety culture is the sum of individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies, and patterns of behavior that impact the commitment and ability to provide a safe environment for patients. Safety culture has three components: Prevention & Reporting, Pride & Reputation, and Resources & Teamwork.

1. **Prevention & Reporting:** Covers topics around being able to speak up about safety concerns and report errors without fear of punishment.

2. **Pride & Reputation:** Assesses perceptions around care/service quality and safety, "Likelihood to Recommend" for care, and if senior management supports a climate that promotes patient safety.

3. **Resources & Teamwork:** Includes items related to teamwork and communication within and across teams and roles, perceptions of staffing, and job stress.



| Safety culture overall | +.02 |
| Resources and teamwork | +.06 |
| Prevention and reporting | +.03 |
| Pride and reputation | +.01 |

**Prevention and reporting**

| Can report mistakes without fear | +.04 |
| Mistake reporting nonpunitive | +.03 |
| Mistakes lead to positive changes | +.03 |
| Emp./mgr. work toward safe workplace | +.03 |
| Emp. speak up re: poor patient care | +.03 |
| My team discusses error prevention | +.03 |
| Can raise workplace safety concerns | +.02 |
| Org. improving patient safety | +.02 |

**Pride and reputation**

| Sr. management promotes safety | +.02 |
| Recommended org. for care | +.02 |
| Org. provides high-quality care | +.01 |
| Org. delivers safe, error-free care | –.01 |

**Resources and teamwork**

| Adequate unit staffing | +.16 |
| Reasonable amount of job stress | +.06 |
| Effective communication between units | +.06 |
| Comm. between phys./nurse/med. personnel | +.04 |
| Collaboration between departments | +.04 |
| Effective physician–nurse teamwork | +.02 |
| Teamwork within unit | .00 |

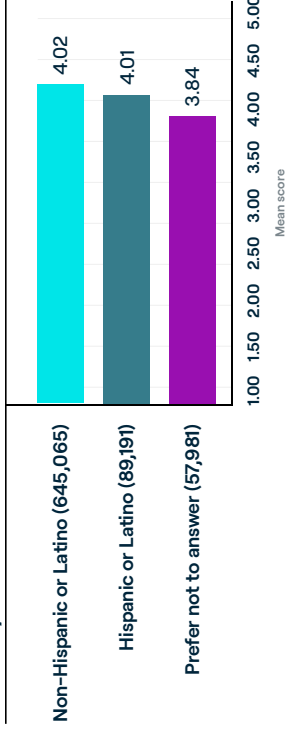# Employees' perceptions of safety culture differ

Perceptions of safety culture can vary significantly due to factors like role, unit, length of service, and demographics.

Segmenting the data by race, ethnicity, and gender identity can uncover important insights and trends. Female employees, for example, have significantly lower perceptions of safety culture compared to male employees (4.00 vs. 4.07, respectively). Even a small change in average score is meaningful, moving the ranking of an average organization to the bottom of its group.
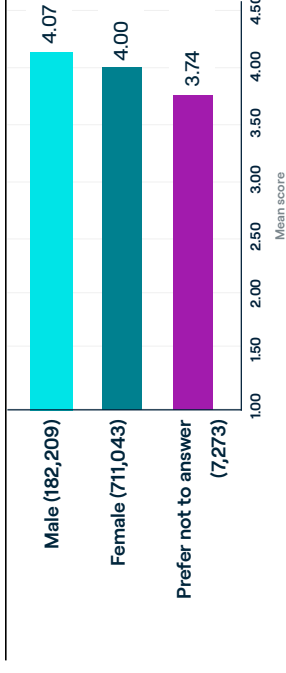
## Race

| | Mean score |
|---|---|
| Asian (39,896) | 4.08 |
| White or Caucasian (349,010) | 4.02 |
| Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander (2,311) | 3.99 |
| Black/African American (69,651) | 3.99 |
| Other (37,741) | 3.97 |
| American Indian/Alaska Native (6,949) | 3.92 |
| Two or more races (14,165) | 3.92 |
| Prefer not to answer (34,943) | 3.84 |

