

DRIVERS OF LARGE TRUCKS: BAD WORKING CONDITIONS AND HUGE TURNOVER

The turnover rate in the trucking industry is extraordinarily high.

- Of the nation's more than 3.3 million truck drivers,¹ roughly 300,000 leave the profession annually.²
- The “average trucking company [has] a turnover rate of roughly 95 percent, meaning that it must replace nearly all of its work force in the course of a year.”³

While the big trucking industry complains about a “driver shortage crisis,”⁴ others say the problem is actually bad working conditions leading to significant turnover.

- According to Todd Spencer, president of the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association (OOIDA), which represents roughly 150,000 members who own and/or operate individual heavy-duty trucks and small truck fleets, “We’ve listened to this driver shortage nonsense since the 1980s. If you have a business where [more than 90%] of your workforce turned over every year, how efficient or good a business would it be? Yet it’s commonplace in trucking, because they can’t keep workers. I don’t know how you classify that as a shortage.”⁵
- Others say, “[T]here is no shortage of people who want to get into truck driving, nor is there a shortage of people who have obtained commercial driving licenses (CDLs). ...[But once on the job], they find the job pays much less than they’d been led to believe, and that working conditions in the industry are terrible.”⁶

Long-haul truck driving is a personally difficult and grossly undercompensated occupation.

- Typical long-haul truckers endure 60- to 70-hour workweeks (or longer), driving on average 400 to 700 miles a day, sitting for hours on end, limited food options, stress, living out of a truck with little time for rest or sleep while pressured to meet employer deadlines, long stretches away from home, family and friends and loneliness.⁷
- Women, who make up about 7% of over-the-road drivers, have it especially bad,⁸ with “more than half report[ing] that while on the job they have received verbally offensive

comments more than once, 28% have received multiple verbal threats, 39% have been subject to an unwanted physical advance more than once, and nearly 4% have experienced rape.”⁹

- Driving itself can be incredibly hazardous, with heavy and tractor-trailer truck driver deaths accounting for 16% of fatal work injuries recorded in the U.S. in 2020.¹⁰
- Drivers are often asked to drive large trucks with vehicle deficiencies. From October 1, 2021 through June 30, 2022, inspectors placed 23% of evaluated trucks out of service for failing to meet federally-mandated standards.¹¹
- Drivers are grossly under-compensated.
 - The median annual pay for tractor-trailer drivers in 2021 was \$48,310.¹² Today, drivers receive about 40% less than they did in the late 1970s even though they are twice as productive.¹³
 - Since truck drivers are typically paid by the mile, weather or traffic delays that extend their day don’t increase their compensation but instead increase pressures to keep driving in unsafe conditions.¹⁴ They receive no compensation for the time it takes to load or unload their trucks, or “for their ‘off time,’ even though they’re miles and miles away from home.”¹⁵
 - It is common practice for trucking companies to deliberately misclassify their workers as independent contractors instead of employees, exempting employers from fair wage requirements or providing benefits.¹⁶
 - New drivers or independent contractors may have to pay for their own training fees, maintenance and fuel,¹⁷ and many have signed predatory truck leasing agreements, which is a type of indentured servitude.¹⁸
- One expert summed up the situation¹⁹:

[T]hrough political lobbying, legal activism and harsh business practices, big trucking companies have made a difficult job even harder, especially for entry-level truckers [and] companies have been “systematically degrading trucker working conditions.” Scholars have referred to trucks as “sweatshops on wheels.” ... [T]he industry is rife with minimum wage violations and ... “debt peonage.” Basically, new drivers become indentured servants, going deep into debt to get training and to lease trucks from their employers.

For more information, see Center for Justice & Democracy, *Big Trucks: An Avoidable Public Safety Crisis* (November 2022), <https://centerjd.org/content/study-big-trucks-avoidable-public-safety-crisis>

NOTES

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² Mark Schremmer, “Buttigieg: 300,000 truckers leave industry every year,” *Land Line*, April 28, 2022, <https://landline.media/buttigieg-300000-truckers-leave-industry-every-year/>

³ Peter S. Goodman, “The Real Reason America Doesn’t Have Enough Truckers,” *New York Times*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/business/truck-driver-shortage.html>

⁴ Ibid. See also, Alana Semuels, “There’s a Problem With How We Train Truckers,” *TIME*, February 7, 2022, <https://time.com/6144516/truck-driver-training/>; Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association, *OOIDA Foundation Statement on Flaws in Driver Shortage Narrative* (November 2021),

