

The Real Reason America Doesn't Have Enough Truck Drivers

A 1,000-mile journey through the middle of America reveals the fundamental reason for truck driver shortages: It is a job full of stress, physical deprivation and loneliness.

By Peter S. Goodman Photographs by George Etheredge

Peter S. Goodman has written widely on the supply chain disruption. In reporting this article, he spent three days riding shotgun, from Kansas City, Mo., to Fort Worth and back.

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A faint winter sun slides toward the frozen scrub as Stephen Graves guides his tractor-trailer across the cracked pavement of a truck stop parking lot in southern Oklahoma. Exhausted from another 400 miles behind the wheel, he needs the restroom. But mostly he needs an answer to the same question that dogs him nearly every day as darkness falls: Where can he park his rig for the night?

Mr. Graves is nearing the 11-hour limit on driving before he is legally required to rest for 10 hours. He could push on for another hour, creep closer to the Texas border and shorten the distance to his drop-off the next morning — a warehouse alongside the Dallas-Fort Worth airport.

The calculus is tricky. The next truck stop down the interstate is notoriously short on parking. He might get there and have to settle for the shoulder of a highway on-ramp. This stop outside the minuscule town of Springer is unappealing — its bathrooms rank and its dining options minimal. But it has parking in abundance. So he pulls in for the night and climbs into the bunk at the back of his cab for a few hours of fitful sleep.

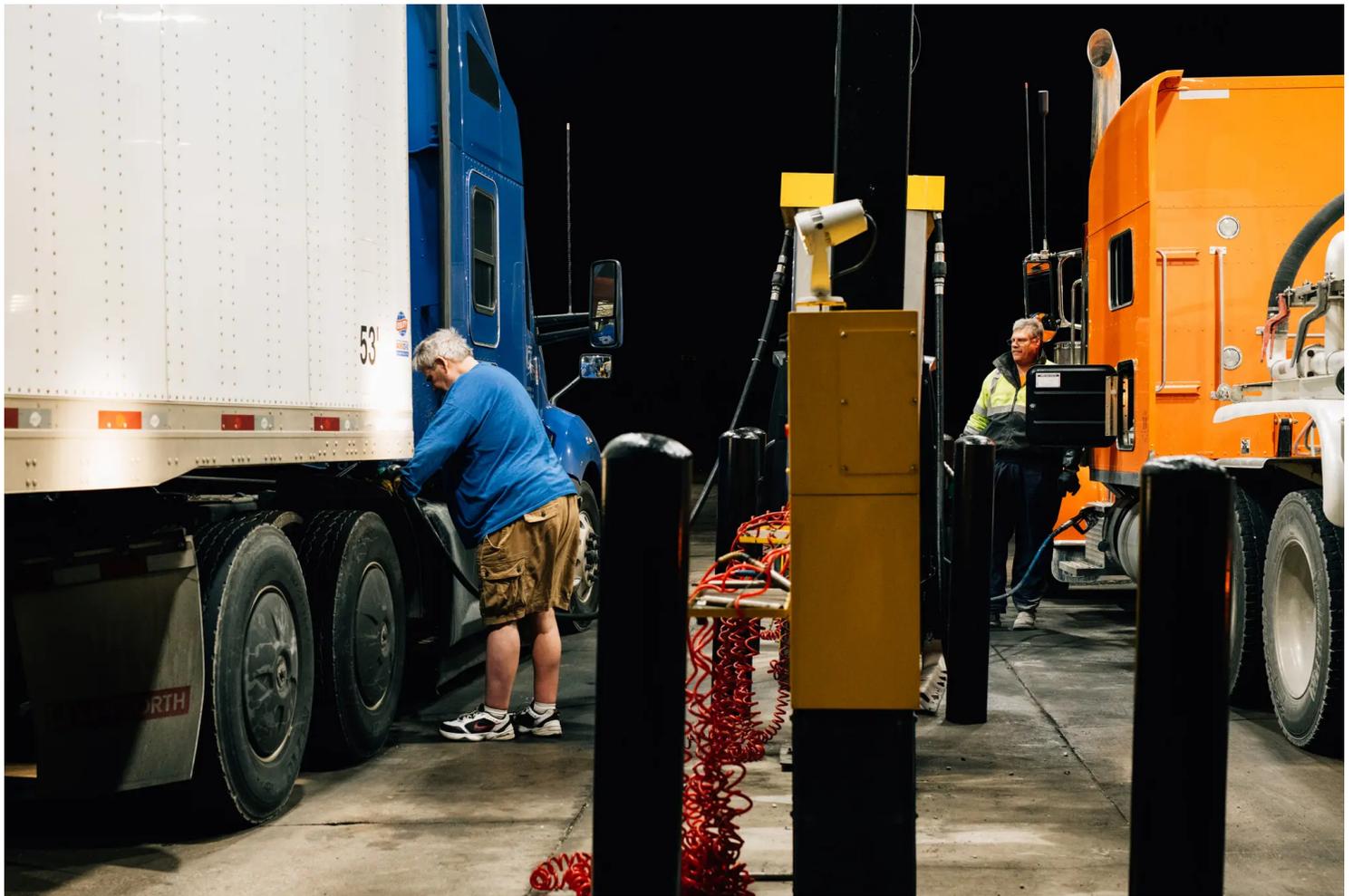
Mr. Graves, 65, has been driving a truck for more than two decades. He is prone to rhapsodizing about the open road. But he does not struggle to explain why his industry is perpetually bemoaning a shortage of drivers.



