

# Nursing Career Pathways:

Opportunities and Barriers

Nursing is a profession that has the power to inspire, attract and fulfill people who choose to care for the wellbeing of others. They do so with knowledge and compassion. Nurses are the backbone of our health system and represent the largest group of registered health professionals in Ontario and Canada. They work across the system in various domains and sectors, contributing to its effective functioning.

The central role of nurses demands that governments and employers demonstrate respect towards the profession – not just through lip service but through concrete action. Yet, this has not been the case for almost three decades now. And then COVID-19 struck.

The pandemic tipped our already chronically understaffed and underpaid nursing workforce into a deep crisis. According to RNAO's 2022 [Nursing Through Crisis report](#), Ontario nurses experienced high rates of burnout, depression, anxiety and stress.

**75%** of nurses experienced burnout

**69%** of the more than 5,000 nurses surveyed reported their intention to leave their nursing position within five years.

The impact of the nursing crisis has been felt right across the health system. Emergency rooms and intensive care units have been forced to close due to nursing shortages. Surgeries, procedures and treatments have been cancelled and patient safety put at risk. The crisis highlights the need to care for the people and the profession that cares for people.

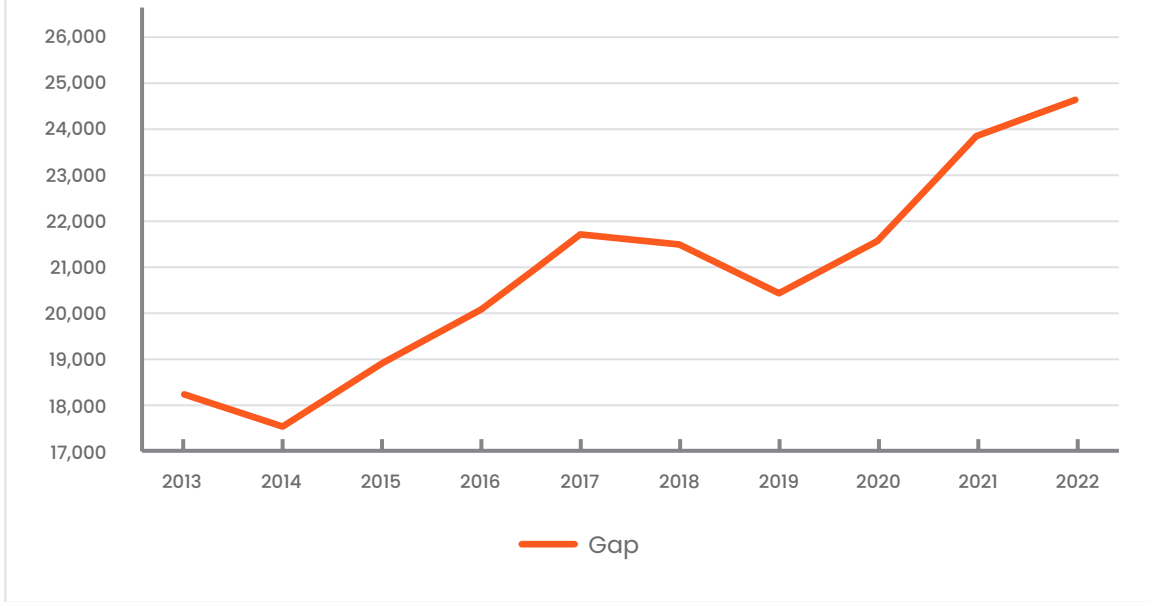
This can be done if the provincial government and health system employers take the necessary steps to build nursing careers in Ontario. This can be accomplished by:

1. improving nurses' working conditions
2. improving supports across all levels of the nursing profession
3. incorporating principles of diversity, equity and inclusion into all systemic and organizational policies, and acting on them
4. expanding Ontario's nursing workforce
5. expanding Ontario's nursing student population

## Background

While all jurisdictions across the country are experiencing a shortage of nurses, Ontario entered the pandemic with the worst RN-per-capita ratio in Canada – and emerged from the pandemic even further behind. Over the course of the pandemic, Ontario's RN deficit increased from nearly 22,000 to 25,000 compared to the rest of Canada on a per capita basis. This means Ontario now needs 25,000 more RNs just to bring the province to the same RN-per-capita ratio as the rest of the country.