## Sex

| | Mean score |
|---|---|
| Male (182,209) | 4.07 |
| Female (711,043) | 4.00 |
| Prefer not to answer (7,273) | 3.74 |

# Safety culture overall by ethnicity, race, and sex

## Ethnicity

| | Mean score |
|---|---|
| Non–Hispanic or Latino (645,065) | 4.02 |
| Hispanic or Latino (89,191) | 4.01 |
| Prefer not to answer (57,981) | 3.84 |

Employee perceptions of safety culture also vary with length of service. Scores peak at 4.15 among very early–tenure employees (those who have been at an organization less than six months). Perceptions wane between three and five years, down to 3.95, but begin to rebound at the 6–10-year mark.

By better understanding patterns and fluctuations in perceptions of safety culture across the employment lifecycle, organizations can target interventions for improvement throughout their career.

## Safety culture overall by length of service

CY2023



| Length of service | Mean score |
|---|---|
| <6 mos (75,343) | 4.15 |
| 6 mos–<1yr (87,911) | 4.03 |
| 1–2yrs (212,223) | 3.98 |
| 3–5yrs (169,185) | 3.95 |
| 6–10yrs (165,088) | 3.98 |
| 11–15yrs (91,893) | 4.01 |
| 16–20yrs (71,780) | 4.03 |
| 21–25yrs (47,133) | 4.05 |
| 25+yrs (56,600) | 4.08 |

While overall trends are moving in the right direction, scores vary significantly across professions. Senior management feels positive about the safety cultures in their organization, rating it 4.53 out of 5. But not everyone agrees. Advanced practice provider (APP) and RN roles consistently have lower perceptions of safety culture across all components, with scores coming in at 3.92 and 3.95, respectively.

Generation also shapes how employees see safety culture in the workplace. Traditionalists (those born between 1925 and 1945) have the highest perceptions of safety (4.17 out of 5 in 2023, unchanged from 2022). On the other end of the spectrum, millennials (1981–1996) reported the lowest (3.95, up from 3.93 in 2022).
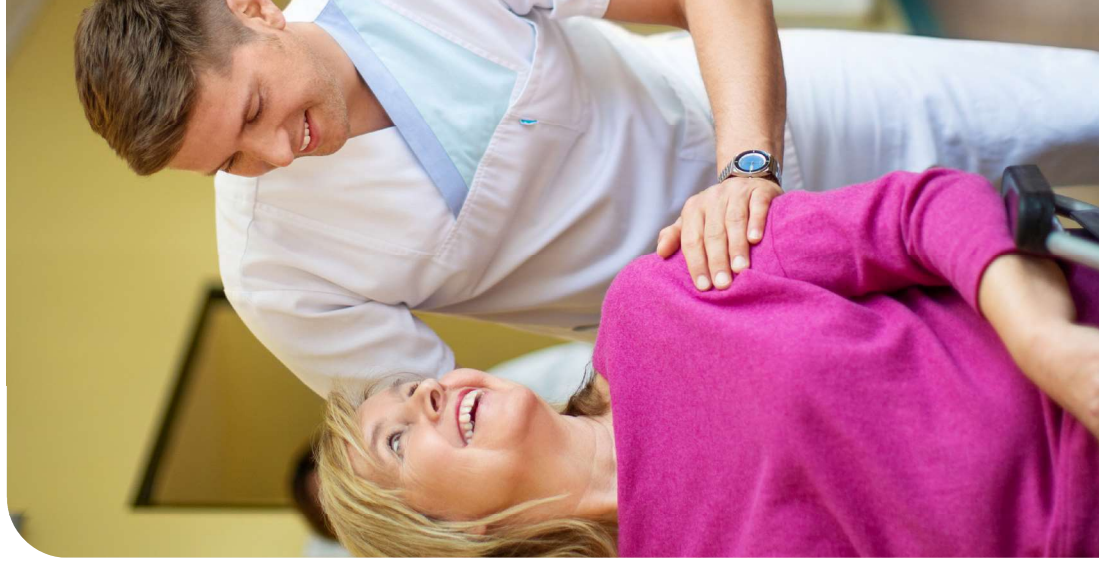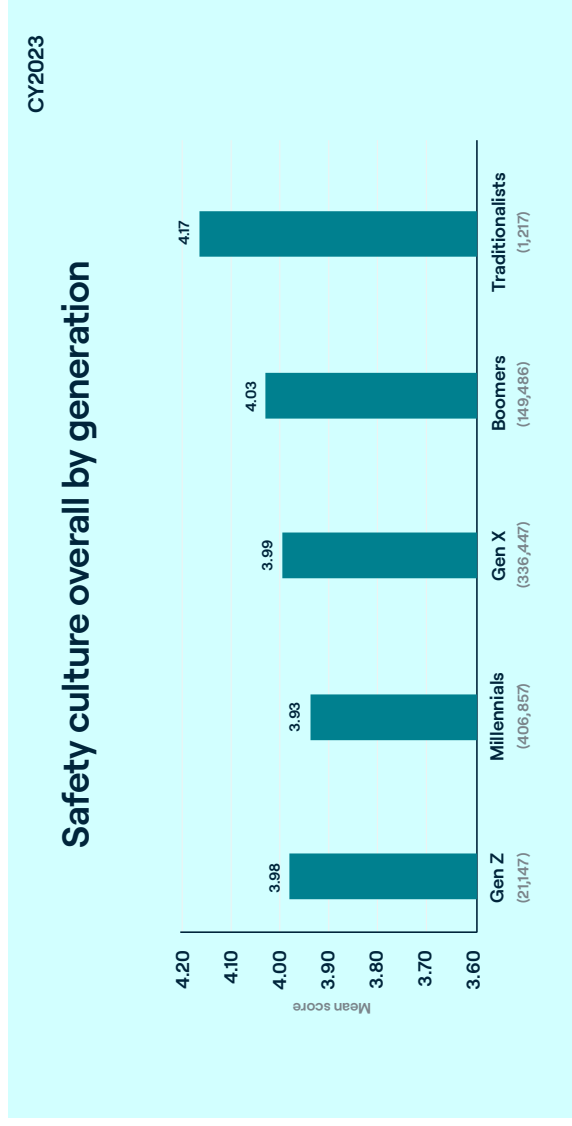
# Safety culture by role

