



 American Counseling Association

2024

Counseling Workforce Survey Report

In partnership with McKinley Advisors

Background

PROJECT DRIVERS, OVERVIEW AND APPROACH

The American Counseling Association (ACA) engaged McKinley Advisors (McKinley) in a critical research study to further ACA's knowledge of licensed professional counseling, in order to raise awareness of the profession, address the shortage of counselors, and support the sustainability of the profession. The project consisted of a series of qualitative and quantitative research phases including:

- **Environmental Scan and Field Statistics:** In this initial phase of work completed in November 2023, McKinley conducted a broad review of publicly available external data and statistics to understand the counseling professions' size and growth rate, as well as identify trends relating to counselor compensation since ACA's 2014 Compensation Salary Survey. Additionally, the Industry Environmental Scan uncovered the pressing challenges facing the counseling profession, to be further explored through subsequent qualitative and quantitative research phases.
- **Member and Stakeholder Interviews:** From October–November 2023, McKinley conducted a series of virtual interviews with thirteen (13) ACA members and staff to further explore the personalized views and experiences related to trends and challenges for the counseling profession and compensation.
- **Licensed Professional Counselor Survey:** In January 2024, an electronic survey was distributed to ACA members, lapsed members, and never-members. The survey collected critical member and nonmember insights on the field's current work environment, pay and benefits, challenges and perceptions of the profession, and market growth potential.
- **Counseling Profession Webinar:** The upcoming webinar on May 10, 2024, will be an opportunity to disseminate key research findings to ACA members and nonmembers, and to leverage the knowledge and experiences of attendees in identifying future advocacy and programmatic initiatives for ACA to consider.



The following survey report includes a comprehensive summary of key findings followed by McKinley's recommendations and considerations to inform future ACA advocacy and research endeavors.

Executive Summary

HIGH-LEVEL FINDINGS

- Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been notable shifts in the counseling landscape, marked by an increase in telehealth utilization, high reports of counselor burnout, and a burgeoning interest in private practice.
- Low pay emerged as a pressing issue, with almost half of survey respondents (45%) not feeling fairly compensated, and over half (55%) citing insufficient pay and/or reimbursement as a significant challenge expected to impact the field of counseling over the next three to five years. For those unlikely to recommend the profession, low pay was a major detractor.
- Compensation increased with tenure and educational degree. Counselors working in community mental health centers and counseling/rehabilitation agencies reported the lowest compensation across all job settings and were among the most likely to have student debt.
- Projected widespread behavioral health provider shortages coupled with providers' feelings of burnout pose significant threats to both the health of the workforce and its pipeline.
- Counselors are seeking access to increased training and educational resources to support and mitigate these challenges.
- Counselor respondents have student loan debt amounts that are 113% higher than the national average student loan debt amount because of high educational costs associated with a career as a licensed professional counselor.
- Although counselors are facing several distinct professional challenges, legislative advancements such as the *Counseling Compact* and the *Mental Health Access Improvement Act* have the potential to increase flexibility of practice and accessibility of care, thereby benefiting clinicians and their clients.
- The research findings present opportunities for ACA to conduct further research, lead advocacy efforts, and develop benefits or training aimed at addressing the distinctive challenges encountered by counselors today.

SURVEY RESPONSE METHODOLOGY

McKinley Advisors administered the ACA Licensed Professional Counselor Survey: an electronic survey that was delivered to 359,792 members and nonmember counseling professionals, as identified by ACA. The survey was closed on January 31, 2024, after fielding for 20 days. Close to half of respondents were members of ACA (47%) and over a third were former members (38%). The survey received a total of 11,226 responses, with a response rate of 3.1%.

Responses	Overall
Total Responses	11,226
<i>Completes</i>	9,228
<i>Partials</i>	1,998
Number of contacts	359,972
Response rate	3.1%¹

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

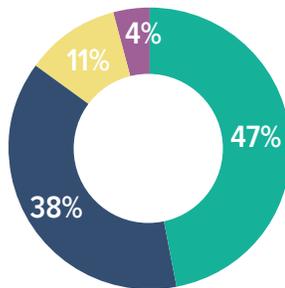
The following section highlights key survey respondent demographics.

Nearly half of survey respondents were current ACA members and 78% of respondents were licensed counselors.

Are you a member of the American Counseling Association (ACA)?

n=10,842; Base: All respondents

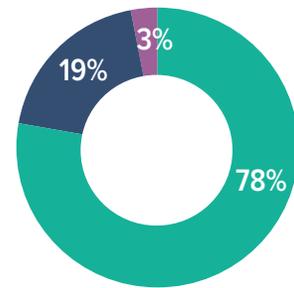
- Yes, I am currently a member of ACA
- No, but I was a member of ACA in the past
- No, I have never been a member of ACA
- Unsure



Are you licensed to practice counseling in your home state?

n=10,495; Base: Employed

- Yes
- No, but I intend to become licensed
- No, and I do not intend to become licensed

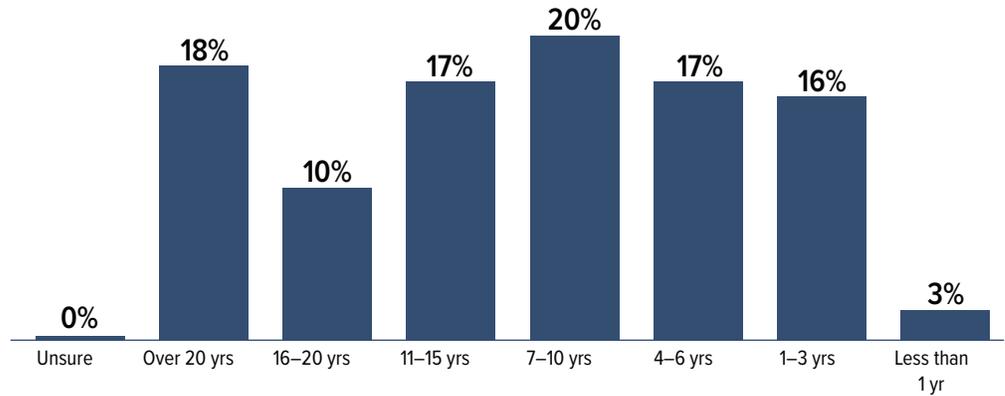


Survey respondent tenure was evenly distributed, with the highest percentage of respondents having seven to ten years of tenure in the counseling profession.

¹Assumes 100% successful deliveries

How long have you been working in the counseling profession?

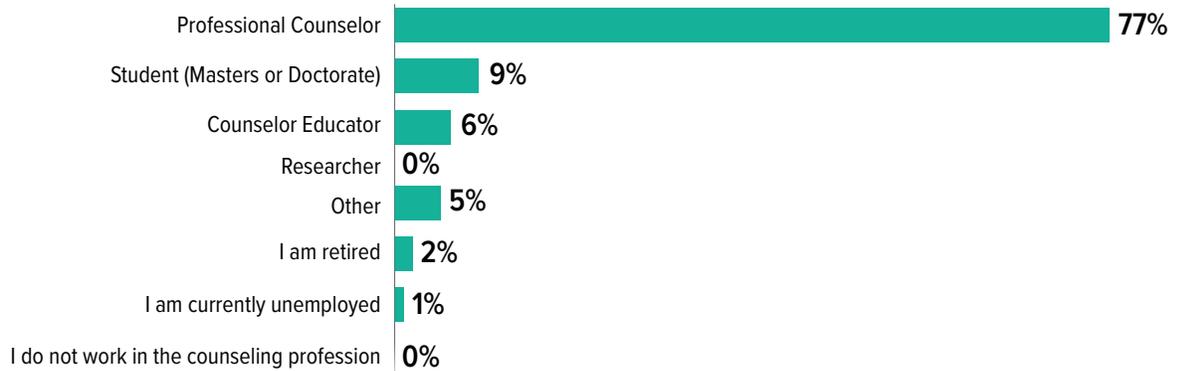
n=8,296; Base: All respondents



A large portion of respondents were professional counselors (77%); 9% were students, and 6% were counselor educators.