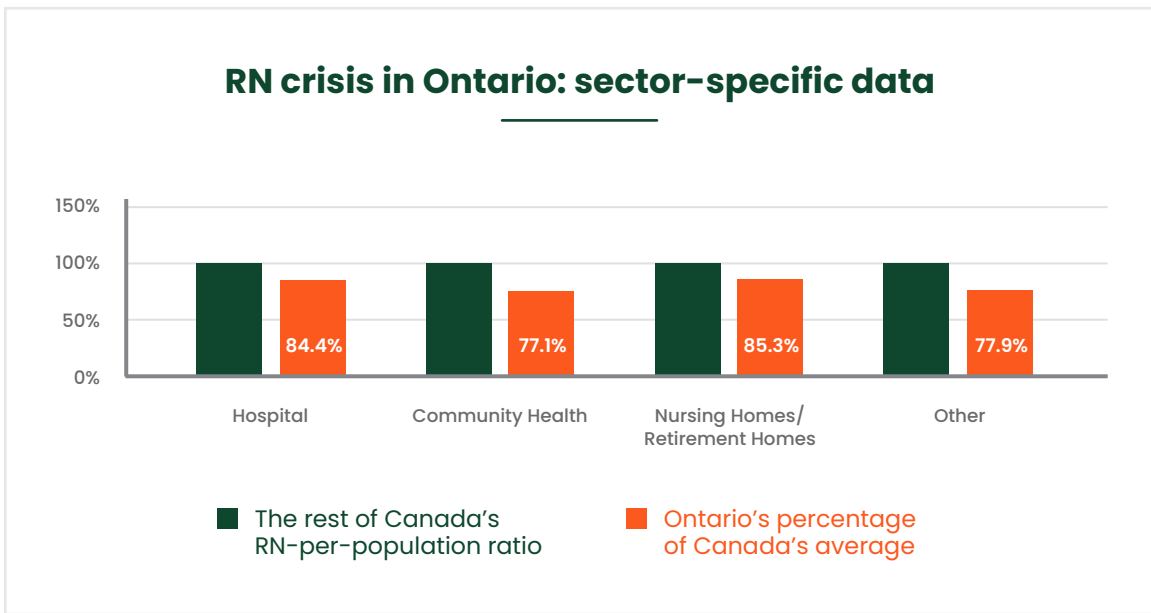
## Ontario RN deficit relative to the rest of Canada on a per capita basis



**Source:** Calculation by RNAO. RN Statistics from Canadian Institute for Health Information (2023). Population Statistics from Statistics Canada (2022).