*Note: Physicians, APPs, & Non MD advanced degree roles reported took Press Ganey's physician survey

**2023 safety culture**

| Role | Score |
|---|---|
| Senior management (7,546) | 4.53 |
| Management (102,904) | 4.21 |
| Nonclinical professional (105,932) | 4.06 |
| Physician (46,379) | 4.03 |
| Clerical (106,676) | 4.01 |
| Skilled maintenance (9,175) | 3.98 |
| Nursing-other (90,101) | 3.97 |
| Clinical professional (91,981) | 3.96 |
| Licensed technician (107,293) | 3.96 |
| Service (64,145) | 3.95 |
| Registered nurse (254,112) | 3.95 |
| APP (23,610) | 3.92 |
| Security (7,472) | 3.91 |

3.40  3.60  3.80  4.00  4.20  4.40  4.60

**vs. 2022**

| Role | Change |
|---|---|
| Senior management | +.03 |
| Management | +.01 |
| Nonclinical professional | +.01 |
| Physician | .00 |
| Clerical | +.03 |
| Skilled maintenance | .00 |
| Nursing-other | +.03 |
| Clinical professional | -.02 |
| Licensed technician | +.03 |
| Service | +.01 |
| Registered nurse | +.04 |
| APP | -.01 |
| Security | +.03 |

-.05  0  +.05  +.10  +.15

## Millennials on the front lines: Leveling up for safety

As generations shift, so does the industry. Today, millennials are a rapidly rising force in healthcare: They make up over a third of the workforce and are increasingly stepping into leadership roles.

As millennials navigate brand-new challenges—like a post-pandemic landscape, increased violence in the workplace, and AI technologies reshaping the industry—organizations must pay special attention to their evolving needs, concerns, and expectations, especially as related to safety. Targeted interventions are needed to address millennials' lower perceptions of safety culture, engage this key demographic, and build toward a better future for healthcare.