Which of the following best describes your primary role in the counseling profession? Please note, the roles below are intended to apply across several settings (e.g., agency, hospital, private practice, government, etc.).

n=10,848; Base: All respondents



Over one third worked in private practice (38%), followed by 11%, working in a community mental health center.

Which of the following best describes your primary work setting?

n=8,940; Base: Employed respondents

Work Setting	%
Private practice/self-employment	38%
Community mental health center	11%
Group Practice	9%
K–12 school	8%
College or university	8%
Counseling/rehab. agency (private)	7%
Counseling/rehab. agency (public)	3%
Hospital	3%

Work Setting	%
Government (state/county/city)	2%
Government (federal)	2%
Correctional facility	1%
Other business/industry setting	1%
Insurance company	1%
Pastoral/regligious organization	1%
Other	5%

Research Findings

COUNSELING PROFESSION LANDSCAPE

An analysis of the *ACA Licensed Professional Counselor Survey* reveals that there are substantial differences in the counselor pay, treatment modality, and revenue source depending on practice setting. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped the counseling profession in undeniable ways, leading to increased use of telehealth and heightened demand. Findings uncover the variability within the current counseling landscape as it relates to practice setting, telehealth use, and income source.

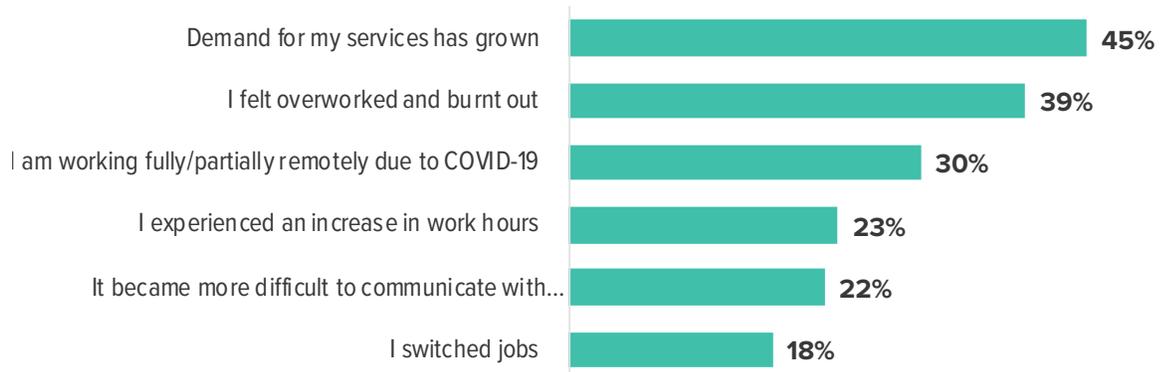
Of 9,295 survey respondents, 45% cite an increased demand for services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and 39% have experienced feelings of burnout. Additionally, one-third of respondents are working fully or partially remotely due to the pandemic.

Heightened Demand of Services

These major trends align with the World Health Organization's estimate that in the first year of the pandemic, the global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased 25%.² Further, adults in the United States remain concerned about elevated levels of mental health and substance use, with a KFF report stating that nearly 90% of adults believe the country is currently facing a mental health crisis.³ Given the high rates of mental health concerns, client demand for mental health services has risen. The American Psychological Association's 2022 *COVID-19 Practitioner Impact Survey* found that demand for anxiety and depression treatment remained high, with 46% of practitioners reporting that they are unable to meet the growing demand for treatment.⁴ 72% of practitioners also reported having longer waitlists than before the pandemic.⁵

How has COVID-19 impacted your work? Select all that apply.

n=9,295; Base: All respondents | Top 6 shown



² (World Health Organization, 2022)

³ (Panchal et al., 2023)

⁴ (American Psychological Association, 2022)

⁵ (American Psychological Association, 2022)

Shift towards Private Practice

Private practice was found to be the most popular job setting among survey respondents, selected by over a third (38%). The high rate of private practitioners is unsurprising, given the ways in which private practice allows clinicians more flexibility and agency over their income and practice modality.

“What I’m seeing is that there’s a burgeoning industry related to private practice. Many students now are thinking, ‘I’m going to finish my degree and I’m going to work in private practice, and I’d like to make a lot more money.’”

—ACA member

“Remote working has shifted a lot of folks to private practice”

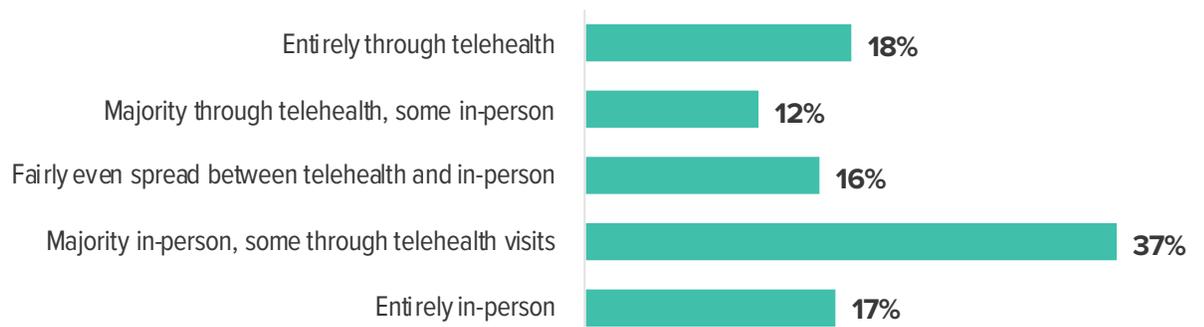
—ACA Member

Delivery of Services

While the traditional delivery of mental health services has been conducted in-person, the COVID-19 pandemic has substantially changed treatment modalities within the profession, especially for those working in private practice. However, telehealth has been an increasingly popular mode of service delivery even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2016–2019, telehealth use doubled from 14% to 28%.⁶ This suggests that while the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated use, telehealth’s increased popularity will likely continue to evolve and expand within the next few years. The results from the *ACA Licensed Professional Counselor Survey* affirmed this widespread adoption of telehealth, as 83% of survey respondents reported seeing clients at least partially through telehealth, with only 17% administering services entirely in-person. Counselors in private practice were among the most likely to provide services to clients entirely/mostly through telehealth (42%), while those working in schools or universities, community centers, or government agencies were most likely to provide services entirely/mostly in-person (78%, 62%, 61%, respectively).

How do you currently see clients?

n=8,786; Base: Employed



⁶ (SAMHSA, 2021)

Insurance Impacts

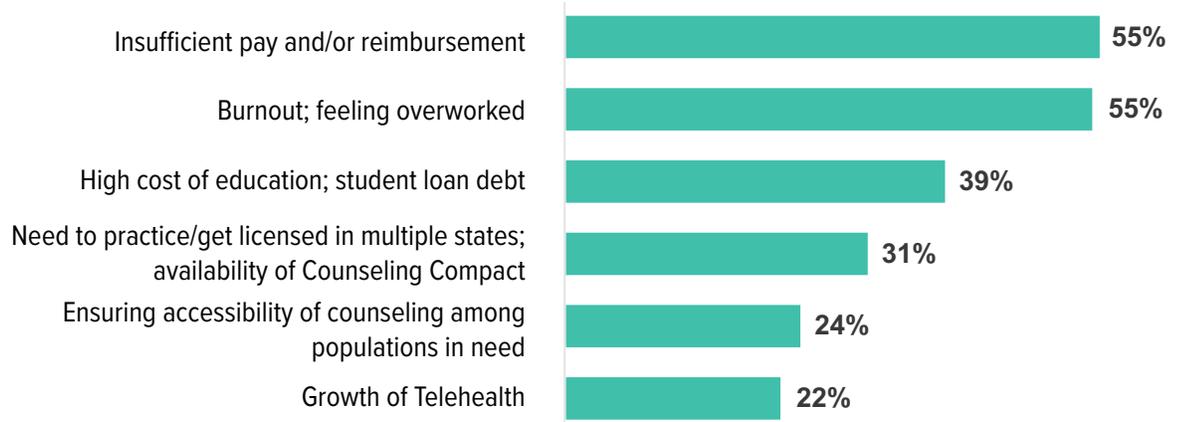
As external trends impact the field, insurance implications have been reported, as well. According to the *ACA Licensed Professional Counselor Salary Survey*, revenue from client visits most commonly came from private and government insurance, varying significantly by work setting. Clinicians in group practice and private practice were most likely to receive revenue predominantly from private insurance (76% and 71%, respectively) rather than government insurance or direct payment. Further, over half (51%) of the clinicians who provide mental health services entirely or mostly via telehealth were also among the most likely to receive revenue predominantly from private insurance.

