



# Health Policy Snapshot

Public Health and Prevention

[www.rwjf.org/healthpolicy](http://www.rwjf.org/healthpolicy)ISSUE BRIEF  
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## How Does Employment—or Unemployment—Affect Health?

### Takeaways:

- Steady employment can provide the income, benefits, and stability necessary for good health.
- The National Prevention Strategy highlights how the federal government and community leaders can expand access to jobs and economic opportunity to create more opportunities for healthy living.
- Employers can institute a variety of strategies—including workplace wellness programs, job safety training, and education initiatives—to keep employees healthy and help their bottom line.

### Overview

On average, American adults spend more than half their waking hours at work.<sup>1</sup> For millions of Americans, a steady job in safe working conditions means more than simply a paycheck—employment can also provide numerous benefits critical to maintaining proper health. On the flip side, job loss and unemployment is associated with a variety of negative health effects.

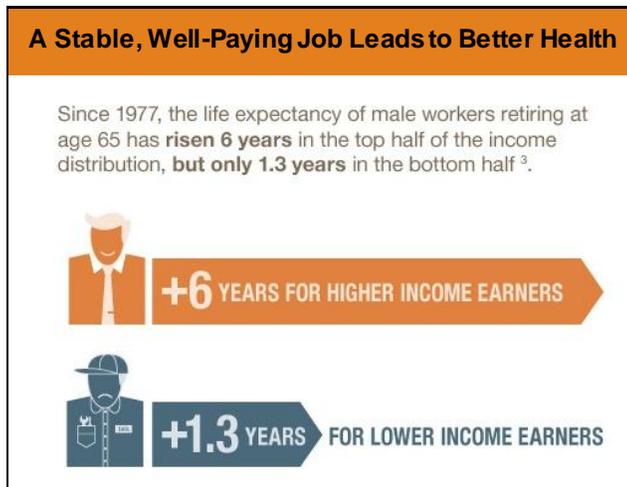
### STABLE, WELL-PAYING JOBS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO BETTER HEALTH

A good-paying job makes it easier for workers to live in healthier neighborhoods, provide quality education to their children, secure child care services, and buy

more nutritious food—all of which are factors that affect health. Good jobs also tend to provide good benefits: for example, 54 percent of the civilian workforce receives health insurance through their employment.<sup>2</sup> Higher earnings also translate to a longer lifespan—since 1977, the life expectancy of male workers retiring at age 65 has risen 5.8 years in the top half of the income distribution, but only 1.3 years in the bottom half.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, unemployed Americans—12.3 million as of October 2012, including five million out of work for at least 27 weeks<sup>4</sup>—face numerous health challenges beyond loss of income. Laid-off workers are 54 percent more likely than those continuously employed to have fair or poor health, and 83 percent more likely to develop a stress-related condition such as stroke, heart attack, heart disease, depression or arthritis.<sup>5</sup> With respect to mental health, a 2010 Gallup Poll found that unemployed Americans were far more likely than employed Americans to be diagnosed with depression and report feelings of sadness and worry.<sup>6</sup>

An additional 10.5 million Americans are employed but classified as “working poor.”<sup>7</sup> This status is associated with health challenges as well. Research shows that insurance coverage is more likely to be offered to employees earning higher salaries.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, those with lower wages are less likely to access preventive care services that insurance may cover, such as screenings for blood pressure and cholesterol.<sup>9</sup>



Sources: <http://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/workingpapers/wp108.html>

## NATIONAL EFFORTS RECOGNIZE LINK BETWEEN EMPLOYMENT AND HEALTH

The National Prevention Strategy, released in June 2011, outlines specific policies that elected officials and community leaders can implement to prevent disease, promote health and control costs. A subsequent Action Plan released in June 2012 showcases more than 200 specific prevention and wellness actions being currently undertaken by federal departments and agencies toward these ends.

The Action Plan highlights strategies designed to promote good jobs and better health. The Departments of Labor and Agriculture, for example, are providing grants to advance approximately 40 high-growth industries in economically disadvantaged regions to promote jobs that provide access to health insurance coverage and prevention services.<sup>10</sup>

## EMPLOYERS CAN TAKE STEPS TO PROMOTE HEALTH AND SAFETY

Good health is not tied only to whether we work—working conditions need to be safe as well. Private sector employees report nearly three million nonfatal workplace injuries and illnesses each year, with more than half being serious enough to result in days missed, job transfer, or restriction.<sup>11</sup> Studies estimate

that workplace injuries and sick days cost employers upwards of \$250 billion annually.<sup>12</sup>

Proactive steps to promote health and safety can improve employees' well-being while saving money. Studies indicate that employers save an average of \$6 for every \$1 spent on workplace wellness programs;<sup>13</sup> health promotion programs reduce sick leave, health plan costs, and worker compensation and disability costs by about 25 percent.<sup>14</sup> Education and training initiatives can also increase awareness of workplace safety hazards and help establish a culture of prevention.

## CONCLUSION

Every day, millions of Americans either look for work or go to work. Their success at finding and/or maintaining a decent job with good benefits will, to a large degree, determine their current and future health.

### WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- [Work Matters for Health](#)
- [How Can Wellness Programs Save Employers Money While Making Employees Healthier and More Productive? \(RWJF\)](#)
- [County Health Rankings: Income](#)
- [County Health Rankings: Employment](#)

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/tus/charts/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/ncs/ebs/sp/ebnr0018.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/workingpapers/wp108.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2831278/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.livescience.com/8122-job-loss-takes-toll-mental-health.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpswp2010.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.kff.org/insurance/snapshot/Health-Benefit-Offer-Rates-and-Employee-Earnings.cfm>

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.commonwealthfund.org/~media/Files/Publications/Issue%20Brief/2004/Oct/Wages%20Health%20Benefits%20and%20Workers%20Health/788\\_Collins\\_wageshltbenefits\\_workershlt\\_ib%20pdf.pdf](http://www.commonwealthfund.org/~media/Files/Publications/Issue%20Brief/2004/Oct/Wages%20Health%20Benefits%20and%20Workers%20Health/788_Collins_wageshltbenefits_workershlt_ib%20pdf.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.healthcare.gov/prevention/nphpphc/2012-npc-action-plan.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/osh.nr0.htm>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.businessnewsdaily.com/1931-workplace-injury-illness.html>

<sup>13</sup> <http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/29/2/304.abstract>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.inspirationaljourneys.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/Meta-evaluation-of-worksite-health-promotion-economic-return-studies-2005-update.pdf>