### Safety culture overall by generation

CY2023

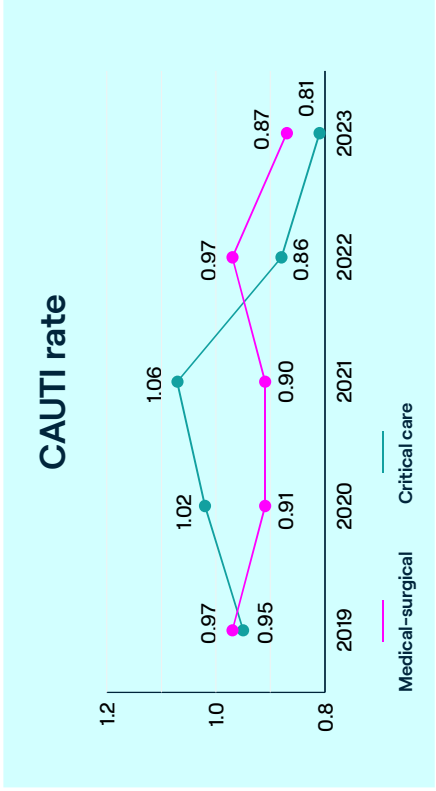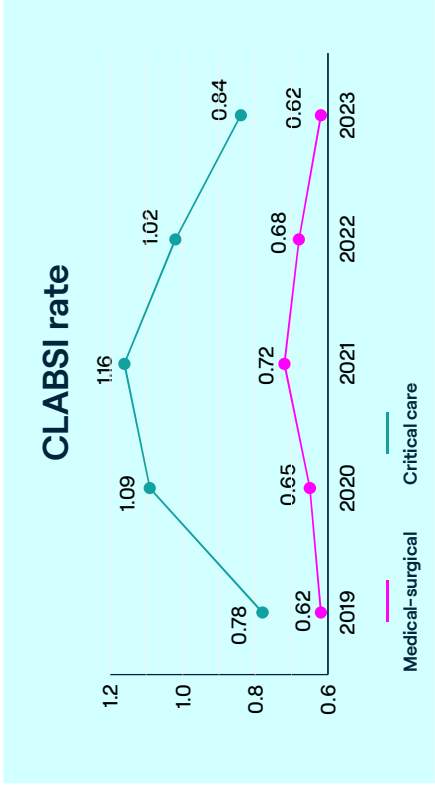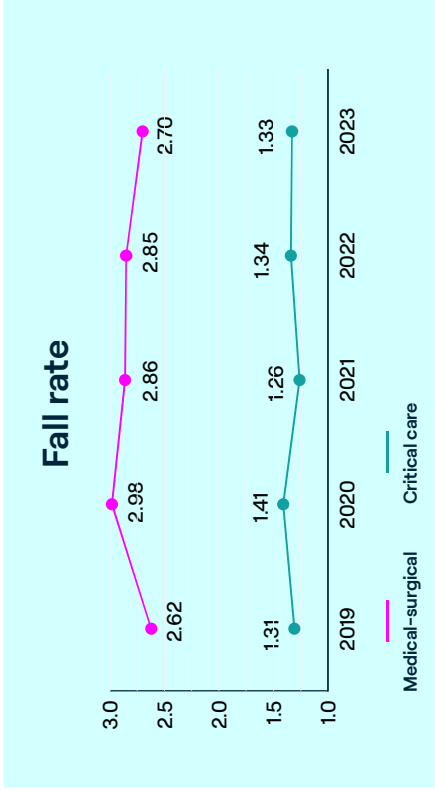| Generation | Mean score |
|---|---|
| Gen Z (21,147) | 3.98 |
| Millennials (406,857) | 3.93 |
| Gen X (336,447) | 3.99 |
| Boomers (149,486) | 4.03 |
| Traditionalists (1,217) | 4.17 |

Mean score

# Safety outcomes

Press Ganey's National Database of Nursing Quality Indicators (NDNQI) is a nursing quality improvement tool used to monitor and benchmark adverse patient events that are impacted by nursing care quality—commonly known as nursing-sensitive indicators (NSIs)—as well as RN workforce engagement measures in acute and ambulatory care.