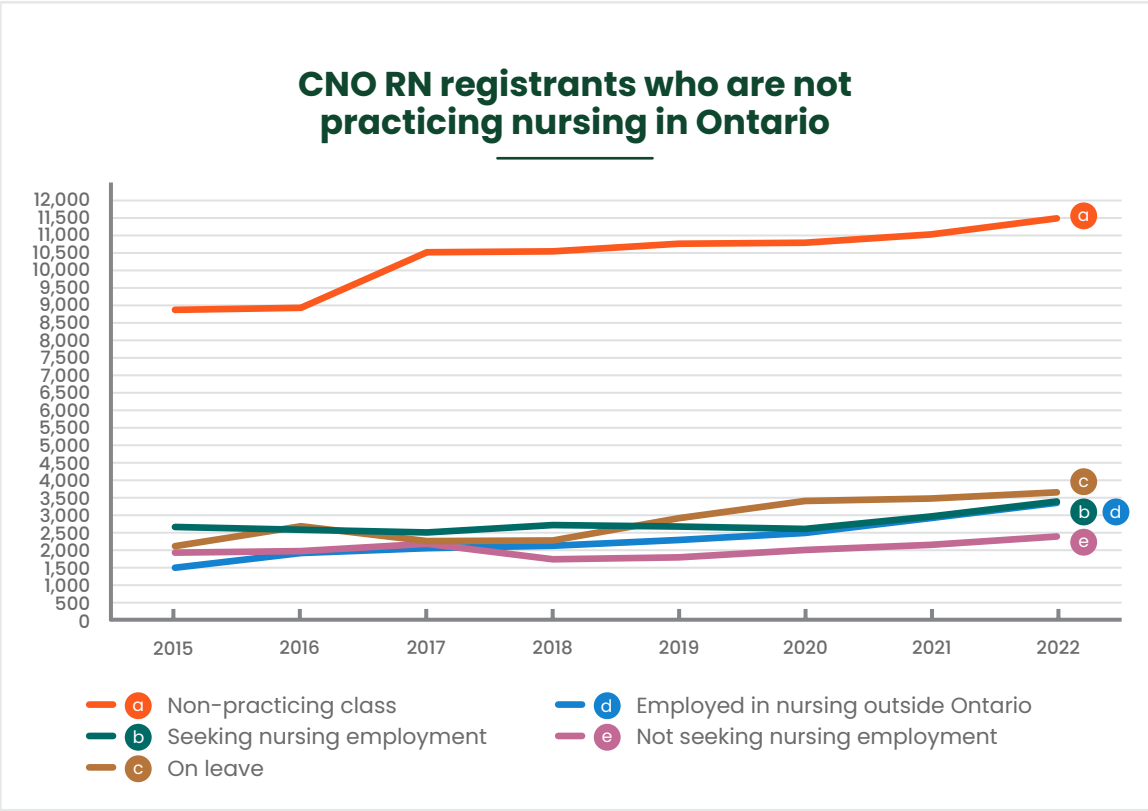
Ontario’s RN deficit compared to the rest of Canada exists across all sectors of the health system.

## RN crisis in Ontario: sector-specific data



**Source:** Calculation by RNAO. RN Statistics from Canadian Institute for Health Information (2023). Population Statistics from Statistics Canada (2022).

Ontario’s RN deficit is partly due to the growing number of RNs opting out of the nursing workforce. That number has steadily increased in recent years, growing from less than 17,000 in 2015 to nearly 25,000 in 2022. That translates to more than 19 per cent of RNs registered with the College of Nurses of Ontario (CNO) in 2022 who were not in the nursing workforce.

