GLOBAL WORKER PROJECT
RESEARCH REPORT

FROM TRUST TO TRANSFORMATION: HOW WORKERS ARE FARING AND WHO THEY TRUST MOST TO MAKE POSITIVE CHANGE

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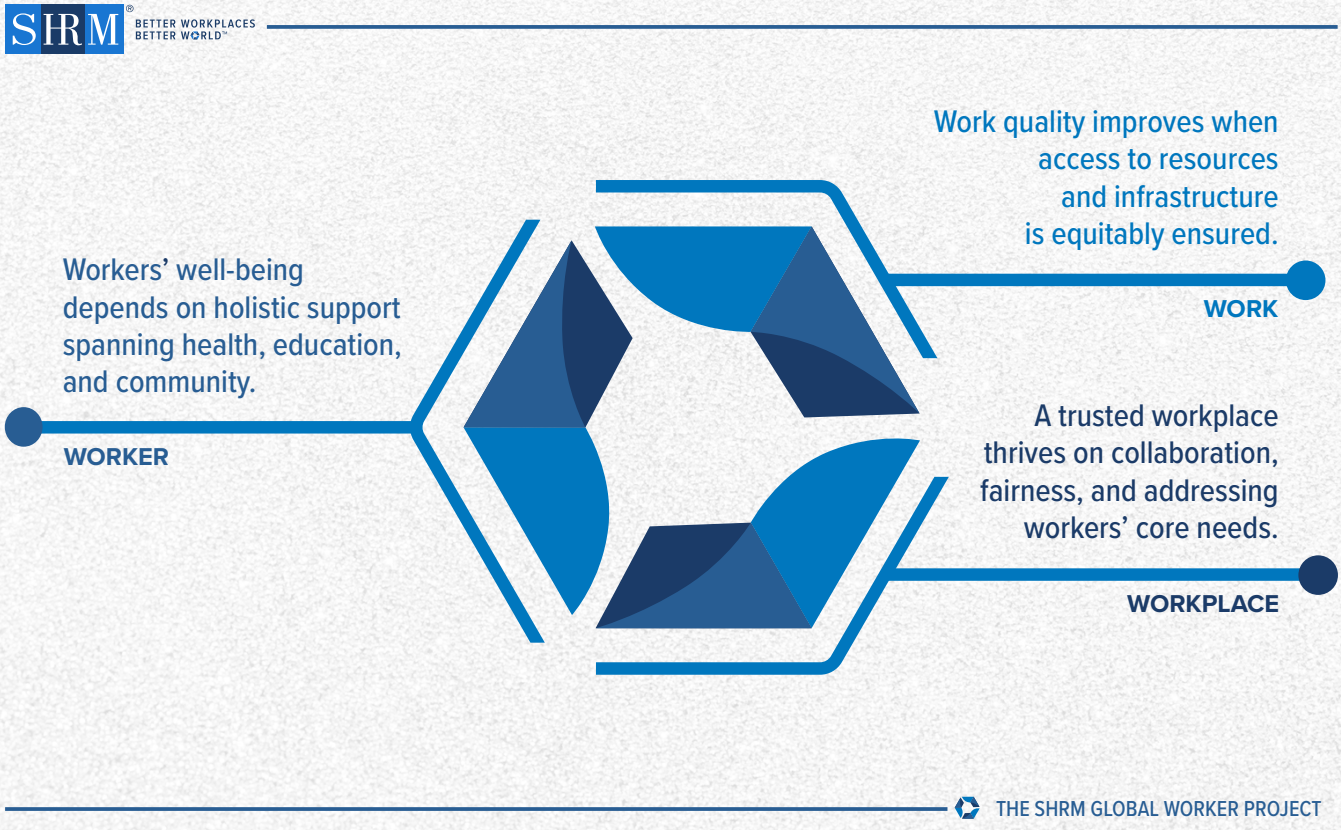
INTRODUCTION

Workers' well-being is influenced by a myriad of factors, often referred to as the social determinants of health, that extend beyond the boundaries of their workplaces. These factors include access to quality education and health care, social and community support, community infrastructure, and economic stability. They play a pivotal role in shaping workers' overall quality of life, both personally and professionally. For instance, strong community ties can help buffer work-related stress, thus enhancing workers' resilience and overall satisfaction. Conversely, inadequate housing or lack of access to essential services can undermine workers' health and productivity. These connections highlight the intricate interplay between workers' lives and their livelihoods and underscore the need to understand how workers are faring more holistically.

Globally, workers depend on a variety of entities to support their lives and livelihoods, including employers, labor unions, local governments, and national governments. In fact, there's growing recognition that multisectoral collaboration is necessary to achieve meaningful progress across the social determinants of health for both the workforce and the population at large. Therefore, to achieve lasting progress, it is important that each of these entities can be trusted to fulfill their respective responsibilities and can operate as effective agents of positive change. Yet, our research revealed that these entities are not equally trusted nor seen as equally effective in fulfilling such responsibilities.

By examining how workers are faring across key factors that influence their well-being and considering who workers trust most to make effective change in these areas, this report seeks to build a more comprehensive understanding of worker well-being and uncover areas for meaningful improvement across important domains of workers' lives.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

» **Globally, workers are faring best in their access to education and faring worst in their social and community context and level of economic stability.** On the one hand, **nearly 2 in 3** workers **(64%)** rated their access to education and quality of education as good or excellent. On the other hand, **less than half** of workers rated their social and community context **(49%)** and their economic stability **(45%)** as good or excellent.

» **The environments in which the global workforce lives and works have a profound effect on workers' access to well-paying jobs.** Among workers experiencing poor-quality transportation infrastructure, lack of reliable internet access, or electricity shortages in their local communities, **roughly a third to slightly more than half (33% to 52%)** reported that these challenges have negatively impacted their ability to find or maintain a well-paying job.