COUNSELOR TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Survey respondents were asked to identify the top trends and challenges that would most significantly impact the counseling profession over the next three to five years. An analysis of nearly 9,700 survey responses found that insufficient pay and/or reimbursement (55%), burnout (55%), and the high cost of education/student loan debt (39%) were the most frequently identified trends and challenges. Across practice settings, professional role, and educational attainment, compensation and burnout were consistently cited as the top challenges facing counselors.

Which of the following trends or challenges do you believe will most significantly impact the field of counseling over the next 3–5 years? Select up to four choices.

n=8,786; Base: Employed | Top 6 shown



COUNSELOR COMPENSATION

An analysis of the current counselor landscape reveals that there are substantial differences in compensation depending on practice setting, tenure, as well as educational attainment. According to the survey, nearly 55% of respondents identified insufficient compensation as the top trend or challenge facing counselors today, with half of survey respondents not feeling fairly compensated for their work. Insufficient compensation and the high cost of education were among the most common reasons for individuals not to recommend counseling as a profession.

The average salary for full-time respondents was found to be approximately \$71,000, and \$51,000 for part-time respondents. An analysis of counselor compensation reveals clear variations in compensation based on practice setting, tenure, and level of educational attainment.

Average Salary or Hourly Rate

Base: Employed respondents

	Part-time	Full-time
Salary	\$51,663 (n=1,802)	\$70,956 (n=4,095)
Hourly rate	\$61 (n=750)	\$53 (n=1,005)

There is significant variation in counselor compensation across the profession. While the average salary for counselors who completed the *2023 ACA Licensed Professional Counselor Survey* was above the Bureau of Labor Statistics' reported national average wage for all occupations nationally, counselors with a bachelor's degree and those with less tenure in the field (less than three years) reported salaries that are lower than the national average. Further, counselors working in community mental health centers received average annual salaries that are 6.3% lower than the average salary for counselor survey respondents.

Table 1. ACA Survey Response Comparison to BLS Report

Category	Salary
All Occupations, Bureau of Labor Statistics	\$61,900 (2022)
All Counselor Respondents	\$70,956 (2024)
Counselor Respondents with a Bachelor's Degree	\$56,784 (2024)
Counselor Respondents in Community Mental Health Agencies	\$66,469 (2024)
Counselors with a Tenure of Three Years or Less	\$57,399 (2024)

Job Role and Practice Setting

In segmenting salary by job role, counselor educators were found to receive a higher average salary (\$77,171) than professional counselors (\$70,516). This aligns with trends in national compensation data, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics also reporting that counselor educators receive higher salaries than professional counselors in a variety of practice settings (i.e. school counselors, substance abuse and mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists).

Counselor compensation also varies substantially across practice settings. Counselors working in the federal government reported the highest average salary of \$83,243. Private practitioners also received salaries that are higher than the overall average, at \$79,605 per year. Conversely, counselors working in community mental health centers and public counseling agencies reported the lowest average salaries of \$66,469 and \$65,721, respectively.

Average Salary by Job Role and Practice Setting; Base: Full-time respondents

Category	Average Salary
Job Role	
Professional counselor (n=3,483)	\$70,516
Counselor educator (n=324)	\$77,171
Practice Setting	
Private practice (n=1,336)	\$79,605 ⁷
School/college (n=1,136)	\$71,179
College or university (n=490)	\$74,736
K–12 school (n=576)	\$68,154
Community mental health center (n=616)	\$66,469
Counseling/rehabilitation agency (n=353)	\$68,473
<i>Counseling/rehab. agency (private) (n=203)</i>	\$70,602
<i>Counseling/rehab. agency (public) (n=150)</i>	\$65,721
Hospital (n=158)	\$73,213
Group practice (n=119)	\$71,924
Government (n=197)	\$80,340
<i>Government (federal) (n=88)</i>	\$83,243
<i>Government (state/county/city) (n=109)</i>	\$78,251
Other (n=441)	\$72,562

Table 2. Counselor Salaries Segmented by Occupation from the Bureau of Labor Statistics⁸

Occupation	2022 Mean Hourly Wage	2022 Mean Annual Wage
Educational, Guidance, and Career Counselors and Advisors	\$30.87	\$64,200
Marriage and Family Therapists	\$30.44	\$63,300
Rehabilitation Counselors	\$22.13	\$46,020
School and Career Counselors	\$28.92	\$60,140
Substance Abuse, Behavioral Disorder, and Mental Health Counselors	\$27.03	\$56,230

⁷ Salary phrased as "practice income" for those in private practice.

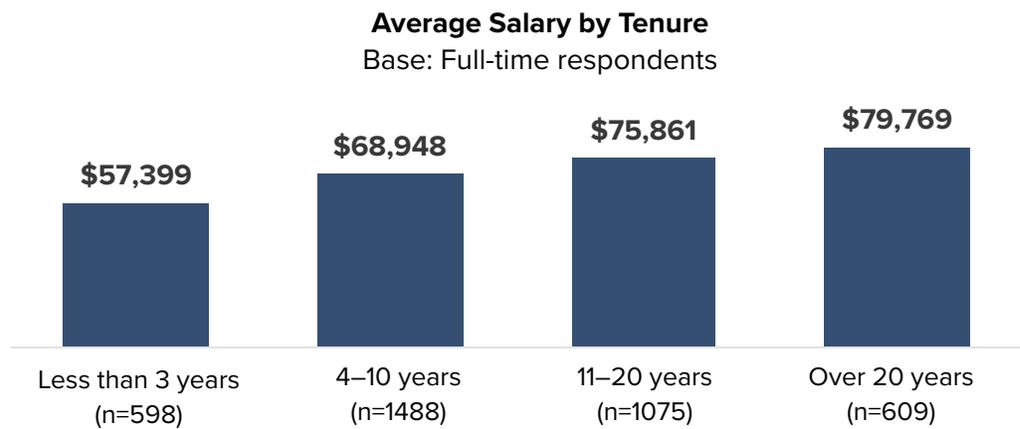
⁸ BLS, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, 2022)

“It seems to be that the clinical mental health counselors, particularly those who do work in community mental health agencies seem to be at the bottom of the salary ladder, which is problematic because these are the counselors who work with people with great needs and people who have high levels of disadvantages across the board.”

—ACA member

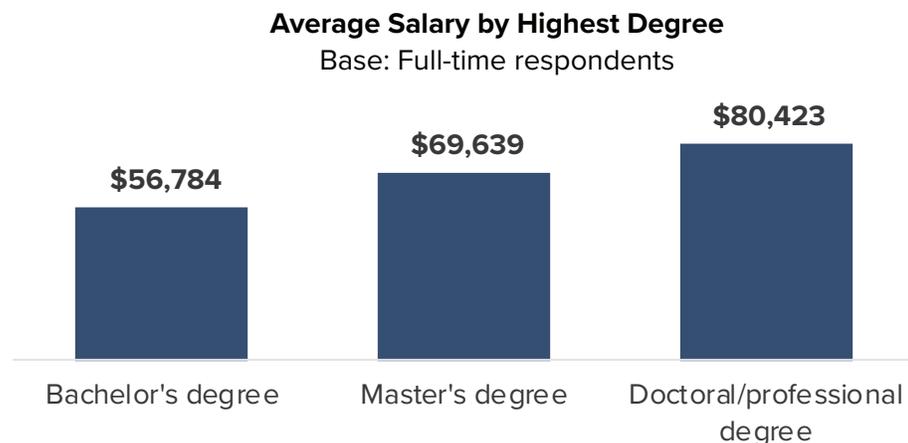
Tenure

As would be expected, salary was found to increase with professional tenure. Those with less than three years of experience in the field reported an average salary of \$57,399, increasing to \$79,769 for those with over 20 years of experience in the field.



