

Georgetown University Research Highlights Substantial Shortages of Credentials Aligned with High-Paying Middle-Skills Occupations in 55 Largest US Metro Areas

Nationwide shortages are expected in blue-collar, management, protective services, and STEM occupations.

(Washington, D.C., Sept. 5, 2024) Workers with middle-skills credentials provide essential medical and public services, build and maintain critical infrastructure, and help run key business operations, among other vital societal functions. These workers can earn a high salary—in some occupations, even more than the typical worker with a bachelor’s degree and similar job experience. New research from CEW, supported by JPMorganChase, finds that middle-skills providers must significantly adjust their current production of middle-skills credentials (certificates and associate’s degrees) to address impending shortages in locally produced credentials that align with these high-paying middle-skills occupations.

Missed Opportunities: Credential Shortages in Programs Aligned with High-Paying Middle-Skills Jobs in 55 US Metro Areas examines the production of middle-skills credentials that prepare workers for high-paying occupations in metro areas with populations exceeding 1 million. It compares current production with the projected number of job openings for workers holding these credentials through 2032. An online data tool accompanies the brief to aid regional planners, educational institutions, and job training providers in making crucial decisions about program investment and expansion.

“High-paying middle-skills jobs are relatively rare: only 25% of early-career middle-skills workers earn more than most young workers with a bachelor’s degree,” said Zachary Mabel, lead author and director of research at CEW. “Nevertheless, the projected demand for high-paying middle-skills workers exceeds the current supply in certain sectors and localities. In many places experiencing shortages, middle-skills providers need to substantially expand their program capacity to prepare future workers for local jobs in high-paying fields.”

High-paying middle-skills occupations are those in which more than half of early-career (ages 18–35) middle-skills workers have a job with annual earnings of more than \$53,000. Early-career middle-skills workers in these jobs not only out-earn most young workers with a bachelor’s degree but also experience considerable earnings growth over time, with median annual earnings that rise to \$80,000 by mid-career (ages 36–49). CEW researchers identified 107 high-paying middle-skills jobs in five occupational groups: blue-collar; healthcare; management; protective services; and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). In total, 349 middle-skills programs provide a pathway to these high-paying jobs.

“The blue-collar sector will have the greatest nationwide shortage of workers prepared for high-paying middle-skills occupations, with 52 of the 55 largest US metro areas experiencing shortages,” said CEW Director and co-author Jeff Strohl. “If the current levels of annual credential production in programs aligned

with these occupations don't increase nationally, the credential supply will meet only 13% of the projected annual demand through 2032. As a result, annual credential production in aligned programs will fall short of annual demand by more than 360,000 credentials. We anticipate that Washington, D.C., Dallas, and Boston will experience the greatest blue-collar shortages relative to projected labor-market demand.”

More moderate shortages are expected in high-paying management, protective services, and STEM middle-skills jobs. In high-paying middle-skills management occupations, 39 of the 55 largest US metro areas will face credential shortages. And while 39 of the 55 major metro areas will also face shortages in annual credential production aligned with high-paying middle-skills protective services jobs—such as police officers and firefighters—the rest of the country will not. Only 10 major metro areas are expected to face a credential shortage in programs aligned with high-paying middle-skills STEM occupations, but many smaller metro areas and rural communities will face severe shortages. As a result, current credential production is projected to meet only 60% of demand nationwide through 2032.

“Jobs are foundational to unlocking greater economic mobility, and well-paying jobs increasingly require a combination of skills and experience that can be difficult to get in traditional education settings,” said Jennie Sparandara, managing director of Global Philanthropy at JPMorganChase. “We are proud to support organizations like CEW and their important, independent research in this space. At JPMorganChase, we are backing up our commitment to inclusive growth with action — helping people prepare for successful careers by supporting research, programs, and policy solutions that promote better access to credentials, skills, degrees, and real-world work experiences.”

Healthcare is the only occupational group with a projected nationwide oversupply of credentials aligned with high-paying middle-skills jobs. In part, this reflects rising demand for workers with bachelor's degrees in healthcare occupations historically held by workers with middle-skills credentials. Between 2010 and 2022, the proportion of workers with middle-skills education in these healthcare occupations decreased from 46% to 25%. If this trend continues, middle-skills workers will make up only 10% of the workforce in these healthcare occupations by 2032.

“Not all metro areas will face shortages in programs aligned with high-paying middle-skills occupations, but where shortages exist, they can be substantial,” said Kathryn Peltier Campbell, co-author and editorial director at CEW. “As it stands now, most middle-skills providers in areas experiencing shortages in programs aligned with high-paying middle-skills blue-collar, management, and protective services occupations would need to more than double their credential production to meet local demand through 2032.”

To view our latest research, including an online data tool that features detailed alignment metrics for high-paying middle-skills occupations in each of the 55 largest US metro areas, visit:

<https://cew.georgetown.edu/high-paying-middle-skills>.

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