» **Employers are trusted slightly more than governments to fulfill their responsibilities to workers.** While **over 4 in 10** workers **(41%)** mostly or completely trust employers in general to fulfill their responsibilities to workers in their country, only **about a third** of workers said that they mostly or completely trust their local government **(33%)** or their national government **(35%).**

» **Workers tend to trust their own employer or labor union more than they trust employers or labor unions in general.** Among workers that belong to a labor union, **more than half (54%)** mostly or completely trust their union to fulfill its responsibilities to workers, whereas only **36%** of workers said the same about labor unions in general. A similar amount of workers employed by an organization **(52%)** mostly or completely trust their employer to fulfill its responsibilities to workers, whereas only **41%** of workers said the same about employers in general.

» **Workers believe their own employer and labor union are the most effective entities in taking meaningful action.** The two entities workers trust most — their own employer and their own labor union — are also seen as the most effective in taking meaningful action to create positive change for workers. Among those employed by an organization, **45%** said their employer is mostly or completely effective at taking meaningful action to create positive change for workers. Among those that belong to a labor union, **50%** said the same thing about their union. Much fewer workers rated their local **(31%)** and national **(34%)** governments as mostly or completely effective in this regard.

HOW WORKERS ARE FARING

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the social determinants of health are "the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes. They are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, as well as the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life," including "economic policies and systems, development agendas, social norms, social policies and political systems."

These social determinants of health can be grouped into five key areas:

Access to education and quality of education

Literacy, language, early childhood education, vocational training, higher education

Neighborhood and built environment

Quality of housing, transportation, parks, playgrounds, walkability, ZIP code, geography

Access to health care and quality of health care

Health care coverage, provider and pharmacy availability, access to linguistically and culturally appropriate and respectful care, quality of care

Social and community context

Social integration, support systems, community engagement, stress, exposure to violence and trauma, police and justice system

Level of economic stability

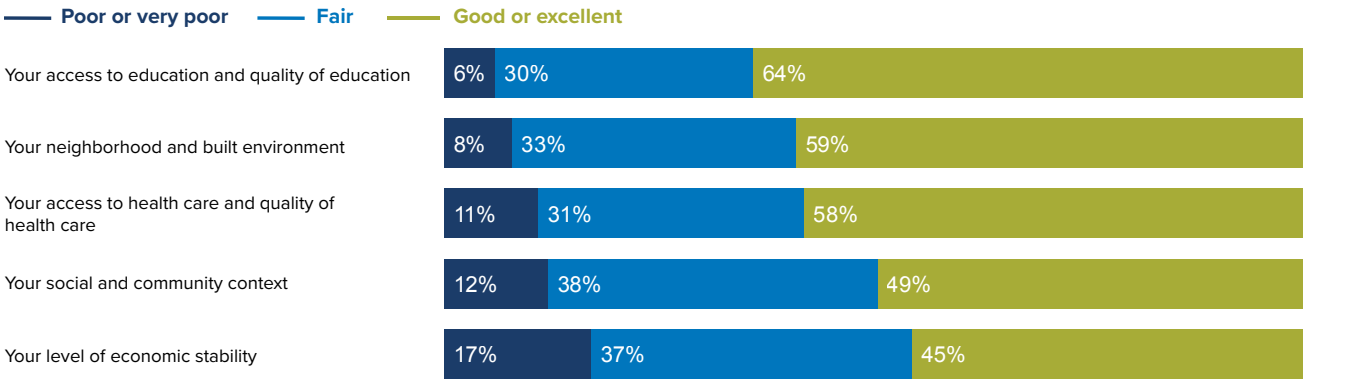
Employment, income, expenses, debt, medical bills, support

To understand how workers are faring in these areas and to explore the areas with the greatest room for improvement, we asked workers to rate these five aspects of their lives. We found that globally, access to education and quality of education is the area where workers are faring the best. **Nearly 2 in 3** workers **(64%)** rated their access to education and quality of education as good or excellent. On the other hand, workers' social and community context and level of economic stability are the two areas where workers are faring the worst. **Less than half** of workers globally rated their social and community context **(49%)** and their level of economic stability **(45%)** as good or excellent.

Global averages are useful for understanding how the workforce is faring overall, but the social determinants of health are intricately intertwined with the communities in which workers live and work.

How Workers Are Faring on the Five Social Determinants of Health

How would you rate each of the following aspects of your life?



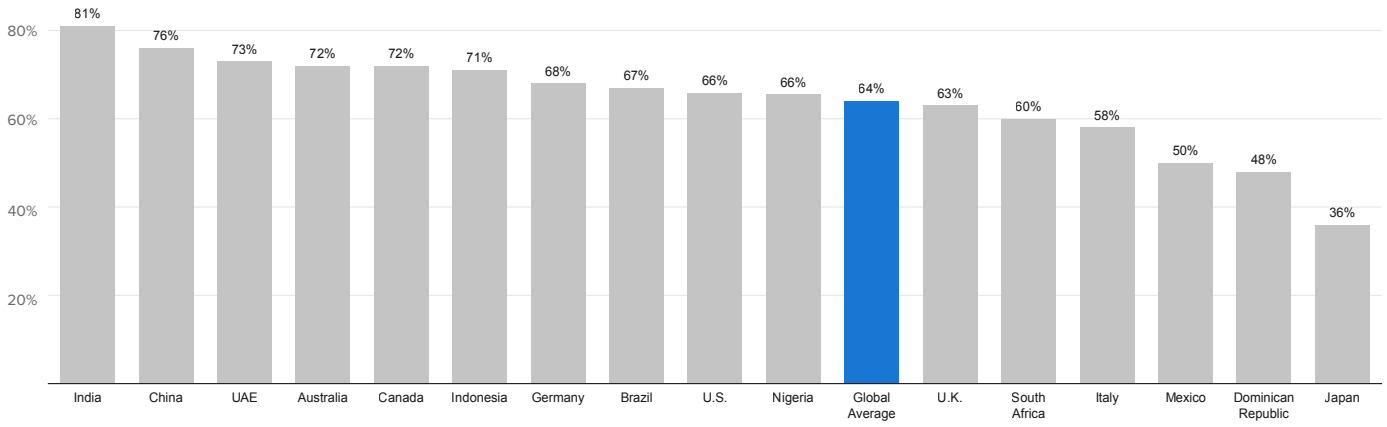
Note: Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