Educational Attainment

Educational attainment had a substantial impact on counselor compensation, as compensation was found to increase with degree level. Respondents with a bachelor’s degree received the lowest average compensation of \$56,784 per year, which increased to an average of \$69,639 for master’s degree holders and \$80,423 for those with doctoral or professional degrees.



National compensation data has similarly revealed that annual earnings increase with educational attainment (See Table 3). According to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, counselors, on average, receive salaries that are higher than the mean annual earnings for all workers (\$70,956). However, this may be explained by counselors requiring a higher education than the average worker. When accounting for degree obtained, the average salary of counselor survey respondents is actually lower than the respective median for all professions. In fact, counselors with a doctoral or professional degree reported an average of \$80,423 per year in the survey, which is lower than the median annual earnings for all master’s degree holders according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Table 3. Median Usual Annual Earnings Segmented by Educational Attainment from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022⁹

Educational Attainment	Median Annual Earnings
All workers	\$58,396
Doctoral degree	\$108,316
Professional degree	\$108,160
Master’s degree	\$86,372
Bachelor’s degree	\$74,464

“The overall issue is that counselors get paid so little. There is low pay, student loan debt, inflation...I have known counselors on food stamps and Medicaid because they didn’t get paid enough, and it was the only way they were going to survive. [They are] educated with a master’s degree and license but still need government programs to keep a roof over their head...you must have a master’s degree to be a licensed therapist.”

—ACA member

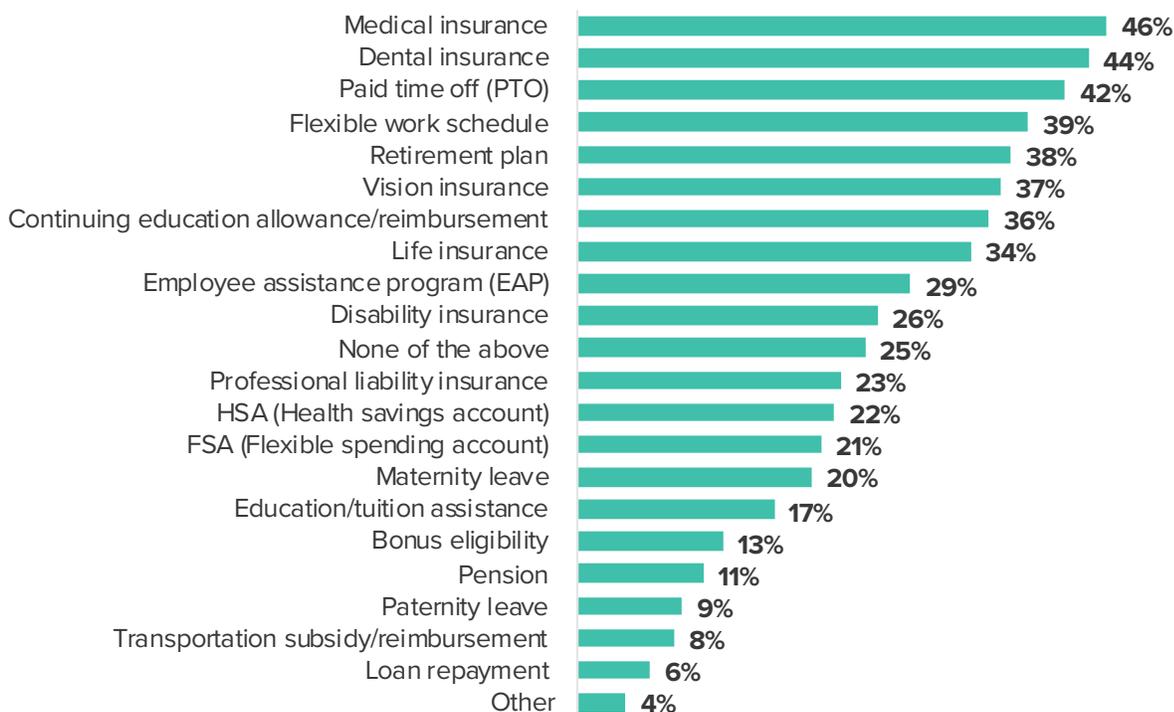
BENEFITS

To understand the full picture of compensation, McKinley asked counseling professionals about the benefits they receive as part of their compensation packages. Survey respondents were most commonly offered insurance coverage, specifically medical and dental, as well as paid time off in their current positions. Since nearly 35% of survey respondents work part-time, it is unsurprising that one quarter (25%) of survey respondents were offered no benefits. Some less commonly-offered benefits include loan repayment, paternity leave, maternity leave and tuition assistance, which may exacerbate challenges related to burnout and high student loan debt.

⁹ (BLS, Earnings and Unemployment Rates by Educational Attainment, 2022)

Please select the benefits you/your employer offer(s).

n=8,517; Base: Employed respondents



EDUCATIONAL COSTS

In addition to insufficient compensation, student loan debt is a major barrier faced by those in the profession. Over a third of survey respondents (39%) cited high cost of education as a top challenge. Many noted that their compensation is not high enough to offset their costly education, thus exacerbating the burden of student loan debt. Since 2006, the total national student loan debt balance has increased by 116%, at an annual rate of 8%.¹⁰ Today, the average student has approximately \$37,338 in student loan debt.¹¹ Student loan debt varies greatly depending on institution attended, educational attainment, and major. However, respondents to this *ACA Licensed Professional Counselor Survey* reported an average student loan debt amount of \$79,434, which is a stark 113% higher than the national average.

“For master’s students, 95% of the time, getting clinical hours is unpaid... internship is 2–3 times per week, it is difficult to work a second job. I had to sacrifice social life, school, when I worked full time on top of my course load. That’s a big barrier, a lot of people really struggle. A lot of people don’t have financial support. I had to take out loans, but that can also be a barrier, private loan interest rates are insane.”

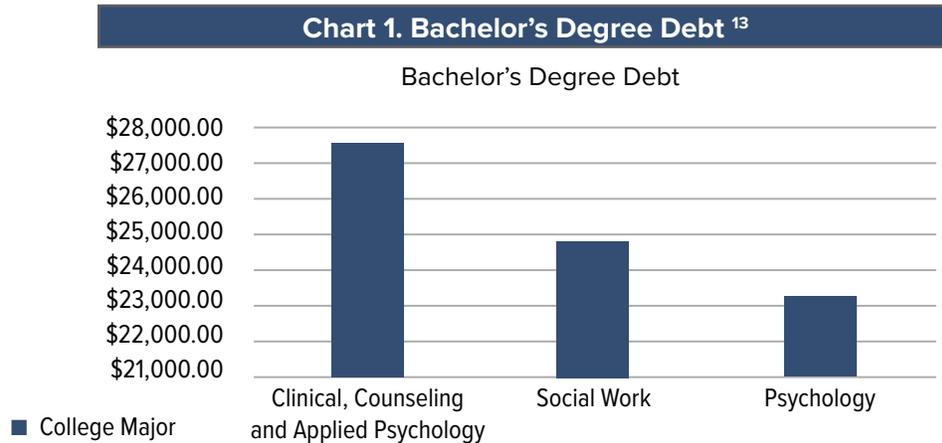
—ACA member

¹⁰ (Hanson, 2023)

¹¹ (Hanson, 2023)

Education Cost of Related Occupations

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, student debt is highest for those pursuing a bachelor's degree in clinical counseling and applied psychology compared to the related fields of social work and psychology. The high costs associated with pursuing a degree in clinical counseling, coupled with the potential need for master's, professional or doctoral degrees in this field, contributes to higher student loan amounts and high barriers of entry into the profession overall.¹²



Counselor Return on Investment for Bachelor's Degree

Analyzing ROI and lifetime earnings can reveal unexpected barriers and costs associated with entering a profession. An analysis conducted by The Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity found that the median return on investment¹⁴ (ROI) for bachelor's degrees is \$306,000.¹⁵ Table 4 analyzes potential ROI for counselors based on the clinical counseling to related professions such as psychology and social work.