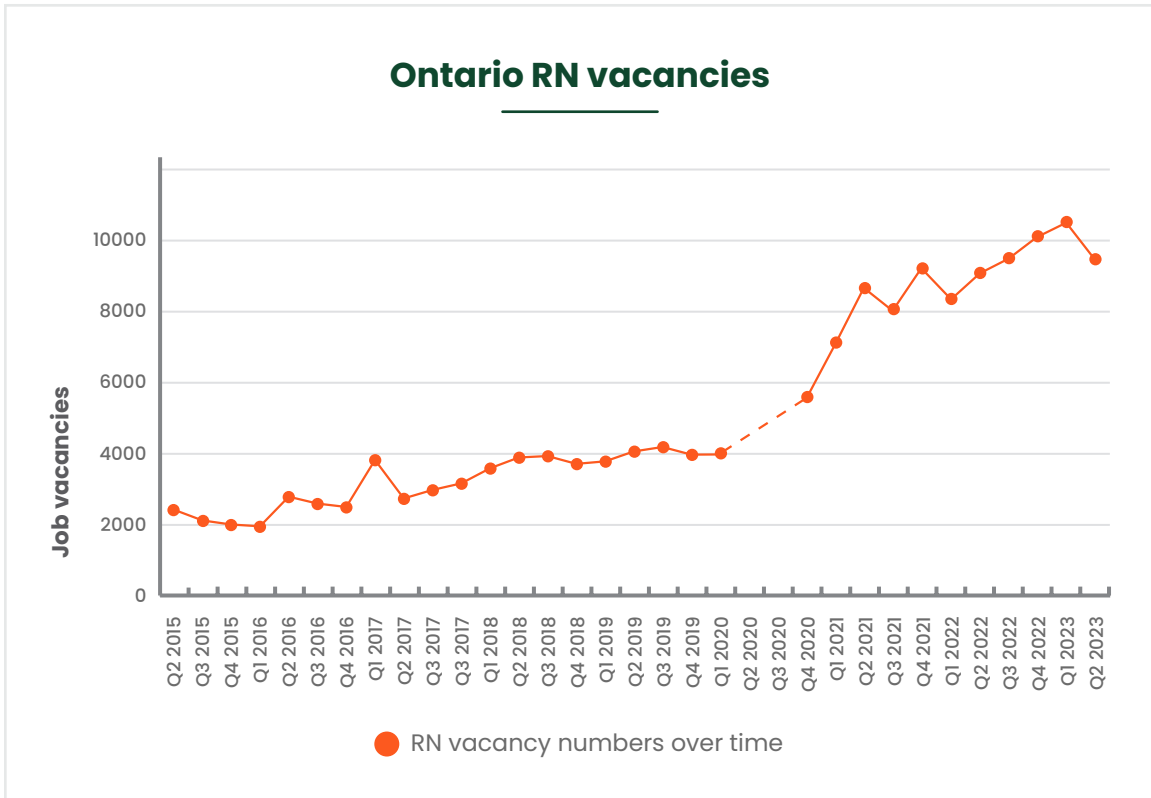


Source: CNO, 2023

The growing gap between nurses registered to work in Ontario and those actually participating in the nursing workforce partly explains the vast increase in RN vacancies in Ontario in recent years. According to Statistics Canada, RN vacancies – that is, the number of Ontario nursing vacancies unfilled for 90 days or more – have more than doubled since the start of the pandemic. This number has remained around 10,000 since the last quarter of 2022.

The increase in vacancies in Ontario also reflects the growth in agency work in the nursing profession. Recent data from the Ontario Nurses’ Association (ONA) interest arbitration reply brief reveals a 260 per cent increase in agency hours and a 450 per cent increase in agency spending in Ontario hospitals over the course of the pandemic ([Ontario Nurses’ Association, 2023](#)). Ontario long-term care associations – AdvantAge Ontario and OLTCa – also report drastic increases in agency use to address high and stubborn RN vacancy numbers (AdvantAge Ontario, 2023; OLTCa, 2023). Nurses resort to agency work in response to the poor terms and conditions in organizations across the health system. As reflected in [RNAO’s survey of more than 5,000 Canadian nurses](#), COVID-19 was not just a workplace issue for nurses; it also made day-to-day life outside of work extremely difficult. Agency work provides more compensation and greater flexibility, providing nurses with a better and healthier work-life balance – both seen as attractive after working through the pandemic under Ontario’s Bill 124, which suppressed their wages.

## Ontario RN vacancies



Source: Statistics Canada (2023)

*We have felt dispensable and disrespected in a time when we have given up so much personally and professionally and risked the health and safety of ourselves and our loved ones.*

- Survey respondent

The growing gap between CNO registrants and the nursing workforce also reflects the poor, inequitable and, in real terms, declining compensation for RNs. A recent hospital arbitration award is a first step in addressing the history of undervaluing and poorly compensating nurses in our province, thanks to ONA. In real terms, the award returns hospital nursing wages to pre-Bill 124 levels, which were still below 2010 levels. More work is needed to improve nursing salaries and ensure wage parity for nurses across all health sectors – from public health, to primary care, to hospitals, home care and long-term care.



**Source:** Ontario Nurses' Association (2021), page 89, Article 19; The Participating Hospitals (Represented by the Ontario Hospital Association) and ONA (2023), page 33; Statistics Canada (2023), Table 18-10-0005-01; Bank of Canada (2023), page 9, Table 1.

## Recommendations

To address Ontario's nursing crisis, barriers that stand in the way of retaining and recruiting nurses, and advancing their career pathways, must be removed. This includes action on compensation and workloads. Policymakers must also leverage opportunities to pave the way for a brighter future for nursing in Ontario. This is the only way to emerge from this crisis with a stronger nursing profession and health system. The following recommendations, if implemented, will bring about transformational change to Ontario's nursing profession and health system.