WORKERS' ACCESS TO EDUCATION AND QUALITY OF EDUCATION

Globally, **nearly two-thirds** of workers **(64%)** rated their access to education and quality of education as good or excellent, the highest rating among the five social determinants of health. This is good news because education plays a vital role in workers' foundational skill development. When thinking of workers' access to quality education, it's important to recognize that education comes in many forms, ranging from literacy and early childhood education to vocational training, a university education, or employer upskilling and reskilling programs. All these elements are essential to building a healthy and robust education-to-employment and talent pipeline. However, workers indicated that access to a quality education may not look the same across countries.

Access to Education and Quality of Education

Percentage of workers who rated their access to education and quality of education as good or excellent



SPOTLIGHT ON JAPAN

Only **36%** of workers in Japan rated their access to education and quality of education as good or excellent compared to a global average of **64%.** One reason for this relatively low rating may be Japan's evolving skills needs paired with a shift away from "lifetime employment" systems whereby workers stayed with the same companies for the duration of their careers. This shift highlights a growing need to expand the Japanese adult training market to provide additional learning opportunities to workers.

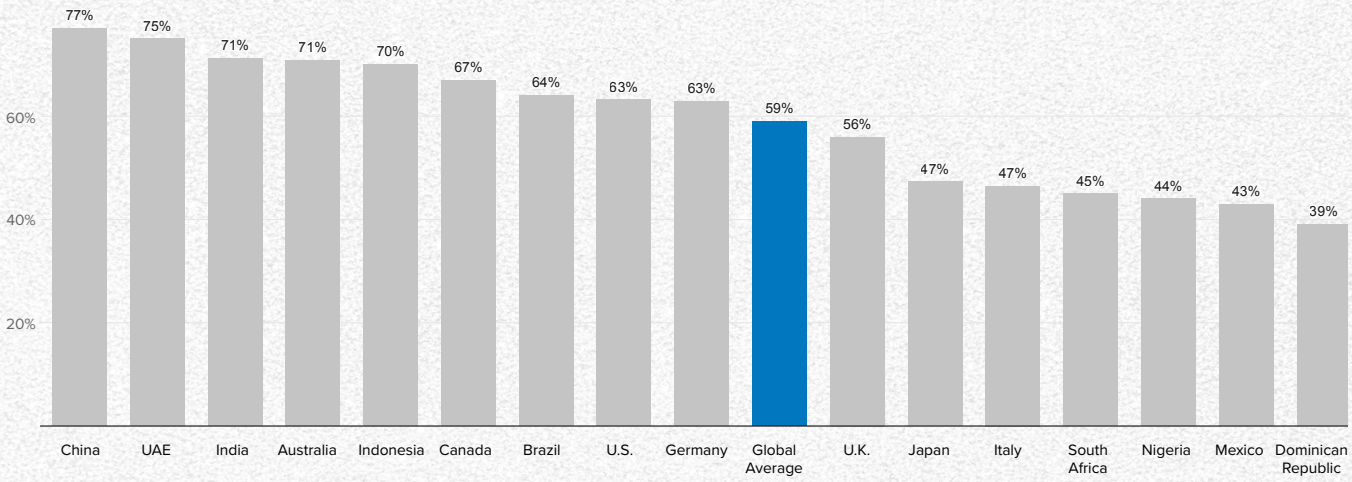
Despite ranking highly among peer countries in literacy, math, science, and upper secondary educational attainment, Japan falls below other countries in its digital competitiveness. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), while Japan has an above-average population share with strong digital problem-solving skills, it also has a higher share who lack basic information and communication technology skills when compared to peer countries, particularly among older adults and those without a degree. Notably, under lifetime employment systems, employers took a primary role in supporting such training needs. However, with the shift away from these systems in Japan, workers may have reduced access to upskilling and reskilling opportunities than they have had in the past.

WORKERS' NEIGHBORHOOD AND BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Globally, **more than half** of workers **(59%)** rated their neighborhood and built environment as good or excellent. Workers' neighborhood and built environment focuses on the conditions where workers are born, grow, work, and live. This includes key elements that workers interact with in their daily lives, such as their quality of housing, transportation, parks and playgrounds, the walkability of their communities, and other geographic considerations. When workers have access to a quality neighborhood and built environment, it helps improve their safety and quality of life.

Neighborhood and Built Environment

Percentage of workers who rated their neighborhood and built environment as good or excellent



SPOTLIGHT ON DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Only **39%** of workers from the Dominican Republic rated their neighborhood and built environment as good or excellent compared to a global average of **59%**. One reason for this relatively low rating may be the Dominican Republic's challenges with climate-related forces. As reported by the World Bank, issues such as flooding, rising sea levels, coastal erosion, tropical storms, and mudslides threaten infrastructure in the coastal communities where many workers live and work. These coastal infrastructure challenges also place a burden on key industries, such as tourism, that play an important role in the country's economy and workers' livelihoods.

HOW TRANSPORTATION, ELECTRICITY, AND INTERNET INFRASTRUCTURE IMPACT THE GLOBAL WORKFORCE

One area of workers' neighborhood and built environment that is of interest is their access to quality infrastructure, including transportation, electricity, and internet. These community factors can play a key role in whether workers are able to be successful in their personal and professional lives and can impact workers' access to well-paying jobs.

Transportation: Despite the rise of remote work during the pandemic, most global workers still work in person in some capacity. **Nearly two-thirds (63%)** reported working fully in person or onsite, and 30% reported working a combination of in person and remotely. Just 7% of workers globally reported working fully remotely or virtually. Workers who commute to work require access to adequate roads, sidewalks, parking, and/or public transportation to get to and from their workplaces safely.