Table 4. Median Return on Investment (ROI) for Counseling and Other Related Fields of Study^{16, 17}

Field of Study ¹⁸	Median ROI (Before Completion Adjustment) ¹⁹
Clinical Counseling and Applied Psychology	\$35,936
Psychology	\$59,359
Social Work	\$75,293

¹² (BLS, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2022)

¹³ (Hanson, 2023)

¹⁴ Return on investment (ROI) is calculated by evaluating the present value of lifetime earnings with the bachelor's degree in a particular field, and then subtracting the present value of counterfactual lifetime earnings (includes lost wages while enrolled in school, potential wages for those without the degree) as well as the cost of tuition and expenses associated with the degree.

¹⁵ (Cooper, 2021)

¹⁶ Median ROI was calculated through an analysis of a sample of ten institutions, varying in size and geography, with available data for each of these three majors (Clinical Counseling and Applied Psychology, Psychology, Social Work).

¹⁷ (Cooper, 2021)

¹⁸ Unlike social work or psychology, there are typically a number of majors/fields of study that could lead to a career in counseling. This analysis included the clinical counseling field of study, which would serve as a likely pathway into counseling.

¹⁹ Before completion adjustment is the amount that a student can expect to see their earnings increase due to the college degree, subtracting the direct and indirect costs of college, and assuming on-time graduation.

Social work generated the highest median ROI, followed by psychology. Since the median ROI for a bachelor’s degree in the United States is \$306,000, lower ROIs for clinical counseling and applied psychology, as well as psychology, likely reflect the high costs of education associated with these degrees.

Student debt is highest for those pursuing a bachelor’s degree in Clinical Counseling and Applied Psychology; Social Work; Psychology; compared to social work or psychology. While counselors may receive higher annual salaries in comparison to certain related professionals like social workers or community health workers, a comprehensive assessment of lifetime earnings and ROI considers additional factors such as educational costs. This analysis reveals that degrees in counseling, such as clinical counseling and applied psychology, yield a lower ROI compared to both national averages and related professions such as social work.

Lifetime Earnings for Counselors and Related Professionals

Table 5 shows the lifetime earnings for counselors compared to related professions across varying levels of educational attainment. As seen below, counselors’ lifetime earnings, as well as the lifetime earnings for professionals in similar fields, increases with educational attainment.

Lifetime earnings for counselors, community and social service specialists, and social workers are equal at the master’s or doctoral level. Psychologists have the highest lifetime earnings at \$2.2M, with no lifetime earnings listed for other levels of educational attainment. This implies that there are high barriers of entry into the psychology profession because of the need for a master’s, professional, or doctoral degree to practice. Counselors similarly experience higher barriers of entry into the profession given that counselors must complete some college to start receiving earnings in the field, whereas other professionals, such as social workers as well as community and social service specialists start receiving earnings with a high school diploma. In fact, social workers receive \$1.3M with a high school diploma, whereas counselors receive \$1.3M with some college education. These differences suggest that the field of counseling might have higher barriers to entry compared to other professions when considering the level of educational attainment required for counseling jobs. Lastly, counselors with a bachelor’s degree earn approximately \$100,000–\$200,000 less than social workers or community and social services specialists. This suggests that to receive lifetime earnings that are comparable to related professions, counselors would likely need to pursue a master’s, professional or doctoral degree.²⁰

Table 5. Lifetime Earnings for Counselors and Related Professionals²¹

Occupation	High School Diploma	Some College	Bachelor’s	Master’s/Professional/ Doctoral
Median Earnings For Bachelor’s Degree	–	–	\$2,200,000	\$2,600,000–\$3,600,000
Counseling	–	\$1,300,000	\$1,500,000	\$2,000,000
Community and Social Services Specialist	\$1,200,000	\$1,400,000	\$1,700,000	\$2,000,000
Psychologists	–	–	–	\$2,200,000
Social Workers	\$1,300,000	\$1,300,000	\$1,600,000	\$2,000,000

²⁰ (Carnevale et al., 2011)

²¹ (Carnevale et al., 2011)

Counselor Debt

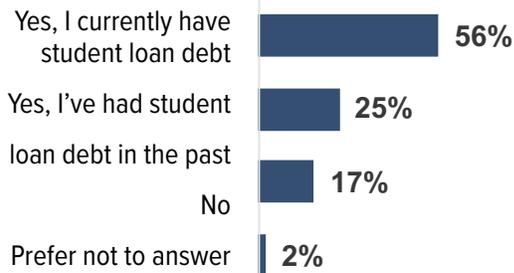
Of the nearly 9,800 counseling professionals surveyed by ACA, approximately 56% currently have student debt and 25% had student loan debt previously. The total average student loan debt for survey respondents was found to be \$79,434, which exceeds average salary (\$70,956) and is slightly higher than the calculated average student loan debt amount reported by the BLS for master’s-level clinical, counseling and applied psychology students (\$79,327).²²

Table 6: Student Debt by Major and Degree Type from the Bureau of Labor Statistics

Major	Total Debt
Bachelor’s	
Clinical Counseling and Applied Psychology	\$27,439
Social Work	\$24,863
Psychology	\$23,292
Masters	
Clinical, Counseling, and Applied Psychology	\$51,888
Psychology	\$43,403
Doctoral	
Clinical, Counseling, and Applied Psychology	\$174,623
Psychology	\$112,529

Have you ever had student loan debt?

n=9,409; Base: All respondents



Please enter the total amount of student loan debt you have ever had in U.S. dollars.

A numerical answer is required.

n=7241; Base: Respondents who have/have had student debt

Average student loan debt:

\$79,434

Those most likely to currently have student loan debt includes students (72%), professionals working in community mental health care settings (65%), and those in counseling/rehabilitation agency settings (65%), the latter two of which also reported receiving the lowest average salaries. Student loan debt amounts were comparatively high for counselors working in the government or hospital work setting, along with those in the lowest-paid settings of community mental health centers and counseling/rehabilitation agencies. Professional counselors accrued more student debt than counselor educators, and early career professionals accrued more than their tenured counterparts. Race and gender had a stark influence on debt, with non-white women reporting the highest student loan debt across all survey segments.

²² (Hanson, 2023)

Average Total Student Loan Debt Segmented
Base: Respondents who have/have had student debt

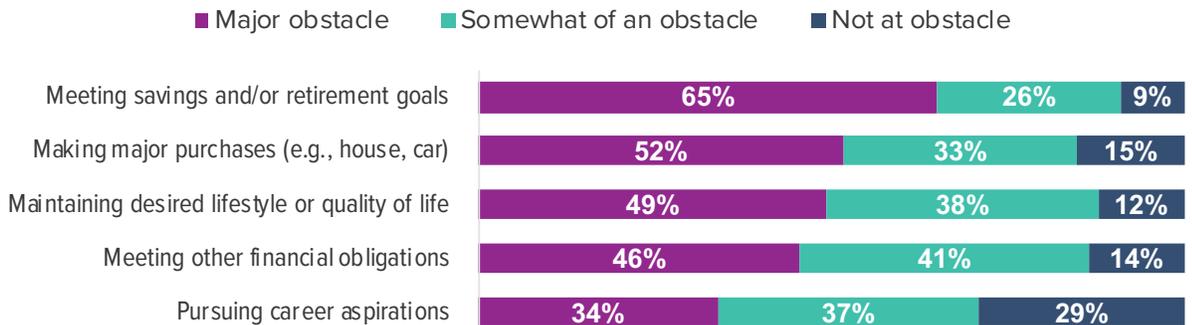
Segment	Total Student Loan Debt
Job role	
Professional counselors	\$81,483
Counselors	\$73,409
Work setting	
Government	\$90,487
Hospital	\$90,054
Community mental health center	\$87,150
Counseling/rehab. agency	\$84,982
Private practice/self-employed	\$77,923
Group practice	\$77,655
College/school	\$76,636
Tenure	
Less than 20 years	\$85,741
20+ years	\$51,921
Gender	
Women	\$80,961
Men	\$70,896
Race/Ethnicity	
White or Caucasian	\$73,215
Another race/ethnicity	\$95,304
Gender by Race/Ethnicity	
Women, white or Caucasian	\$73,869
Women, another race/ethnicity	\$97,579
Men, white or Caucasian	\$67,730
Men, another race/ethnicity	\$81,991