Truck drivers are limited to 11 hours of driving before they are legally required to rest for 10 hours.



Mr. Graves has been driving a truck for more than two decades.



Trucking is a journey through gas stations, fast food chains and liquor stores.

“The lifestyle probably is the first thing that smacks people in the face,” he says. “You know what it does to you. You’re thinking about it all the time. We’re tired. Our bodies are starting to go. Our bladders have been put to the test. And no exercise. We end up with all types of heart and other health ailments. You can’t truly fathom what it’s done to you.”

In a world contending with the unrelenting impact of the Great Supply Chain Disruption and its attendant worry of the moment, rising consumer prices, a shortage of truck drivers is frequently cited as an explanation for shortages of many other things — from construction supplies to electronics to clothing.

Last year, trucking companies in the United States suffered a record deficit of 80,000 drivers, according to the American Trucking Associations, a trade association. Given that trucks move 72 percent of American freight, a lack of drivers spells substantial disruption.

“There’s no silver bullet for fixing this,” says Robert Costello, the trade association’s chief economist. “We need to get more people into the industry.”

Some experts counter that the very notion of too few drivers is bogus — a reach by the industry for federal subsidies to train recruits as compensation for its poor rates of retention. 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. More recruits boost the supply of drivers, which keeps a cap on wages.

As the trucking association itself noted, more than 10 million Americans held commercial driver’s licenses in 2019. That was nearly triple the 3.7 million trucks that required a driver holding that certification.



America has a record deficit of truck drivers, and the typical turnover rate is high.

The American Central Transport headquarters in Kansas City, Mo., include a quiet room for truck drivers to relax, where no technology is allowed. George Etheredge for The New York Times

Drivers enjoyed refuge in a lounge area at the headquarters.

“This shortage narrative is industry lobbying rhetoric,” says Steve Viscelli, a labor expert at the University of Pennsylvania who previously worked as a truck driver. “There is no shortage of truck drivers. These are just really bad jobs.”

Until the 1980s, truck driving was a lucrative pursuit in which one union — the Teamsters — wielded enough power to ensure favorable working conditions, Mr. Viscelli recounts in his book “The Big Rig.” But the Carter administration deregulated the industry in the name of fostering competition, clearing the way for an influx of new trucking companies that diminished pay and increased demands on truckers.

The result was an opening for big-box retailers, which harnessed increasingly cheap freight and international trade to stock enormous stores with a vast profusion of wares. Along the way, truck driving was downgraded from a middle-class profession to one best avoided, Mr. Viscelli asserts.

Understand the Supply Chain Crisis

- **The Origins of the Crisis:** The pandemic created worldwide economic turmoil. We broke down how it happened.
- **Explaining the Shortages:** Why is this happening? When will it end? Here are some answers to your questions.
- **A New Normal?:** The chaos at ports, warehouses and retailers will probably persist through 2022, and perhaps even longer.
- **A Key Factor in Inflation:** In the U.S., inflation is hitting its highest level in decades. Supply chain issues play a big role.

Mr. Graves is satisfied with his employer, American Central Transport, which has a better retention rate than the average. He has been driving for the company for nearly seven years, and earns what he describes as “a comfortable living” — enough to finance vacations to Australia, Bulgaria and other far-flung destinations — though he declines to disclose how much.

He and his fellow drivers are now enjoying the upper hand. Trucking fleets are handing out across-the-board raises to retain drivers while offering \$10,000 cash bonuses in a frantic effort to court new hires.

Still, a three-day run in Mr. Graves’s vehicle — from Kansas City, Mo., to Fort Worth and back — reveals the inherent pressures of a relentlessly stressful job.

Here is a life spent navigating the hazards of piloting a truck weighing 26,000 pounds and pulling a 53-foot trailer, while balancing the need to ingest caffeine against the imperative to limit bathroom breaks.

The hours pass, the towns recede, while the gnawing loneliness of the road is constant.

"I don't pretend that I'm Superman," Mr. Graves says. "I'm a cog in the wheel. If I don't do what I do, things will slow down. Somebody bought a new TV. They're waiting for it. They're going to watch the game."