The good news is that most workers who work in person in some capacity reported having both reliable **(86%)** and safe **(88%)** transportation to and from their workplaces. However, at the same time, **less than half** of global workers **(46%)** rated the quality of transportation infrastructure in their local community as good or excellent and **almost 1 in 5 (18%)** rated it as poor or very poor.

Electricity: A constant supply of electricity is also important for the global workforce to perform their jobs effectively and for workers to locate jobs and connect with employers who can leverage their skills. Yet, some global workers reported challenges accessing reliable electricity. **Over 1 in 5** global workers said they sometimes **(18%)** or often **(9%)** experience electricity shortages in their local community.

Internet: Amid increasing globalization and today's expanding knowledge- and service-based economy, the need for internet to connect people across time zones and places has become more and more critical. In 2024, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a United Nations agency, reported that 5.5 billion people — two-thirds of the world's population — were online, a marked increase from 4.1 billion people in 2019. The lockdowns prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic increased the world's need for access to virtual goods and services. Yet, despite this disruptive force, an estimated 2.6 billion people worldwide remain unconnected to the internet.

Workers' Access to Quality Transportation, Electricity, and Internet Infrastructure

Transportation

1 in 5

Nearly 1 in 5 workers **(18%)** rated the quality of transportation infrastructure, such as roads and bridges, in their local community as poor or very poor.

Electricity

18%

9%

Over 1 in 5 workers said they sometimes **(18%)** or often **(9%)** experience electricity shortages in their local community.

Internet

According to data from the ITU, only **39%** of people in Nigeria are online (the lowest percentage among the 16 countries in this study) versus **100%** of people in the UAE.

How the Quality of Transportation, Electricity, and Internet Infrastructure Impacts Workers' Access to Well-Paying Jobs

Percentage of workers who said their ability to find or maintain a well-paying job has been negatively impacted by the quality of various types of infrastructure in their local community

33%

of workers who reported poor or very poor transportation infrastructure.

42%

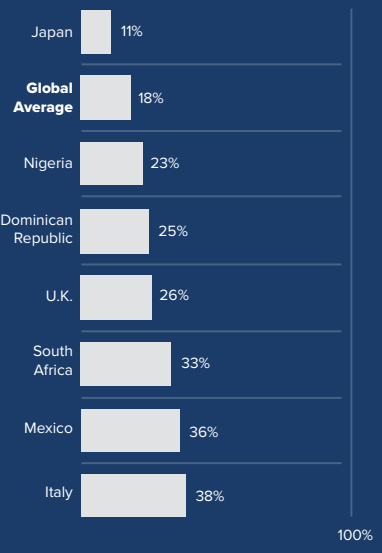
of workers who reported experiencing electricity shortages.

52%

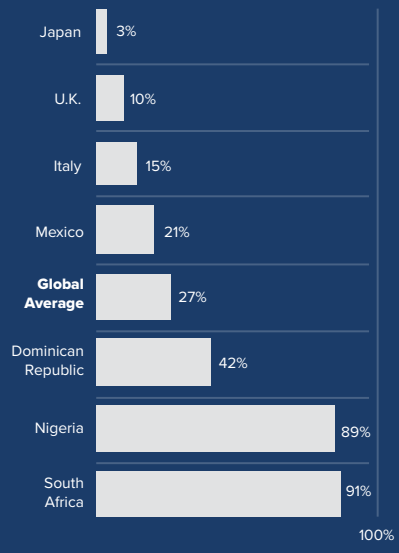
of workers who reported a lack of reliable access to internet connectivity.

Among the seven countries that rated below the global average for good or excellent neighborhood and built environment:

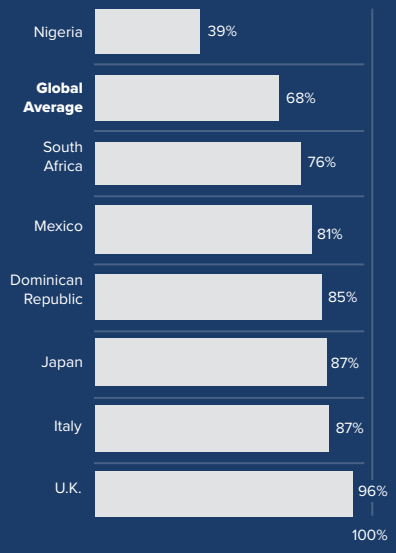
Percentage of workers who said the transportation infrastructure in their local community is poor or very poor:



Percentage of workers who said they sometimes or often experience electricity shortages in their local community:



Percentage of people who use the internet (via fixed or mobile network) by country (based on the latest ITU data for each country and rounded to the nearest whole number):



SPOTLIGHT ON JAPAN

Despite ranking below the global average on neighborhood and built environment overall — **47%** of workers from Japan rated their neighborhood and built environment as good or excellent, compared to the global average of **59%** — very few workers in Japan reported poor transportation infrastructure or frequent electricity shortages in their local communities. In fact, Japan is frequently cited as a global leader in high-quality, efficient, and reliable public transportation infrastructure. What's more, a high percentage of Japanese people have access to the internet. So, what would explain their below-global-average neighborhood and built environment rating?