IMPACTS AND OBSTACLES OF COMPENSATION AND DEBT

A study conducted by Liu found that the number of entry-level jobs offering student loan repayment benefits has doubled since 2019²³; however, out of 8,517 survey respondents, only 4% had access to loan repayment programs through their employer. Given the low percentage of employers offering loan repayment benefits to counselors, it is important to note that the existing *Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program* as well as income-driven loan repayment programs typically only consider a borrower eligible if their income is below a certain threshold, and may impose repayment periods that could be 20 or 25 years in length. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the majority of survey respondents considered their student debt to be either a major obstacle or somewhat of an obstacle across all categories tested (71% to 91%). Survey respondents report impacts of student debt to include barriers in achieving their savings and/or retirement goals (65% major obstacle), the purchasing of large assets such as a house or car (52%), maintaining a desired quality of life (49%), meeting other financial obligations (46%), and pursuing career aspirations (34%).

How large of an obstacle is/was your student loan debt in achieving the following?

n=7,481; Base: Respondents with student loan debt



Further, debt was most likely to pose as an obstacle for students (55% major obstacle), those with less tenure in the field (53%-55%), counselors working in community mental health centers (54%), as well as bachelor's degree holders (53%). These segments of survey respondents also reported lower average full-time salaries in comparison to counselors working in other practice settings, counselors with more tenure, as well as master's or doctoral degree holders. This suggests that compensation and student loan debt are closely intertwined. Further resumed student loan payments in September 2023 have the potential to exacerbate the hardships associated with having student loans, along with high interest rates.

²³ (Liu, 2023)

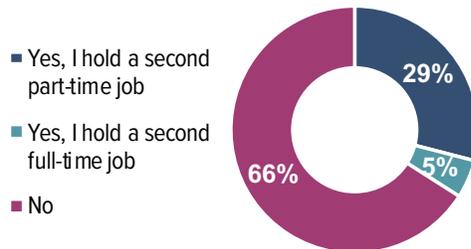
²⁴ (U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid)

Need for a Second Job

Given these trends in counselor compensation, it is unsurprising that nearly one third of survey respondents hold a second part-time job (29%), largely for additional pay (77%). Of the 8,863 survey respondents asked, 29% indicated that they work a second part-time job, and 5% work a second full-time job. Other common reasons respondents held a second job were to further pursue their interests (34%) and to advance their career (27%). It is also important to note that 12% are accessing specific benefits through the additional job. Given that 87% of survey respondents are not eligible for overtime pay, holding an additional job allows counselors to supplement their incomes with additional pay.

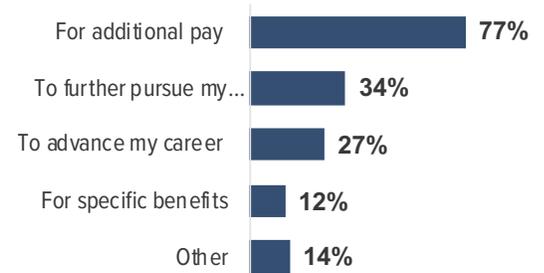
Do you hold a second job or position?

n=8,863; Base: Employed respondents



For what purpose do you hold a second job or position? Select all that apply.

n=3,007; Base: Holds second job



Among those most likely to hold a second job were those in school or university settings (43%), which included counselor educators (46%) and those with a doctoral/professional degree (49%). It is likely that these professionals have more flexibility in their schedules given school breaks. Their ability to hold a second job may explain the higher average salary for counselor educators compared to professional counselors (\$77,171 vs. \$70,516).

BURNOUT

In addition to insufficient compensation for counselors, burnout was a top challenge identified by survey respondents (55%). For those who were unlikely to recommend counseling as a profession, burnout was cited as a top detractor. Those in community mental health centers were among those least likely to recommend counseling as a career (37%) and among the most likely to cite burnout as a top challenge (65%). Other groups that commonly cited burnout as a top challenge were those under the age of 40 (65%) and professionals with licensure in only one state (58%).

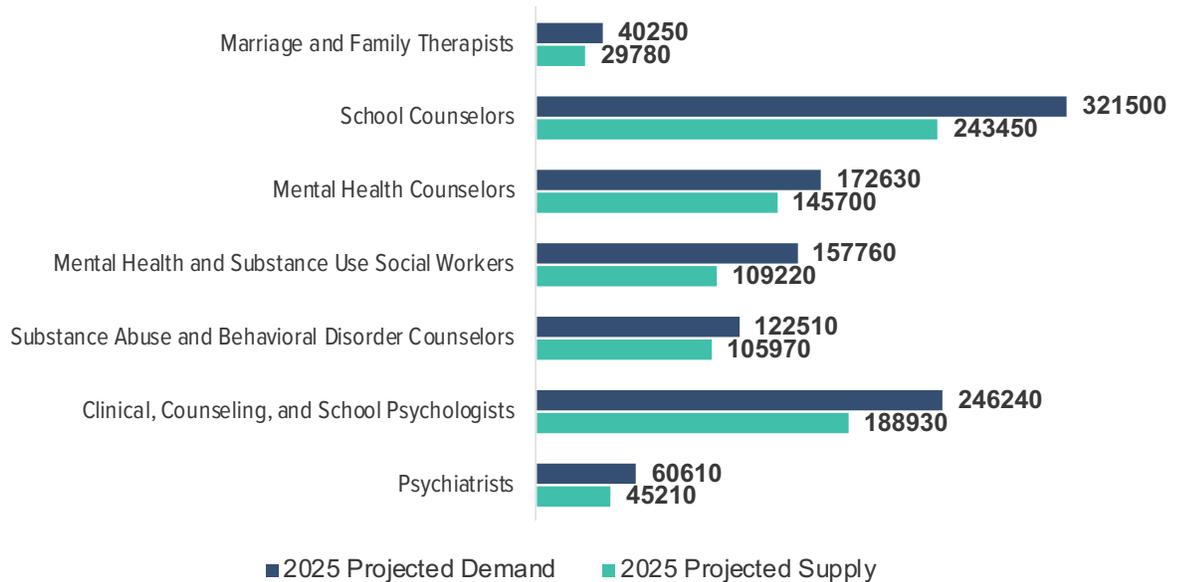
“When I went into the field, I just wanted to help people and focus on my clients. However, it was a rude awakening, the reality of the environment you are expected to work in. You get so little in return, I felt like the life got sucked out of me, I had nothing left to give.”

—ACA member

Provider Supply and Demand

The pandemic has certainly exacerbated feelings of burnout for healthcare professionals, as 45% of survey respondents noted that the pandemic resulted in an increase in demand for their services. Additionally, according to the Center for Disease Control, 46% of health workers reported feeling burnt out often or very often in 2022, which was a 14% increase from 2018.²⁵ Projections from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services predict widespread shortages for behavioral health providers by 2025.²⁶ As seen in Chart 2, behavioral health provider demand is projected to outpace supply for each type of behavioral health provider. Since these projections were released before the Covid-19 pandemic, it is reasonable to assume that demand for behavioral health providers has increased, creating more significant shortages than is represented in Chart 2.

