

To Avoid Projected Shortages, the US Must Produce 712,000 Additional Credentials Aligned with High-Paying Middle-Skills Occupations Annually Through 2032, Georgetown University Report Says

Projected certificates and associate's degrees shortages present substantial opportunity for men and women of all races/ethnicities to earn credentials that align with high-paying middle-skills occupations.

(Washington, D.C., June 24, 2025) The US is facing shortages of middle-skills credentials (certificates and associate's degrees) that provide pathways for early-career workers to secure jobs in occupations that are high-paying for workers without a bachelor's degree. New research from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) finds that these projected shortages present substantial opportunities for men and women of all races/ethnicities to increase attainment of credentials aligned with high-paying middle-skills occupations. High-paying middle-skills occupations for early-career middle-skills workers (ages 18–35) offer median annual earnings of more than \$55,000, but just one in four of these early-career workers is in a job that meets this threshold.

Bridging the Middle-Skills Gap: Connecting a Diverse Workforce to Economic Opportunity Through Certificates and Associate's Degrees examines the projected shortages of credentials that offer pathways to high-paying middle-skills occupations across five occupational groups. CEW researchers determined that the US is facing an annual shortage of nearly 712,000 certificates and associate's degrees aligned with high-paying middle-skills occupations nationwide. These shortages, which are projected to persist at least through 2032, fall in four occupational groups: blue-collar (360,800), management and professional office (253,000), STEM (87,500), and protective services (10,600). Healthcare is the only high-paying occupational group for early-career middle-skills workers that does not face a projected national shortage of middle-skills credentials, in part because healthcare employers increasingly prefer to fill these open positions with workers who have a bachelor's degree. In healthcare occupations, better connectivity from middle-skills credentials to bachelor's degrees would offer workers more economic opportunity.

“Credential shortages are troubling because the US is in dire need of qualified workers to keep our infrastructure intact, our communities safe, and our industries at the forefront of innovation. We must do more to improve access to and boost the attainment of credentials that align with high-paying middle-skills occupations and to smooth the transition from school to employment,” said Emma Nyhof McLeod, lead author and senior policy analyst at CEW. “Although earning an aligned credential doesn't guarantee a job in a high-paying occupation, workers with these credentials who find work in aligned lower-paying occupations still earn more than workers in lower-paying occupations that don't align with these credentials.”

The prospects of landing in a high-paying occupation are mixed. Workers with aligned credentials have the highest chance of finding a job in high-paying middle-skills STEM occupations (73%), followed by high-paying middle-skills protective services occupations (58%), high-paying middle-skills management and professional office occupations (47%), and high-paying blue-collar middle-skills occupations (37%).

The racial/ethnic and gender demographics of workers in high-paying middle-skills occupations tell a clear story. Men hold the majority of jobs in both high-paying and lower-paying middle-skills occupations in three occupational groups (blue-collar, protective services, and STEM), and white men alone hold the plurality of high-paying middle-skills jobs in four of five occupational groups: blue-collar (68%), protective services (64%), STEM (58%), and management and professional office (49%).

Women account for only 30% of high-paying middle-skills management and professional office employment, despite holding 53% of lower-paying middle-skills jobs in this occupational group. This may be because women are more likely to earn middle-skills credentials that offer pathways to lower-paying middle-skills management and professional office occupations, even as women earn the majority of all middle-skills credentials aligned with this occupational group.

Women also earn the majority of middle-skills credentials aligned with healthcare occupations and account for more than 80% of high-paying and lower-paying middle-skills employment in these occupations. White women account for the majority of workers in both high-paying and lower-paying middle-skills healthcare occupations, though they hold a larger share of high-paying than lower-paying middle-skills healthcare jobs. While men earn just 16% of middle-skills healthcare credentials, men of all races/ethnicities who earn these credentials are more likely than women of all races/ethnicities to earn them in programs that align with high-paying healthcare occupations. White men are the most likely to earn credentials that align with high-paying healthcare occupations (61%), while Black/African American women are the least likely to earn these credentials (22%).

“Credential shortages present an opportunity to diversify high-paying middle-skills occupations and strengthen the American economy by drawing qualified workers from the widest talent pool possible. But first, we need to address long-standing disparities in credential attainment and the labor market,” said co-author and CEW Director Jeff Strohl. “Increasing the number of work-based learning opportunities, providing integrated academic and career support services, and addressing biases in hiring and promotion are necessary to clear the pathway to opportunity in high-paying middle-skills occupations.”

As described in the report, filling credential shortages more equitably would mean that, for men and women of all races/ethnicities, the new share of credentials earned aligning with high-paying occupations in each occupational group would match the current share of all credentials earned in each occupational group. Filling credential shortages equitably would require an increase of more than 500% in credentials aligned with high-paying blue-collar middle-skills occupations among men and women of all racial/ethnic backgrounds, along with substantial increases in credentials aligned with STEM, management and professional office, and protective services occupations.

To view the full report, including a more in-depth discussion of policy and practice recommendations for the high-paying middle-skills workforce, visit: <https://cew.georgetown.edu/bridging-middle-skills-gap>.

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