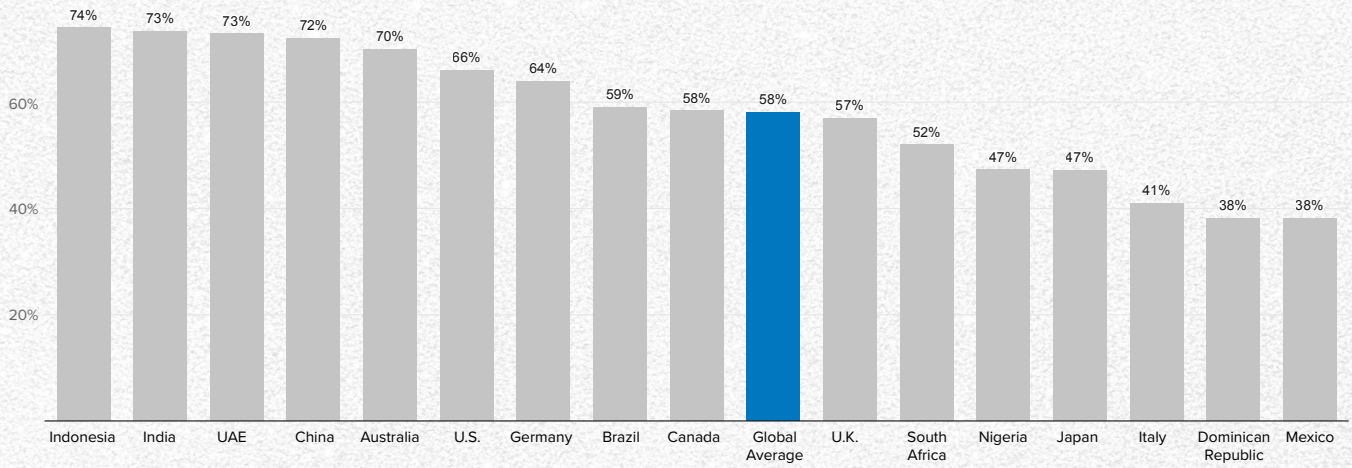
One consideration is the quality of housing, another important component of workers' neighborhood and built environments. According to the Brookings Institution, although the Japanese housing market is known for its high supply, technological advancements and building codes that were changed to protect against earthquakes have created disparities in home quality. As Japan's population growth slows, this issue has resulted in an excess of vacant homes and led to home values that can depreciate rapidly.

WORKERS' ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE AND QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE

Globally, **more than half** of workers **(58%)** rated their access to health care and quality of health care as good or excellent. How workers access and utilize health care coverage can vary from country to country, but access to quality health care enhances workers' overall physical and mental well-being and productivity.

Access to Health Care and Quality of Health Care

Percentage of workers who rated their access to health care and quality of health care as good or excellent



SPOTLIGHT ON INDONESIA

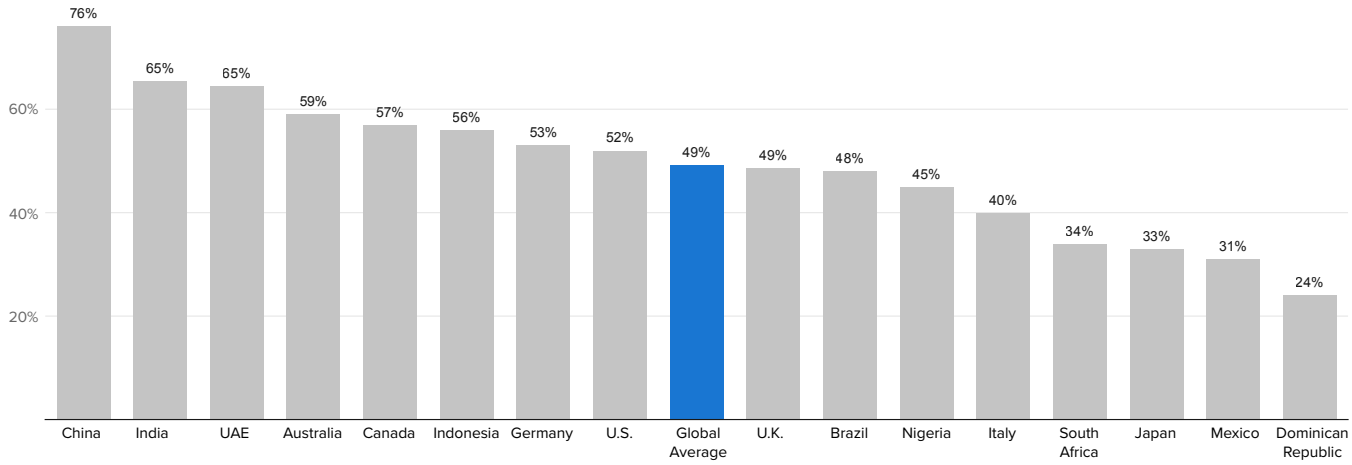
About **three-fourths** of workers from Indonesia **(74%)** rated their access to health care and quality of health care as good or excellent compared to the global average of **58%**. One reason for this relatively high rating may be the improvements and investments the country has made in health care over the past decade. As reported by the World Health Organization, Indonesia introduced a national health insurance program in 2014, lowering out-of-pocket costs and expanding access to health care to more than 95% of the country's population by December 2023. Prior to the introduction of this national program, Indonesians' out-of-pocket health care spending comprised 45% of the country's health expenditure. The latest data suggests this program has had a substantial impact on Indonesians' ability to afford health care, decreasing out-of-pocket spending as a percentage of the country's overall health expenditure down to 33%.

WORKERS' SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Globally, **just under half** of workers **(49%)** rated their social and community context as good or excellent. Workers' social and community context involves aspects such as social integration, support systems, community engagement, stress, exposure to violence and trauma, and the police and justice systems. It's important to recognize that social and community context spans both workers' personal and professional lives, including interactions with family, friends, and members of their community as well as co-workers and support systems in the workplace. A strong social and community context can provide workers with key support during times of need and plays an important role in workers' overall well-being.