Chart 2: Behavioral Health Provider Projected Supply and Demand



TRAINING AND SUPPORT NEEDS

Along with heavy workload and feelings of burnout, counselors identified the need for increased support and trainings. Of the 10,360 survey respondents asked about their perceptions of the profession, only 52% strongly agreed that they currently have the training and resources needed to effectively do their job. Students and new professions were the most likely groups to report needing additional training and resources.

When asked about the types of training needed, survey respondents identified the following:

- 1. Specialization:** Respondents cited the need for specialized training to better meet the needs of clients. For example, respondents are seeking training related to grief/loss, addiction, EMDR, and dissociative disorders.
- 2. Affordable and Accessible:** Respondents identified the need for more affordable training/CEUs. Trainings are commonly perceived as unaffordable and inaccessible, especially for those with high student loan debt amounts or those receiving insufficient compensation.

²⁵ (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023)

²⁶ (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016)

3. Business-Related: As private practice becomes an increasingly popular practice setting, counselors are seeking trainings that provide support on running a private practice, as well as guidance related to billing insurance companies, note-taking and documentation of sessions, and leadership/management. Those with supervisory responsibilities were more likely to cite burnout as an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may help explain the need for increased training relating to leadership and management.

“I have absolutely no training in how insurance works and I feel like the choices are either completely fumbling in private practice or losing up to 40% of my income to credentialing/billing services.”

—Survey Respondent

4. Licensure Barriers: Research conducted by Motivo found that mental health professionals face high barriers when pursuing licensure, with 57% of those who earn a master’s degree in mental health never becoming licensed.²⁷ For those who complete a masters of counseling, Motivo estimated that in 2021 only 46.4% of students obtained licensure, an even lower rate than mental health master’s degrees overall.²⁸ The most common barriers to attaining licensure included costs associated with licensure, inadequate pay, a complex licensure process, and burnout. Survey respondents are also seeking greater availability of affordable, quality supervision. The limited availability of experience supervisors will certainly impact the number of licensed counselors entering the profession.

5. Ethics on Emerging Technologies:

Counseling professions are also seeking training related to AI, telehealth, and other emerging technologies, to ensure that they are practicing ethically and are compliant with the regulatory environment. A study conducted by Glueckauf et al. found that 90% of psychologists expressed the need for mental health care practitioners to undergo training about the potential clinical, legal and ethical concerns related to telehealth.²⁹ Additionally, when surveyed, mental health providers cited ethical and regulatory concerns with using telehealth and identified the need for specialized training in the future.³⁰

“I’m concerned about AI and what that has to do with the profession. So, I’m just thinking about artificial intelligence... I’m curious about how that’s going to impact the profession.”

—ACA Member

As the counseling industry changes in response to technological advancements, a growing interest in private practice, and high costs associated with pursuing a career in counseling it will be critical for counselors to have accessible trainings and other necessary resources.

²⁷ (McCrickard, n.d.)

²⁸ (McCrickard, n.d.)

²⁹ (Sampaio et al., 2021)

³⁰ (Sampaio et al., 2021)

Future of the Counseling Profession

Despite these identified challenges faced by counselors in the field legislative advancements have the potential to positively shape the profession and increase the visibility of the profession as a whole.

LEGISLATIVE ADVANCEMENTS

Counseling Compact

The *Counseling Compact* is a movement in the legislative space which allows professional counselors who are licensed and residing in a compact member state to practice in other compact member states without the need for multiple licenses. To date, 30 states across the country have enacted the *Counseling Compact*³¹

Of the 7,578 survey respondents asked about multi-state licensure, 15% are currently licensed in multiple states and are interested in obtaining licensure in more states. 54% are not licensed in multiple states but are interested in doing so. With 69% of survey respondents interested in multi-state licensure, the *Counseling Compact* proves to be a promising advancement to provide counselors more flexibility in their practice without facing geographic constraints. However, counselors also identified implementation challenges associated with the Compact's success due to regulatory nuances that exist across states.

“Licensure portability is something that we feel is really important... So I think that's a very positive development. I think that we're going through some of the pains that you go through when you're trying to implement something new because some states have very strong licensure laws.”

—ACA Member

“[With] licensure portability, I think it's absolutely wonderful and I think it's definitely needed. I wish we had more states buy in. I do think it's going to be interesting to see the impact...[Will there be] instances of ethical violations, patient and client care violations because someone doesn't know the laws or rules in another state?”

—ACA member

³¹ (Counseling Compact, n.d.)

Mental Health Access Improvement Act

The *Mental Health Access Improvement Act*, passed in 2022, will both increase access to telehealth services, as well as provide Medicare reimbursement for licensed professionals, specifically allowing licensed professional counselors to bill Medicare for services provided. This is significant because Medicare is projected to cover approximately 77 million people by 2030.³² In addition to increasing access to mental health care for clients, this legislation has important implications for counselors.³³ An American Counseling Association survey of members found that nearly 72% of counselors expressed interest in pursuing enrollment as Medicare-eligible providers.³⁴ This would both expand the mental health workforce, but also create more cost-effective services.³⁵

“[Mental Health Access Improvement Act] that’s significant because that’s a population we have locked out of serving for 30 years or longer.”

—ACA Member

With 83% of surveyed counselors providing mental health care at least partially via telehealth, the *Mental Health Access Improvement Act* has the potential to transform the counseling profession by providing more flexibility for counselors over their treatment modality. Further, 24% of respondents indicated that ensuring accessibility of counseling among populations in need is one of the top trends or challenges with the potential to significantly impact the counseling profession within the next three to five years. The *Mental Health Access Improvement Act* has the potential to increase the accessibility of mental health services, particularly for Medicaid recipients, who disproportionately have more severe mental health concerns.³⁶

“This Act improves that greatly. Equity and equality. Improved quality of care, continuation of care; adds to awareness of the profession. People are listening; seeing the importance of mental health from policymakers.”

—ACA Member

Counselor Identity

Along with the ways in which the *Counseling Compact* and the *Mental Health Access Improvement Act* increases the visibility of the counseling profession, counselors have also witnessed an increased awareness and demand for mental health services.

³² (Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, 2023)

³³ (Mental Health Access Improvement Act, 2022); (Kalogredis, 2023)

³⁴ (Farrell et al., 2022)

³⁵ (Farrell et al., 2022)

³⁶ (Ford & Michener, 2022)

Given the relative newness of the counseling profession compared to related professions such as social work or psychology, ACA members acknowledge that the public oftentimes misunderstands the distinction between counselors and related professions. These legislative advancements have the potential to promote clarity around the counselor identity, primarily by introducing more uniformity in the licensure process across states.

Optimistic Outlook

Despite the identified trends and challenges facing the profession, survey respondents are overwhelmingly optimistic about the future of the profession. For example, while insufficient compensation was identified as a challenge by nearly 55% of respondents, only 2% pursued a career in counseling for the salary or pay. Instead, nearly three-quarters of respondents pursued a career in counseling to have a positive impact and help others.

Respondents largely feel positively about their work, and most intend to stay in the field in the near term. Of the 10,360 respondents, 68% strongly agree that they enjoy their work, 66% strongly agree that they feel appreciated by their clients, and 71% intend to continue working in the counseling field three years from now. Lastly, only 11% of survey respondents indicated that they are either not very likely or not at all likely to recommend counseling as a career to a college or university student, suggesting that 89% of survey respondents are optimistic about the future of the profession.

MARKET GROWTH

Additionally, the counseling profession has experienced substantial growth within the last ten years. Despite the shortage of behavioral health professionals, the counselor workforce is projected to continue expanding. Between 2014 and 2022, the total number of employed counselors increased approximately 36%. During this period, nearly all counseling occupations identified by the Bureau of Labor Statistics experienced an increase in the number of professionals employed.³⁷ An analysis of counseling program enrollment data from CACREP similarly found that student enrollment in counseling programs has outpaced the growth in the number of participating institutions between 2014–2022.³⁸

“When you say I'm a counselor, there's a whole host of follow-up questions...I think that our profession of counseling has to do more with creating strong identity statements, to teach our students, so that they also can speak. Counseling is a newer profession compared to social or for psychology and I think that has contributed to this issue.”