Safety outcome data from 2023 shows measurable progress. Across the board, NSIs are recovering, and all are almost back to 2019 numbers. Most notably, catheter-associated urinary tract infection (CAUTI) rates were 11.46% lower in 2023 than 2019, and falls decreased by 2.67% during that same time frame.

Ventilator-associated events (VAE), central line-associated bloodstream infections (CLABSI), and hospital-acquired pressure injury (HAPI) rates also decreased between 2022 and 2023, but have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.*

*CAUTI, CLABSI, and falls are per 1,000 patient days. HAPIs are reported as the percentage of patients on the unit at the time of the prevalence assessment.

# Fall rate

Medical–surgical
2019: 2.62
2020: 2.98
2021: 2.86
2022: 2.85
2023: 2.70

Critical care
2019: 1.31
2020: 1.41
2021: 1.26
2022: 1.34
2023: 1.33

# CLABSI rate

Critical care
2019: 0.78
2020: 1.09
2021: 1.16
2022: 1.02
2023: 0.84

Medical–surgical
2019: 0.62
2020: 0.65
2021: 0.72
2022: 0.68
2023: 0.62

# CAUTI rate

Medical–surgical
2019: 0.97
2020: 0.91
2021: 0.90
2022: 0.97
2023: 0.87

Critical care
2019: 0.95
2020: 1.02
2021: 1.06
2022: 0.86
2023: 0.81

# % HAPI

Critical care
2019: 4.56
2020: 5.56
2021: 6.44
2022: 5.61
2023: 4.49

Medical–surgical
2019: 1.33
2020: 1.60
2021: 1.68
2022: 1.72
2023: 1.54

## Optimal safety through collaboration

While safety outcomes are making a strong comeback overall, organizations must address the harm that's still occurring. Accelerating the industry toward zero harm means coming together to exchange event data, learn from each other, identify best practices for implementation, and better prevent harm.

Press Ganey's Patient Safety Organization (PSO) is the country's largest forum enabling cross-industry sharing and learning from safety data, with over 5 million patient safety events. In 2023, more than 568,000 events were submitted—a combination of serious safety events, precursor safety events, near-miss events, and unsafe conditions. Of the events discovered in 2023, well over half (62%) involved problems with managing care, medications, and delays in diagnosis or treatment.

The PSO goes beyond the "what" to understand the "why" behind safety events, diving deeper by analyzing causal factors. An analysis of 2023 safety events shows the most frequently occurring failure mechanism for individuals was making incorrect assumptions when giving or receiving information. The most frequently occurring system factor influencing individual mistakes was work processes missing critical steps.

This level of analysis lets organizations more effectively use aggregate insights to drive targeted improvements. This can involve strengthening individual work habits (e.g., self-checking, clear communications, critical thinking, policy/procedure compliance) and improving organizational structures, processes, protocols, and technologies.

## Combatting inequities in safety event data

A 2023 study by Press Ganey's PSO looked at patient safety events involving falls and maternal/perinatal death or disability. It found that harm classification data was more likely to be available for white patients than for patients of other races. This can result in inequitable learnings, as level of harm is an important factor for determining what events warrant deeper analysis. Because of this variance, the key finding here is not around safety events. Instead, it's around the need for more equitable reporting and classification across all racial groups.

# Violence in the workplace

Everyone deserves to feel safe and be safe on the job, and it's the responsibility of employers to foster a safe environment. Unfortunately, the reality on the ground for healthcare workers is that violence from patients and their families continues to put caregivers at risk.

Reported assaults against nursing personnel increased 5% YOY, jumping to 2.71 per 100 nursing personnel in 2023, from 2.59 in 2022. The number of reported assaults sampled from 329 hospitals totaled 16,975—or around 1.89 per hour. Psychiatric units saw the most frequent episodes of violence, followed by the emergency department, adult units, pediatrics, and, lastly, perioperative units.

While the rise in reported assaults is cause for concern, multiple factors could be contributing to the increase. For example, employees might be taking a more active role in reporting incidents, because their leaders are fostering an environment that encourages them to speak up.

