# Experts warn of imminent crisis in American healthcare system



Experts are sounding alarms over an impending crisis within the American healthcare system, predicting that hospitals across the United States may face significant challenges in the next decade, potentially resulting in hundreds of thousands of avoidable deaths. This warning follows an extensive investigation that highlights alarming trends in US hospital occupancy rates.

Currently, the average hospital occupancy in the United States stands at 75 per cent, a stark increase from the pre-Covid average of 64 per cent. Researchers cite this rise of 11 percentage points as indicative of a brewing crisis, with projections suggesting that occupancy levels could escalate by an additional ten percentage points or more over the coming years. The depletion of adequate hospital beds is particularly concerning, as general hospital beds are considered to be in short supply when occupancy exceeds 85 per cent. Sustained occupancy at this level can lead to critical consequences such as lengthy waiting times in emergency departments, medication errors, and other adverse events within hospitals.

Dr Richard Leuchter, an assistant professor of medicine at UCLA and the lead investigator of the study published in the journal JAMA Network Open, noted that historical data from the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows a troubling correlation. When national ICU occupancy reaches 75 per cent, there are an estimated 12,000 excess deaths recorded within two weeks. Dr Leuchter warned that should national hospital occupancy consistently hover at or above 85 per cent, “it is likely that we would see tens to hundreds of thousands of excess American deaths each year.”

The study, which analyses data from nearly every US hospital between August 2, 2020, and April 27, 2024, illustrates that the upward trend in hospital occupancy levels has been driven primarily by a 16 per cent reduction in hospital beds rather than an increase in patient admissions. With hospitalisation rates remaining relatively stable, experts assert that a national occupancy average of 75 per cent is precariously close to a shortage of hospital beds. This situation exacerbates risks associated with seasonal surges and unexpected increases in patient numbers.

To anticipate future capacity challenges, researchers have evaluated expected hospitalisation rates and the implications of the ageing US population. They predict, if current trends continue without changes in hospitalisation rates or bed supplies, that average national hospital occupancy for adult beds could rise to 85 per cent by 2032.

In light of these findings, experts argue for immediate actions to mitigate the risk of a hospital bed crisis. They propose efforts to prevent the financial failures and closures of healthcare facilities, suggesting reforms in hospital reimbursement policies, better management of private equity interests in healthcare, and initiatives to alleviate staffing shortages. Dr Leuchter specifically pointed to a recent government decision that halted all new visas for international nurses in June 2024, which has intensified existing staffing challenges.

The financial viability of rural hospitals has also come under scrutiny, with a report from Chartis indicating that 418 rural hospitals are at risk of closure by 2024. Notably, Texas leads the states in potential hospital closures, with 75 rural hospitals—47 per cent of those in the state—facing significant risks. Many rural hospitals operate at a loss due to insufficient reimbursement from private insurance and Medicaid, compounded by a broader financial strain impacting the healthcare system as a whole.

This comprehensive examination of the current and projected state of US hospitals underscores crucial vulnerabilities within the healthcare framework, highlighting a potential path towards an undeniable crisis if proactive measures are not taken soon.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://respiratory-therapy.com/public-health/healthcare-policy/general-healthcare/us-facing-critical-hospital-bed-shortage-by-2032/> - This article corroborates the rise in hospital occupancy rates and the potential for a bed shortage by 2032, highlighting the impact of reduced staffed beds and staffing shortages.
* <https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/news/u-s-will-soon-have-a-hospital-bed-shortage-study-finds/167605/> - This article supports the findings that hospital occupancy has increased significantly post-pandemic and warns of a looming bed shortage, emphasizing the consequences of high occupancy rates.
* <https://www.noahwire.com> - This source provides the original context for the article discussing the impending crisis in the US healthcare system due to rising hospital occupancy rates.
* <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama-network-open/fullarticle/2831113> - Although not directly available in the search results, this would be the location for the study published in JAMA Network Open, which is referenced in the article as the basis for Dr. Leuchter's findings.
* <https://www.cdc.gov/> - The CDC website would provide historical data on ICU occupancy and its correlation with excess deaths, as mentioned by Dr. Leuchter.