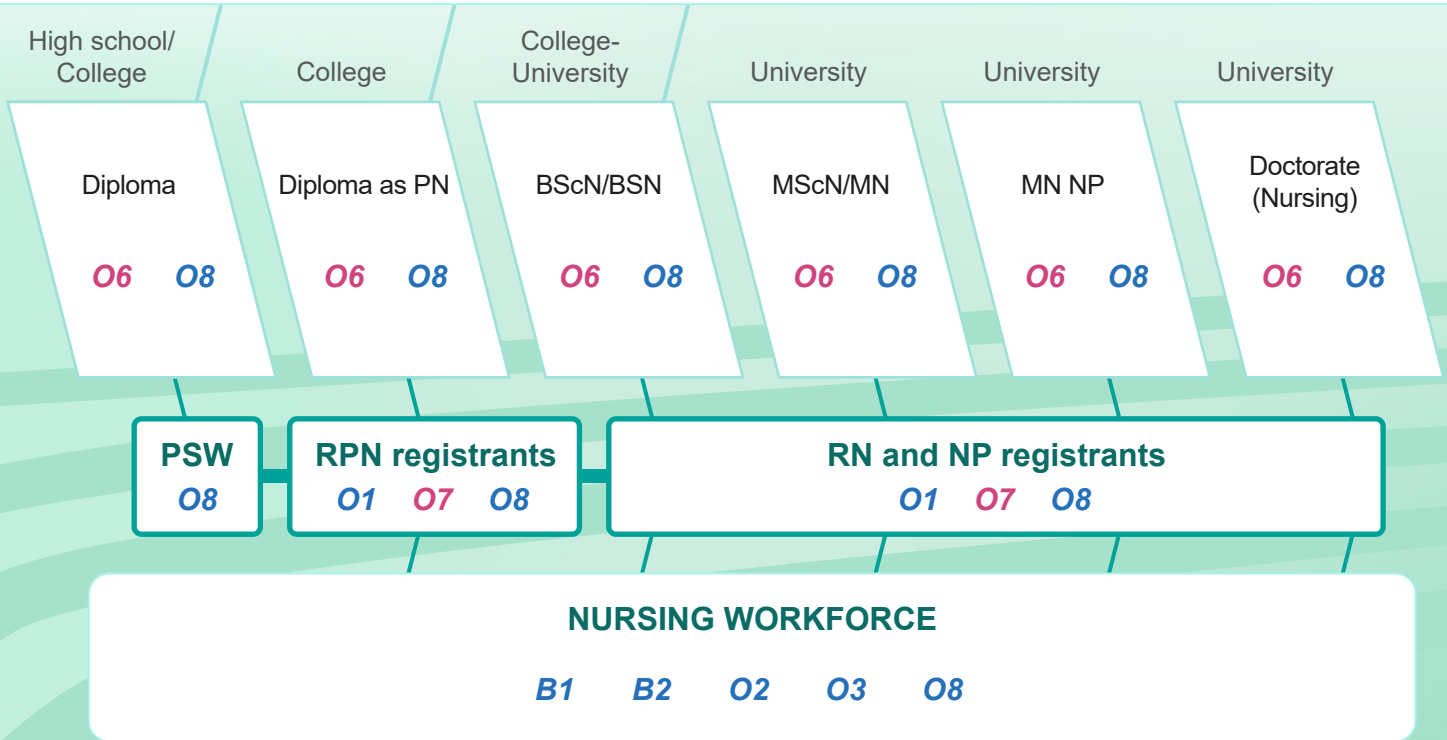
### **BARRIER B1: Compensation**

- Increase compensation for Ontario nurses in all roles, domains and sectors so it is competitive with compensation in other jurisdictions, including the U.S.
- Address pay disparities among nurses working in different sectors, including home care and long-term care, by harmonizing their compensation upwards.

# Nursing career pathways: opportunities and barriers

**Entry pool:** General Population | Internationally Educated Nurses | Pre-Qualified Candidates

O4 O5 O8



**Re-entry pool:** Non-Registered Nurses (Retired | Resigned | Not Renewed)

O1 O7 O8

## LEGEND

Retention	Recruitment	O=Opportunity	B=Barrier
B1: Compensation	B2: Workloads	O1: Provide mentorship supports	O2: Provide leadership training
O3: Increase career development opportunities	O4: Register internationally educated nurses	O5: Increase nursing education seats and funding	O8: Eliminate racism and discrimination
O6: Expand nursing education pathways	O7: Return nurses to the workforce		

## **BARRIER B2: Workloads**

- Ensure safe and healthy workloads for nurses by increasing nurse staffing and supports across all sectors.
- Implement evidence-based recommendations to retain and recruit nurses by providing full-time employment, mentorship and professional development, occupational health and safety measures and enforcement, as well as safe workloads.