## Assaults on nursing personnel per 100 nurses



| Year | Value |
|------|-------|
| 2019 | 2.19 |
| 2020 | 2.22 |
| 2021 | 2.37 |
| 2022 | 2.59 |
| 2023 | 2.71 |

Sample includes 3,350 units and 329 hospitals that had complete assault data and nursing care hour data from 2019 to 2023.
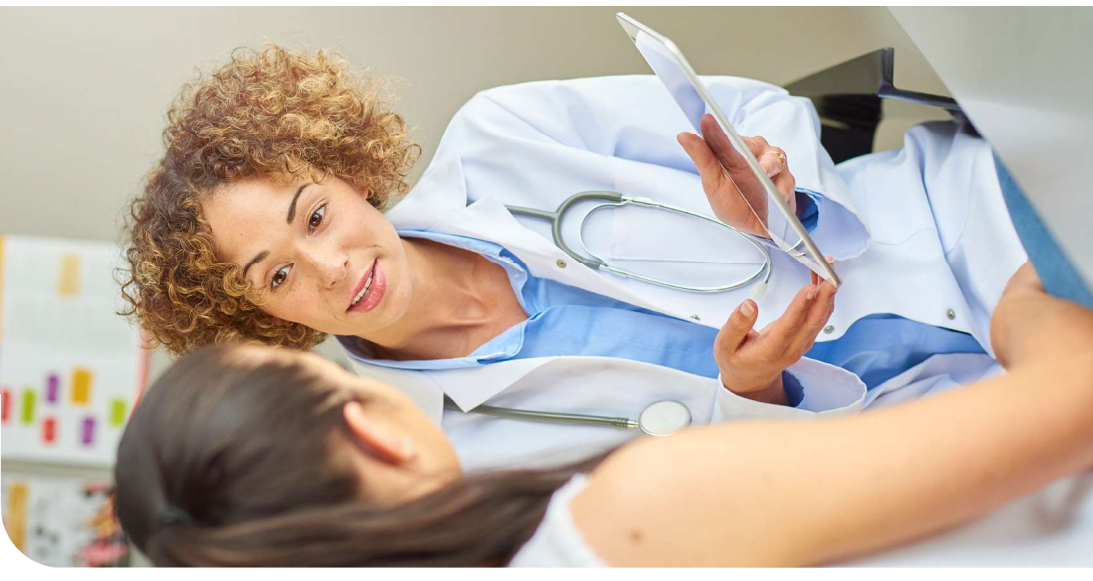
# How safe employees feel at work

On the surface, the rise in reported assaults appears to contradict the fact that employee perceptions of their own safety have, actually, gone up.

More healthcare employees felt safe on the job in 2023.* Nationally, 80% agree or strongly agree that their organization cares about employee safety—up 1% from the previous year. But this means one in five healthcare employees still doesn't feel safe at work.

When it comes to perceptions of adequate measures to prevent and respond to workplace violence, senior management and front-line staff (particularly RNs and APPs) don't necessarily see eye to eye.

Senior management rates "this organization has good security measures in place that help prevent violence from patients or their families" at 4.30, vs. RNs at 3.36. This gap is particularly concerning given that nearly a third (29%) of RNs report experiencing violence "occasionally" or "frequently" from patients or patients' family members.**

Addressing workplace violence—as well as general workforce safety, including preventing back injuries, needlesticks, and slips/falls—is a critical need. Organizations must champion a culture of transparent and thorough reporting as well as reliably implement best practices to keep all employees safe from harm.

## 29%

of RNs report occasionally or frequently experiencing violence in the workplace.

*According to Press Ganey workforce engagement surveys.

**Sample consists of over 10,000 respondents from more than 250 different locations across the U.S.

# Takeaways and recommendations

Safety is the underpinning of every positive experience and outcome—for patients and employees. In response to safety's backslides during the pandemic, Press Ganey partnered with clients across the country on an ambitious goal to reduce patient and caregiver harm 80% by 2025.

While the trends in this report indicate that the industry is moving in the right direction, sustaining progress requires a direct and focused strategy. Organizations that have seen the greatest improvements, and consistently rank at the top in safety performance, engage in practices others can learn from.

