

A Full Recovery: Restoring Trust in the Post-Pandemic Era



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Introduction

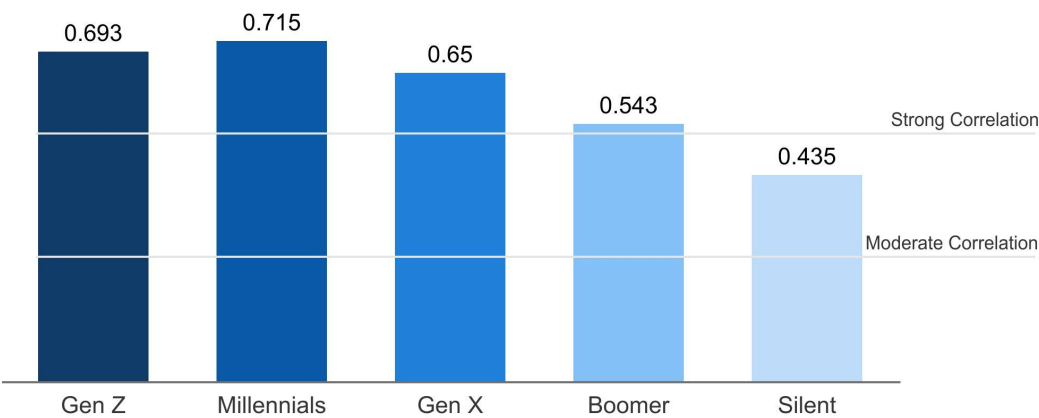
Trust is the touchstone of all patient-care team interactions and the top key-driver of Net Promoter Score (NPS) across generations. However, younger patients appear to value trust most, and yet often report the lowest levels of it. The COVID-19 pandemic strained trust, especially among Generation Z respondents, whose confidence in healthcare declined the most from 2020 to 2022. While trust is recovering post-pandemic, especially among older generations, rebuilding it among younger patients requires thoughtful strategies. To sustain and accelerate the momentum, healthcare organizations must not only prioritize trust-building efforts, but also actively measure trust to identify gaps and drive meaningful improvement.

Trust is Key

NRC Health research shows that patients' trust in care providers is the top key driver of NPS across all generations, which means that an organization that improves on trust is more likely to improve their NPS. While trust is key to whether or not patients would recommend a facility, this effect is strongest among younger generations, indicating that gaining the trust of these patients

is especially important. With younger generations reporting the lowest amount of trust but rating trust as of the highest importance, this area of focus is the greatest opportunity for healthcare organizations. To continue improving, especially among younger age groups, it's imperative that care providers, hospitals, and health systems continue to build on trust.

Trust correlation with facility NPS (r)



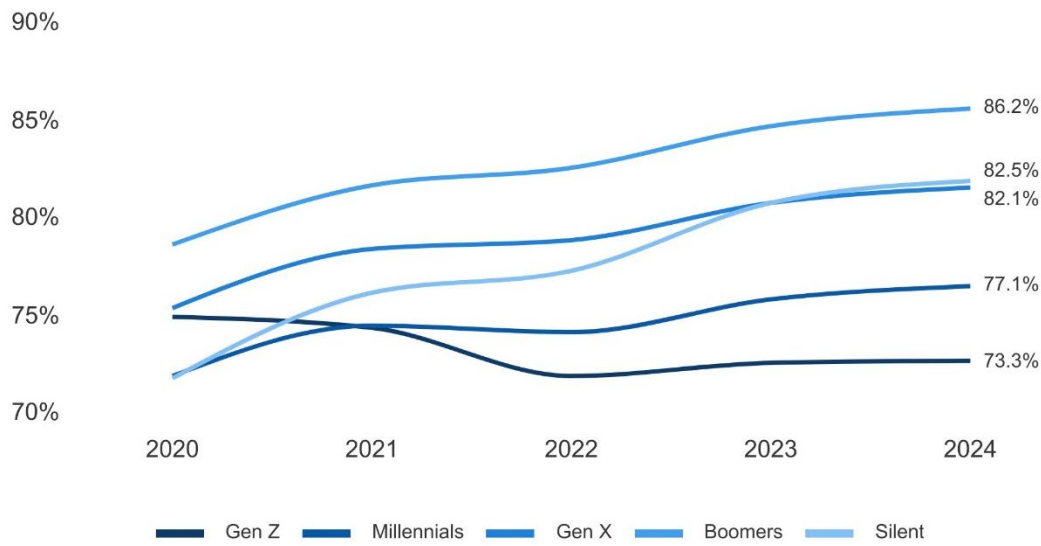
NRC Health Experience Data | 2024 | n = 9,220,861

Trust is Returning

One of the challenges faced by healthcare during the pandemic was a stagnation of trust, especially among younger patients. Trust declined during that time for Gen Z and Millennial patients and has yet to recover, indicating a negative impact to the patient-provider relationship. This decline stemmed from various factors, including limited in-person interactions, inconsistent messaging about COVID-19 precautions, and lack of consistent information. As a result, many patients grew skeptical of healthcare providers and hospital systems, leading to hesitancy in seeking care and diminished confidence in medical recommendations.