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October 25, 2021, <https://www.trucking.org/news-insights/ata-chief-economist-pegs-driver-shortage-historic-high>; American Transportation Research Institute, *Critical Issues in the Trucking Industry – 2021* (October 2021),

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https://www.trucking.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/ATAs_Driver_Shortage_Report_2019_with_cover.pdf

⁵ Bob Woods, “Why driving big rig trucks is a job fewer Americans dream about doing,” *CNBC*, July 5, 2022, <https://www.cbc.com/2022/07/05/why-driving-big-rig-trucks-isnt-a-job-americans-want-to-do-anymore.html>

⁶ Alana Semuels, “The Truck Driver Shortage Doesn’t Exist. Saying There Is One Makes Conditions Worse for Drivers,” *TIME*, November 12, 2021, <https://time.com/6116853/truck-driver-shortage-supply-chain/>. See also, Bob

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<https://www.cbc.com/2022/07/05/why-driving-big-rig-trucks-isnt-a-job-americans-want-to-do-anymore.html>

⁷ Peter S. Goodman, “5 Things You Might Not Know About Truckers,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2022,

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/02/04/business/truck-drivers-faq.html>

⁸ Ibid. See also, Alana Semuels, “There’s a Problem With How We Train Truckers,” *TIME*, February 7, 2022, <https://time.com/6144516/truck-driver-training/>

⁹ Bob Woods, “Why driving big rig trucks is a job fewer Americans dream about doing,” *CNBC*, July 5, 2022, <https://www.cbc.com/2022/07/05/why-driving-big-rig-trucks-isnt-a-job-americans-want-to-do-anymore.html>,

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<https://www.womenintruck.org/press-releases/women-in-trucking-association-publishes-whitepaper-on-addressing-gender-bias-and-harassment-toward-professional-drivers>

¹⁰ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries in 2020*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cfoi.pdf>; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Table A-5. Fatal occupational injuries by occupation and event or exposure, all United States, 2020,” December 16, 2021,

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¹¹ Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, *Motor Carrier Safety Progress Report (as of June 30, 2022)*, <https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/safety/data-and-statistics/motor-carrier-safety-progress-report-june-30-2022> (last updated September 22, 2022).

¹² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook: Heavy and Tractor-trailer Truck Drivers* <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/transportation-and-material-moving/heavy-and-tractor-trailer-truck-drivers.htm> (viewed October 4, 2022).

¹³ Alana Semuels, “The Truck Driver Shortage Doesn’t Exist. Saying There Is One Makes Conditions Worse for Drivers,” *TIME*, November 12, 2021, <https://time.com/6116853/truck-driver-shortage-supply-chain/>

¹⁴ Greg Rosalsky, “Is There Really A Truck Driver Shortage?” *NPR Planet Money*, May 25, 2021,

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¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ International Brotherhood of Teamsters, “Teamsters Campaign Pays Off to Uphold Misclassification Law Protecting Drivers,” June 30, 2022, <https://teamster.org/2022/06/teamsters-campaign-pays-off-to-uphold->

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¹⁷ Jamie Lee Taete, “Arcades, Churches and Laundromats: A Trucker’s Haven on the Precipice of Change,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/04/business/truck-driver-shortage-support.html>

¹⁸ Letter from Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association to U.S. Department of Labor Secretary Martin J. Walsh and Wage and Hour Division Director Amy DeBisschop, April 12, 2021, https://downloads.regulations.gov/WH-2020-0007-4178/attachment_1.pdf (“‘[L]ease-purchase’ or ‘lease-to-own’ agreements ... are schemes where motor carriers lease a truck to a driver with the promise of fair compensation, future ownership of the truck, and ‘independence’ from traditional employer-employee requirements. The most problematic lease-purchase schemes are generally those that require the lessor (truck driver) to lease their truck to the motor carrier when the motor carrier and lessee are effectively the same entity. In essence, employers are able to lease a truck to a driver, which the driver leases back to the motor carrier in return. Lease-purchase schemes can only be described as indentured servitude — drivers are paid pennies on the dollar, will likely never own the truck, and have zero independence. In these situations, there is no opportunity for a driver to make a profit.”)

¹⁹ Greg Rosalsky, “Is There Really A Truck Driver Shortage?” *NPR Planet Money*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2021/05/25/999784202/is-there-really-a-truck-driver-shortage>