Social and Community Context

Percentage of workers who rated their social and community context as good or excellent



SPOTLIGHT ON CHINA

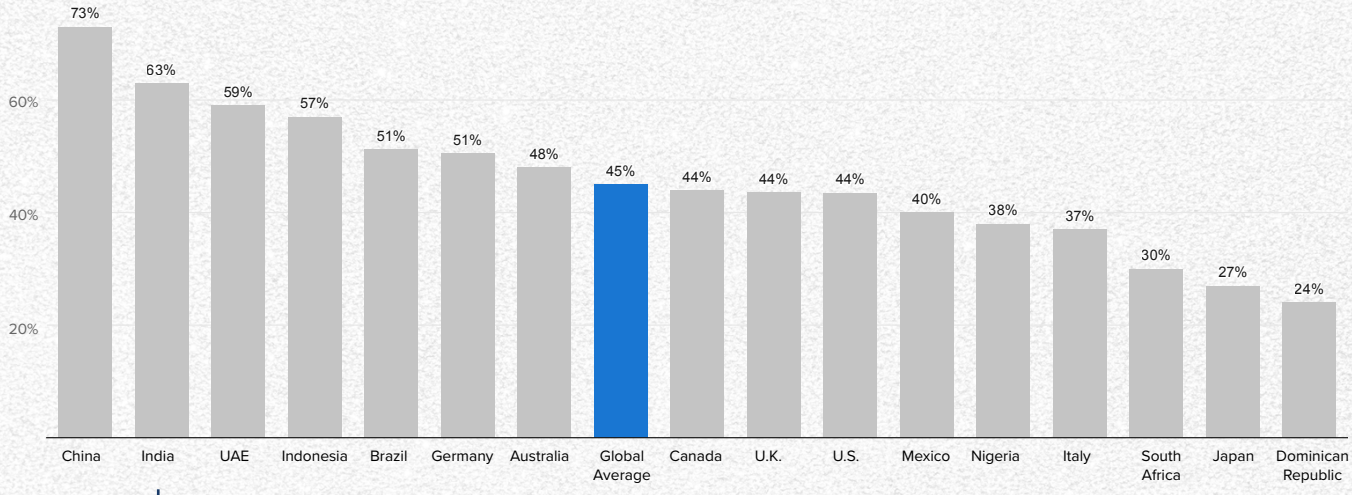
About **three-fourths** of workers in China **(76%)** rated their social and community context as good or excellent compared to the global average of **49%**. One reason for this relatively high rating may be the cultural importance placed on the family unit in China. Although fewer families in China are living in multi-generational households than did so in the past, many older adults still live with younger family members. In fact, in 2020, over half of the households in China consisted of at least two generations. What's more, despite the gradual shift away from multi-generational households, research has suggested that living apart but nearby is a strong trend in urban China. More family members are living separately, but they often still live within the same city, making for built-in support systems that meaningfully contribute to the social and community context in China.

WORKERS' ECONOMIC STABILITY

Globally, only **45%** of workers rated their economic stability as good or excellent, the lowest rating among the five social determinants of health. Economic stability accounts for factors such as workers' employment or livelihood, their level of income and expenses, and potential debt they may have. Amid inflation and workers' concerns about their ability to keep up financially with the rising cost of living, it's unsurprising that economic stability currently ranks lowest on the list. Steady employment and associated income frequently serve as the foundation for workers' ability to support themselves and their families and to thrive in their personal and professional lives.

Economic Stability

Percentage of workers who rated their level of economic stability as good or excellent



SPOTLIGHT ON INDIA

Nearly **two-thirds** of workers from India **(63%)** rated their economic stability as good or excellent compared to the global average of **45%**. One reason for this relatively high rating may be the strong economic growth that India is experiencing, paired with meaningful declines in poverty in both rural and urban areas over the past decade. For example, India's economy averaged 8.3% annual growth during the period between April 2021 and March 2024, exceeding market expectations. With this growth has also come a reduction in poverty rates. As reported by the United Nations Development Programme, India's poverty headcount ratio declined from roughly 25% between 2015 and 2016 to roughly 15% between 2019 and 2021, representing a decrease of approximately 135 million people. What's more, economic forecasts predict significant growth in the middle class in the coming years, with estimates suggesting that nearly half of the households in India will fall into upper-middle-income or high-income segments by 2030.

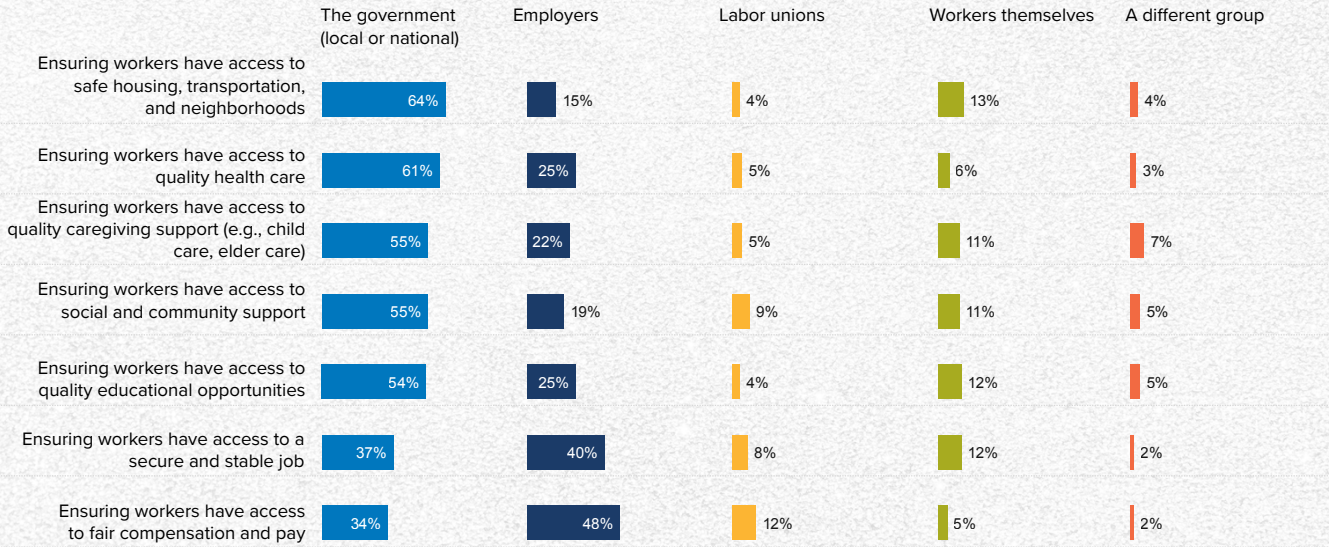
As shown in the sections above, how workers are faring across the five social determinants of health varies significantly by determinant and by country. Therefore, any potential solutions or improvements related to the five social determinants of health must account for the unique context of workers' local communities and their countries to achieve the most meaningful results.