—ACA Member

³⁷ (BLS, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, 2022); (BLS, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, 2014)

³⁸ (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2014); (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2022)

Table 7. Number of Institutions and CACREP-Accredited Counseling Programs³⁹

	Number of Institutions Included in CACREP Report	Number of CACREP-Accredited Counseling Programs Included
2014 Annual Report	284	639
2022 Annual Report	434	909
Percent Change	52.8%	42.3%

Table 8. Total Number of CACREP-Accredited Programs with Enrollment Figures⁴⁰

	Total Enrollment in 2014	Total Enrollment in 2022	Total Enrollment % Change
Total Enrollment	39,849	71,844	80%

Counselors have positive perceptions about the future of the counseling profession. Similarly, an analysis of enrollment data suggests that the field has experienced significant growth in the past 10 years, with young professionals entering the field at high rates.

Broad Overview of Mental Health Care Market Size

In recent years, the mental health care market has shown consistent growth, as evidenced by an analysis of various metrics that measure growth within a sector. An analysis of various growth metrics such as industry market size, total employment for various market segments, and employment growth suggests that the mental health care market is steadily growing. For example, mental health and substance abuse clinics experienced a 4.0% increase per year in market size between 2017 and 2022.⁴¹ Similarly, the market size of the psychologists, social workers and marriage counselors industry has grown an average of 6.3% per year between 2017 and 2022.⁴² Further, the U.S. behavioral health market is projected to grow by \$49.3bn in the next decade, and is expected to reach \$136.6bn by 2032.⁴³ These figures firmly demonstrate that the market for mental health services is steadily increasing.

³⁹ (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2014); (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2022)

⁴⁰ (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2014); (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2022)

⁴¹ (IBIS World, 2023)

⁴² (IBIS World, 2023)

⁴³ (Precedence Research, 2023)

Licensed Professional Counselor Employment Growth

See Table 9 and Chart 3 below for licensed professional counselors' total employment as well as the percent change in employment between 2014 and 2022.

Table 9. Total Employment by Counseling Occupation, 2014–2022^{44, 45}

Occupation ^{46, 47}	Total Employed 2014	Total Employed 2022 ⁴⁸	Percent Change in Employment, 2014–2022
Counselors, All Other ⁴⁹	28,240	37,270	31.9%
Educational, Guidance, School, and Vocational Counselors	246,280	308,000	25.0%
Marriage and Family Therapists	30,150	62,080	105.8%
Rehabilitation Counselors	103,890	82,420	–20.6%
Substance Abuse and Behavioral Disorder Counselors, and Mental Health Counselors	205,190	344,970	68.1%
Total	613,750	834,740	36.0%

⁴⁴ (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, 2014)

⁴⁵ (BLS, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, 2022)

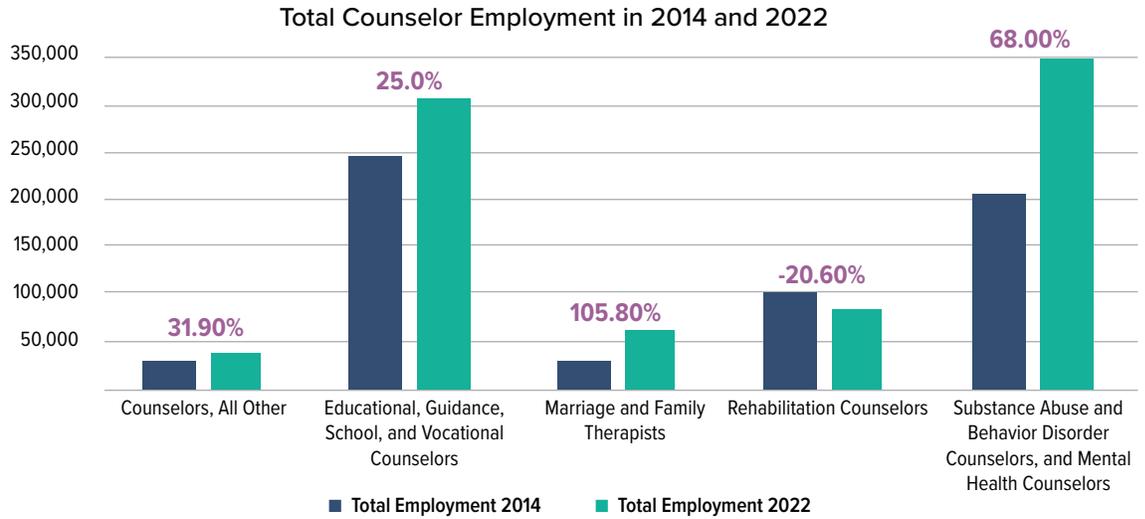
⁴⁶ (Classifications for these occupations were informed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics Standard Occupational Classification System Definitions for Counselors (2010).

⁴⁷ (Classifications for these occupations were informed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics Standard Occupational Classification System Definitions for Counselors (2018) and can be found in Appendix A.

⁴⁸ The May 2022 Occupation Profiles are the most recent data available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

⁴⁹ *Counselors, All Other* refers to counselors that do not fall into one of the counseling occupations from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. E.g. Grief Counselors

Chart 3. Total Employment by Counseling Occupation, 2014–2022



Between 2014 and 2022, the total number of employed counselors increased approximately 36%. During this period, nearly all counseling occupations identified by the Bureau of Labor Statistics experienced an increase in the number of professionals employed. The occupation with the most substantial growth in terms of total employment was marriage and family therapists, with an increase of 105.8% in total employment since 2014 (Table 9).

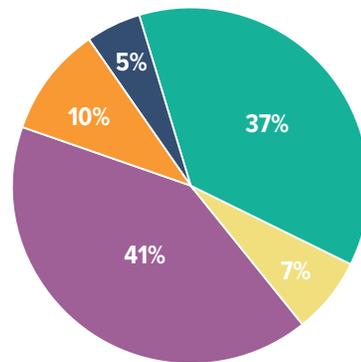
In 2014, based on figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the most popular counseling occupations were educational, guidance, and career counselors and advisors, followed by mental health counselors.

Similarly, in 2022, the most popular counseling occupations continued to be substance abuse, behavioral disorder and mental health counselor followed by educational, guidance, school, and vocational counselors. Since 2014, both occupations saw substantial employment growth of 68.0% and 25.0%, respectively.

Chart 3. Total Employment by Counseling Occupation, 2022⁵⁰

Counseling Occupations

- Educational, Guidance, and Career Counselors and Advisor
- Marriage and Family Therapists
- Substance Abuse, Behavioral Disorder, and Mental Health Counselors
- Rehabilitation Counselors
- Counselors, All Other



⁵⁰ (BLS, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, 2022)

A Look Forward from ACA

The counseling profession is facing critical workforce shortages, exacerbated by increased demand for mental health services, barriers in the licensure process and disparities in compensation and benefits.

ACA is directly addressing these challenges to move the association and the profession forward. Our strategic initiatives focus on supporting counselors and the growing mental health needs of individuals and communities.

- **Advocacy & Engagement**

ACA guides counselors in advocating for the mental health and well-being of their communities and clients, as well as the profession.

- **Community & Partnerships**

ACA nurtures the counseling community and mutually beneficial partnerships to advance the profession and expand its footprint.

- **Education & Awareness**

ACA provides broad-reaching education for counselors across their career trajectory. ACA amplifies counseling as a viable path to wellness and delineates counselor identity and counseling's position in the mental health field.

- **Research & Practical Application**

ACA curates and disseminates rigorous, innovative research and scholarly activity to continually advance data-informed practice.



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The American Counseling Association extends its thanks to **HPSO** for their sponsorship and support of this vital market research project.