## **OPPORTUNITY O1: Provide mentorship supports**

- Expand the Nursing Graduate Guarantee to include all new nursing registrants in Ontario and internationally educated nurses.
- Reinstate the Late Career Nurse Initiative, and encourage recently retired nurses to return as mentors for new graduates.

## **OPPORTUNITY O2: Provide leadership training**

- Provide nurse leaders with leadership training and supports.

## **OPPORTUNITY O3: Increase career development opportunities**

- Expand RN scope of practice to include RN prescribing.
- Expand NP scope of practice and innovative models of care, including more NP-led clinics.
- Increase funding and resources for nurses to pursue continuing education, professional development and nursing specialty certifications.
- Provide nurses with time off, flexible work scheduling and compensation when pursuing continuing education.

## **OPPORTUNITY O4: Register internationally educated nurses**

- Continue to implement policies and programs to ensure internationally educated nurses who reside in Canada and want to practise in Ontario are registered with the CNO in a timely manner.

## **OPPORTUNITY O5: Increase nursing education seats and funding**

- Increase the supply of RNs by further increasing enrolments and funding for four-year baccalaureate nursing programs, second entry/compressed programs and RPN-to-RN bridging programs by 10 per cent per year for five years.
- Compress the RPN-to-BScN bridging programs to two years.
- Support faculty retention and recruitment in both college and university programs as a critical strategy to increase the RN supply in Ontario.
- Increase the supply of masters and PhD/DNP/DN-prepared RNs by increasing enrolments and funding for these nursing programs.
- Increase the supply of NPs by increasing the funding and capacity for student-NP seats and associated program costs. This should include enabling more NPs to be prepared at the PhD/DNP/DN levels for faculty support.
- Support a 50 per cent increase in the number of NPs by 2030 as set out in RNAO's 2021 NP Task Force report, [Vision for Tomorrow](#).

## **OPPORTUNITY O6: Expand nursing education pathways**

- Develop expanded and optimized nursing education pathways similar to the U.S. and other countries to encourage nurses to advance their nursing education and careers in Ontario.

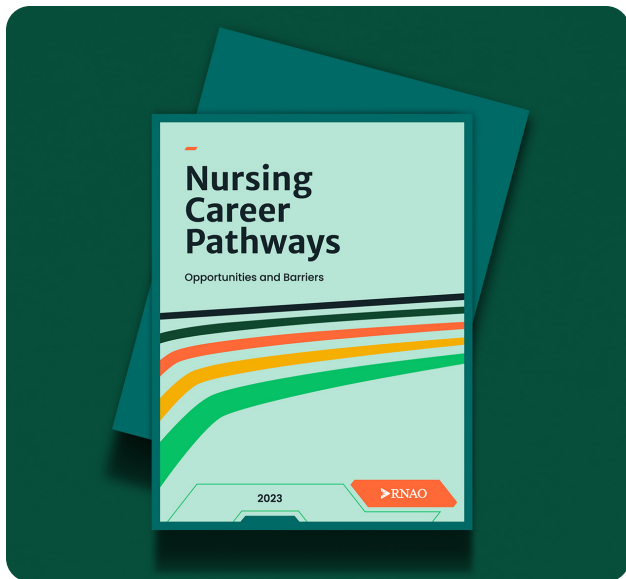
## **OPPORTUNITY O7: Return nurses to the workforce**

- Establish a "Return to Nursing Now" program to attract CNO registrants back into Ontario's nursing workforce.

## **OPPORTUNITY O8: Eliminate racism and discrimination**

- Mandate the collection of race-based data by the College of Nurses of Ontario.
- Provide cultural safety education and awareness building at individual, organizational and policy levels.
- Incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles in all human health resources policies to ensure fair and equitable access to educational opportunities, professional development and career advancement potential.
- Ensure programs that support DEI, such as mentorship, are available in all workplaces.





Want to download the full report or get more information? Visit the [Nursing Career Pathways page](#) on RNAO.ca for videos and profiles featuring the voices of Ontario nurses.

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