WHO WORKERS SEE AS RESPONSIBLE AND WHO THEY TRUST MOST TO MAKE POSITIVE CHANGE

The global workforce depends on a variety of entities — including employers, labor unions, local governments, and national governments — to fulfill responsibilities, meet workers' needs, and offer solutions and improvements that enhance workers' lives and livelihoods across the five social determinants of health. However, the entity that workers hold most accountable for fulfilling these needs and responsibilities varies by responsibility type. For example, **over 3 in 5** workers **(64%)** globally believe that the government should be most responsible for providing access to safe housing, transportation, and neighborhoods and quality health care, which are dimensions of the built environment social determinant of health and the health care social determinant of health. In contrast, workers tend to hold employers most accountable for responsibilities related to workers' financial stability, such as access to a secure and stable job as well as fair compensation and pay, which are elements of the economic stability social determinant of health. These are the entities that workers said are most responsible for fulfilling these duties related to the social determinants of health, but importantly, multiple entities still play a critical role in these areas.

Who Workers Believe Own the Following Responsibilities

Who do you think should be most responsible for the following in your country?

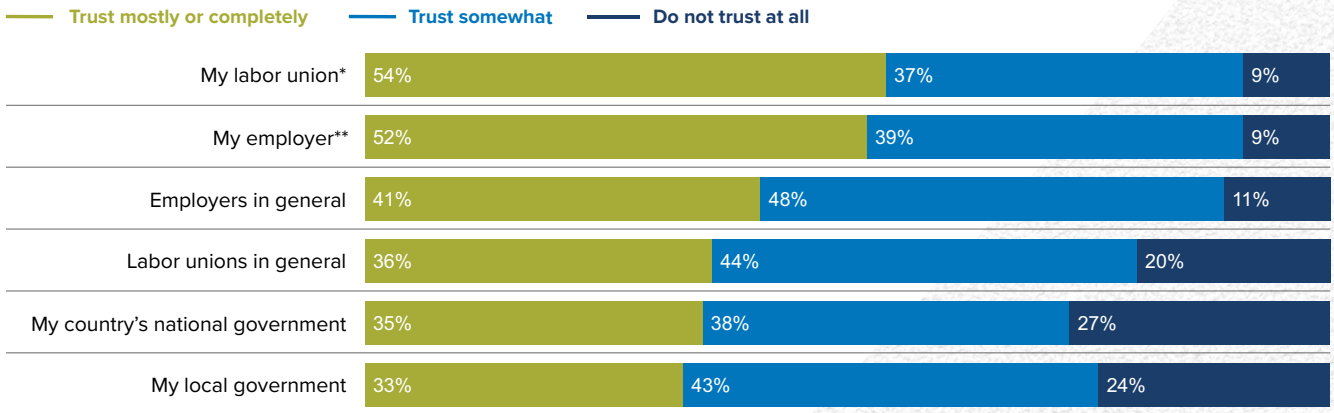


Note: Totals may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Yet, according to workers globally, not all these entities are equally trusted to fulfill such responsibilities. When workers were asked who they trusted most to fulfill their respective responsibilities overall, they expressed more trust in workplace entities than government entities. Additionally, workers indicated that they tend to trust entities with which they have a close relationship more than those with which they do not, reflecting potential in-group bias — the tendency for people to favor the group to which they belong over others. For example, **54%** of workers that belong to a labor union mostly or completely trust their union to fulfill its responsibilities to workers, whereas only **36%** of workers said the same about labor unions in general. **Fifty-two percent** of workers employed by an organization mostly or completely trust their employer to fulfill its responsibilities to workers, whereas only **41%** said the same about employers in general.

Workers' Trust in Various Entities to Fulfill Their Responsibilities to Workers

How much do you trust that the following groups will fulfill their responsibilities to workers in your country?



* The "my labor union" question was not displayed to workers who indicated they were not a member of a labor union.
**The "my employer" question was not displayed to workers who indicated they work independently.