Database trends suggest a recent gradual recovery of trust across all generations. The most notable improvements have been observed in older age groups, particularly among Baby Boomers, who now exhibit the highest levels of trust. Generation X and the Silent Generation follow closely behind, demonstrating steady gains in confidence toward healthcare providers. By contrast, younger generations, particularly Millennials and Generation Z, continue to report lower trust levels, with Generation Z expressing the most skepticism. These generational differences highlight the need for targeted engagement strategies, improved transparency, and enhanced communication efforts to rebuild trust, particularly among younger patients.

Did you trust the care providers with your care? (%positive)

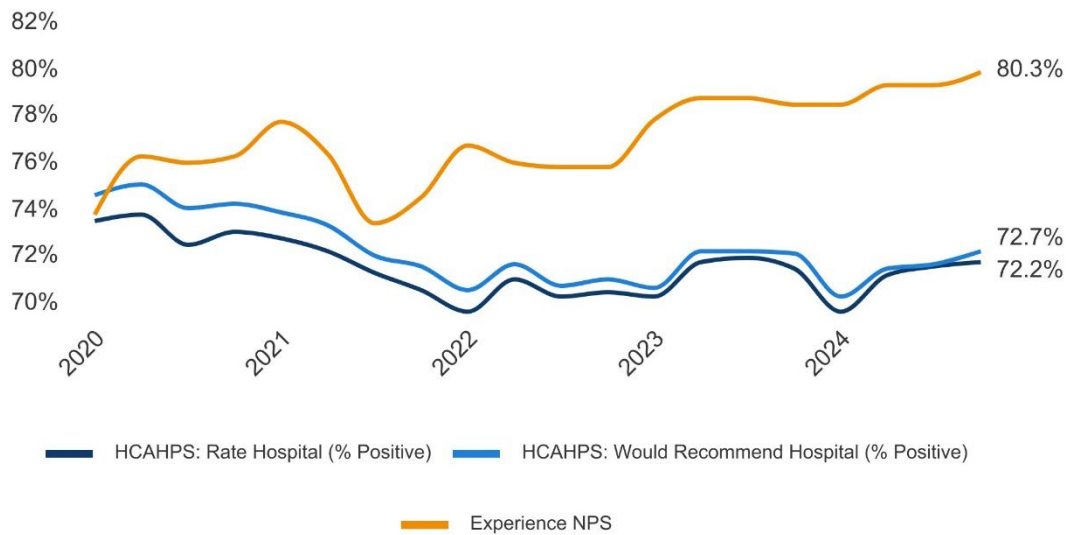


Health Experience Data | January 2020–December 2024, n = 41,786,037

Patient Experience Has Overcome Pandemic Obstacles

In addition to the trend of rising patient trust in care providers, patient experience is making a strong post-pandemic recovery. While many healthcare organizations saw a decline in experience scores over the past five years, NRC Health's all-service-line Net Promoter Score shows that experience scores are now on the rise and, in some areas, even surpassing pre-pandemic levels. NPS scores reached historic lows in 2022 but have shown steady improvement in 2023 and 2024. HCAHPS scores also reflect this positive trend, with patient experience metrics now approaching pre-pandemic levels, signaling that the challenges brought on by the pandemic have largely been overcome.

Experience vs HCAHPS trends



NRC Health Experience Data | January 2020–December 2024, n = 92,496,362

Making a Case for Trust

Conducting HCAHPS is valuable and necessary for most hospitals, but it's not enough on its own. To truly understand and improve patient experience, you also need to measure trust. While trust cannot be mandated, it can be restored through intentional actions and behaviors. For example, if you are not currently asking a trust-related question on your patient-feedback survey, you might consider adding it. NRC Health helps organizations identify areas for improvement and implement strategies that elevate the voices of healthcare consumers and patients. By making meaningful efforts to rebuild trust, health organizations adopt a holistic approach to the patient experience—one that ultimately enhances care and strengthens relationships.

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