- **Leaders commit to safety as a core value,** embedding high reliability practices and behaviors like daily tiered huddles and leader rounding throughout the system. Building these types of practices into the way organizations operate lays a foundation that improves their ability to achieve safety at scale.

- **Top-performing organizations take an integrated approach** to the Human Experience, recognizing that employee and patient perceptions are key indicators of safety. In addition to tracking events and outcomes, organizations should continuously listen to patients and the workforce—via safety culture and "pulse" surveys, as well as interactive channels like crowdsourcing. Prioritizing this kind of feedback isn't just about identifying concerns; it also underscores safety as healthcare's North Star.

- **To gain deeper insights, organizations segment their safety, clinical, and employee and patient experience data** so they can understand what's happening on a more granular level— by unit and team, length of service, and demographic. By analyzing data in this way, organizations can pinpoint areas where safety needs the most attention.

- **Utilizing tech platforms that leverage AI will strengthen any integrated strategy** by making it easier to report, analyze, predict, and prevent events. They also help leaders identify and then focus on critical areas that demand immediate attention, and develop targeted interventions and action plans to continually drive improvements.

- **Lastly, transparency is key to accelerating progress.** Sharing safety insights internally and externally through a Patient Safety Organization can prevent harm across an organization—and the industry at large. By learning from each other and fostering collaboration, healthcare can collectively elevate safety standards—and outcomes—for everyone.

# About the data

- **NDNQI:** The National Database of Nursing Quality Indicators (NDNQI) tracks nursing performance, patient experience, and health outcomes for hospitals across hundreds of measures. The indicators were calculated with data from 2,430 hospitals and 25,652 units, a representative sample of participating facilities. In addition, Magnet® facilities are represented (approximately 10% of facilities in the sample are Magnet).

- **Employee experience:** Data represents over 1 million employee responses (a subset from 2.2 million collected in calendar year 2023) within 200 healthcare systems that answered Press Ganey's full set of 19 questions related to safety culture within their organization. The database is representative of all types of healthcare roles and facility types (e.g., academic medical centers and Magnet).

- **Patient experience:** Data represents over 500 entities and 325,000 patients in the hospital setting, and over 1,200 entities and 12.5 million patients in the medical practice setting, from systems that added patient safety items to their survey. This sample includes hospitals from all AHA regions, as well as text and sentiment analysis of patient comments.

- **Patient experience rounding:** The item "staff provides care in a safe manner" includes ~55,000 surveys and 87 hospitals.

- **Patient Safety Organization (PSO):** Press Ganey's PSO—a confidential forum where organizations can share safety events and best practices—is the largest nationwide, with over 5 million safety events, including 568,000+ reported in 2023. These are a combination of serious safety events (i.e., deficiencies in care resulting in moderate to severe harm, up to and including death), precursor safety events (deficiencies resulting in minimal or no detectable harm), and near-miss events (deficiencies caught before reaching the patient).
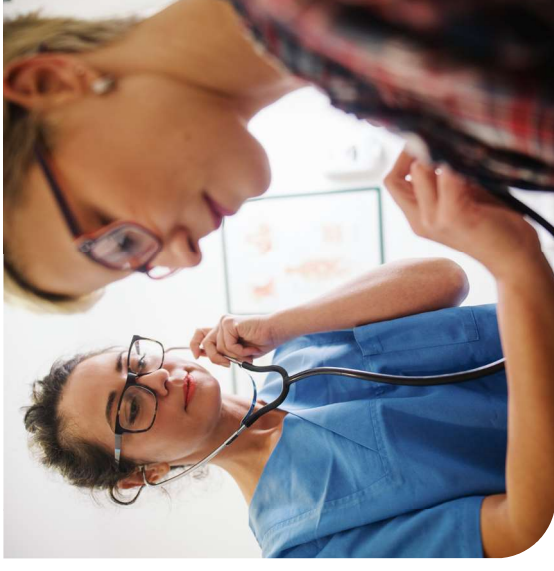
## Zero harm, within reach

Press Ganey gives you the tools to measure, manage, and improve safety within your organization. Reach out to our team:

pressganey.com/request-a-demo

# PressGaney

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