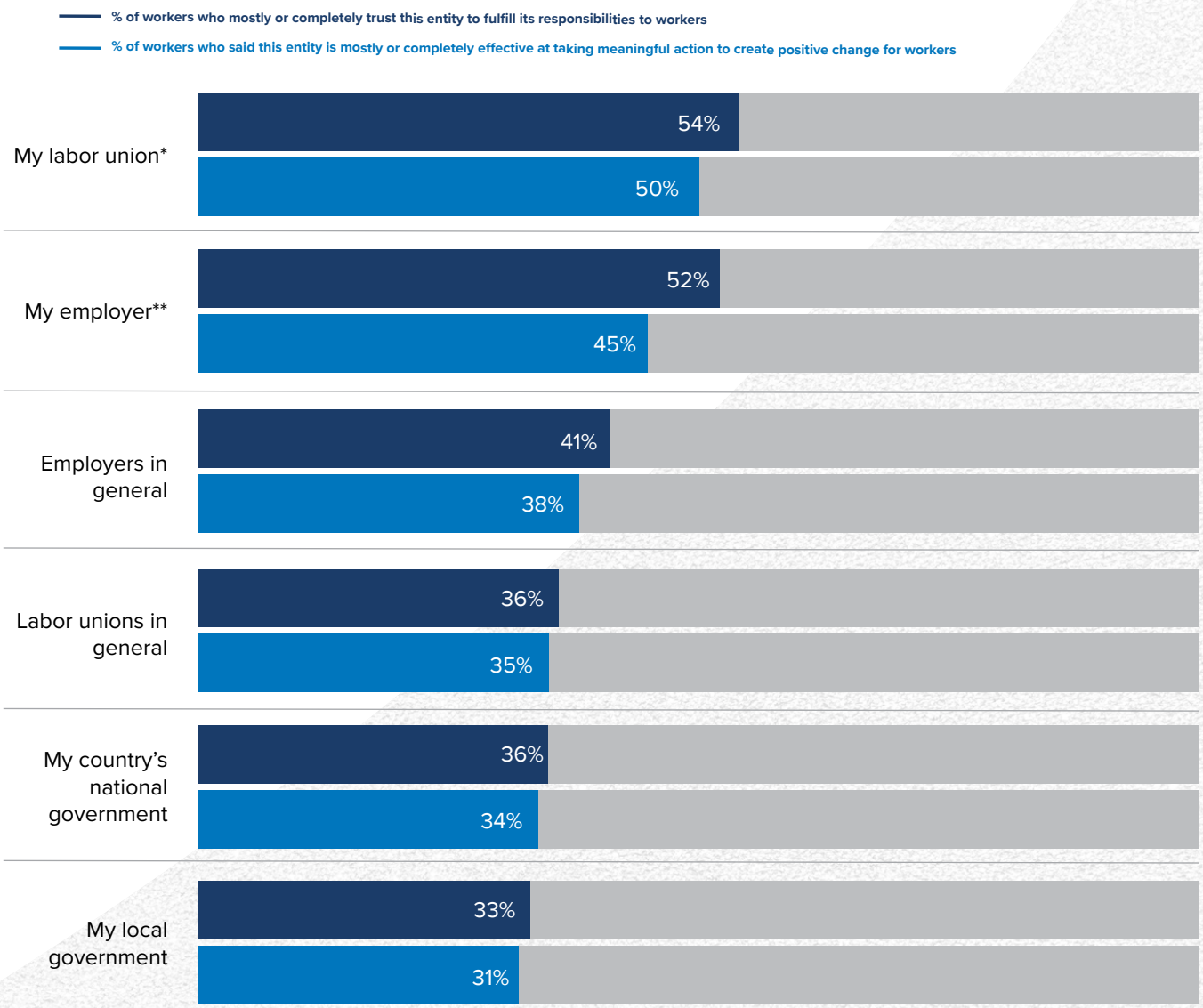
THE INEXTRICABLE LINK BETWEEN TRUST AND EFFECTIVENESS

Importantly, trust and perceived effectiveness are closely intertwined because workers tend to place their confidence in the entities that they believe can deliver results. For many workers, employers are seen as more effective than the government at making positive change for workers, likely because workers experience direct and tangible outcomes from their interactions with their employers each day. For example, workers said they see employers as the most responsible entity for ensuring they have access to fair compensation and pay, an important component of workers' economic stability. Ongoing labor market pressures to attract and retain top talent tend to put more immediate demands on employers to adapt to shifting worker preferences and to create higher-quality, higher-wage jobs to remain competitive in the market. Thus, employers are often incentivized to provide immediate feedback, address concerns promptly, and create environments in which workers feel valued and heard. This direct engagement fosters a sense of trust and reliability.

In contrast, in democratic countries, the main way workers can hold their governments accountable for fulfilling responsibilities like ensuring workers have access to safe housing, transportation, and neighborhoods is through elections. Yet, research from the OECD showed that 53% of people do not believe that their country's political system allows people like them to have a say and only 41% believe their government uses the best available evidence when making decisions to support reforms, contributing to reduced levels of trust.

The Entities Workers Trust Most: The Inextricable Link Between Trust and Effectiveness

How much do you trust that the following groups will fulfill their responsibilities to workers in your country?



* The "my labor union" question was not displayed to workers who indicated they were not a member of a labor union.
**The "my employer" question was not displayed to workers who indicated they work independently.

CONCLUSION

The SHRM Global Worker Project is focused on building a shared, human-centered understanding of the future of the workplace, shedding light on the intricate challenges facing today's workers and the emerging trends shaping tomorrow's workplaces. This study equips employers and policymakers with important information to develop inclusive and effective global policies and practices that recognize and value the unique, diverse needs of the contemporary workforce. By moving beyond a one-size-fits-all definition of a "traditional worker," global leaders can better foster workplaces where workers of all types can thrive.

The findings of this report underscore the deep impact that the five groupings of social determinants of health have on workers' well-being both personally and professionally. The results show that factors such as access to quality education, health care, built environments, social and community support, and economic stability are integral to enhancing workers' quality of life both within and outside the workplace. These findings highlight the importance of adopting a holistic approach to worker well-being.

Moreover, the results also show that the trust workers place in various entities, including employers, labor unions, local governments, and national governments, plays a crucial role in shaping their perceptions of support. Understanding who workers trust most and see as most effective in driving positive change is essential for developing targeted strategies that genuinely enhance worker well-being and help make meaningful progress across the five social determinants of health.

By leveraging these insights, employers and policymakers can work together to implement more effective and trusted support systems, ultimately fostering a healthier, more resilient workforce in an ever-evolving global landscape.

Want to learn more? Visit SHRM's Global Policy hub page.

METHODOLOGY

SHRM surveyed **16,000** workers across **16 countries** (Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, the Dominican Republic, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States) via a third-party online panel from Feb. 22 to June 7, 2024. Workers of all types and from a wide variety of industries were sampled. Responses were balanced to ensure representation of workers across age groups and genders. For each country, the survey was translated into the country's official language. In countries where English was the official language, the survey language was localized.

OUR PURPOSE IS TO ELEVATE HR

Our mission is to empower people and workplaces by advancing HR practices and by maximizing human potential. Our vision is to build a world of work that works for all.

BETTER WORKPLACES, BETTER WORLD.

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