The Road Traveled

Along I-35 in Kansas. Long-haul drivers endure the pressures of a stressful job, intensified by the supply chain disruption.

Like many truck drivers, Mr. Graves had anticipated a different life.

Raised an only child near Richmond, Va., he planned to be an engineer. But when his father became ill, he dropped out of college and moved home to help his mother.

He considered training to be a plumber or a carpenter, but those professions entailed years of apprenticing. Driving a truck put him in position to begin earning in a matter of weeks.

Twenty years and 1.6 million miles later, he is still behind the wheel.

At 3:30 on a blustery morning in Kansas City, Mr. Graves emerges from his bunk inside his Kenworth T680 tractor and commences his day.

He slips on a Day-Glo orange woolen hat, opens the cabin door and climbs down a ladder to the pavement, grimacing as he lands on his flat feet. The asphalt is pockmarked by patches of ice and crusted snow. In the 12-degree chill, he checks the tire pressure and his brake lines. He checks whether his brake pads or windshield wiper fluid has frozen. He inspects the connection between his tractor and his trailer.

Satisfied, he returns to his cab, fortifies himself with coffee, surveys the paperwork on the load he is picking up this morning and then rolls out of the yard.

Mr. Graves is what is known in trucker vernacular as an over-the-road driver, meaning that he typically does not make it home by nightfall. He drives roughly 9,000 miles a month, spending two and three weeks on the road at a time, before returning home to his condo in Kingsport, Tenn.

This is Day 10 of a 19-day trip that has taken him from Texarkana, Ark., to Texarkana, Texas, with three separate runs through Chicago, a stop in Indianapolis and a drop in Spartanburg, S.C., before bringing him to Kansas City.

“After a while, all the cities and towns run together,” Mr. Graves said as he traveled south toward Texas. George Etheredge for The New York Times

Mr. Graves drives nearly 9,000 miles a month and has logged 1.6 million miles over his career.

He is headed to a warehouse 35 miles southwest of Kansas City to pick up 26 crates of tractor parts. Then he will begin the 545-mile journey south to a distribution center in Fort Worth.

He keeps his cabin temperature cool, at 63 degrees, to “keep an edge” and stave off “highway hypnosis” — a loss of attention that can be fatal.

Only seven months into his career, he was carrying a load of electronics from North Carolina to Virginia, traveling north on I-95, when a pink Cadillac Escalade traveling southbound hurtled over the divider, flipped in the air and landed in his lane, 150 feet in front of him. He swerved onto the shoulder, but still clipped the vehicle. He was certain that everyone inside was dead. The couple survived. So did his appreciation for the perils of the highway.

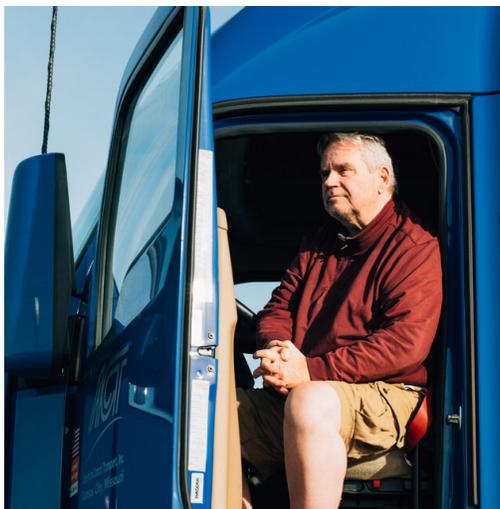
“If this isn’t scary, you’re a fool,” he says. “It takes more than the length of a football field to stop out here.”

What he knows viscerally is borne out by statistics. A truck driver is 10 times more likely to be killed on the job than the average American worker, according to federal data.

5 Things You Might Not Know About Truckers



Peter S. Goodman
Riding shotgun between Missouri and Texas



everyone.

Here are the facts →

Every truck stop is like a shrine seeking to ward off the demons of fatigue. Refrigerated display cabinets are stocked with supercaffeinated energy drinks whose brand names attest to the trading of long-term health for a short-term jolt: Red Bull. Java Monster. Bang.

"It's a deal with the devil," says Mr. Graves, who sticks with coffee.

At the warehouse, his instructions direct him to Building 2, which he assumes means the second building he encounters. But after climbing out of the cab and limping up a staircase, a receptionist directs him back to the first building.

He handles this with studious cheer.

"Good morning, ma'am," he says to every woman on the other side of the plexiglass dividers at every warehouse, savoring the most rudimentary human connections. "Are you doing OK?"

He makes a point of learning the name of the woman who pours him a coffee at a Burger King — Bailey — and talks about her, about the kindness in her glance, for several hundred miles after.

"I try to give everyone a smile," he explains, compensating for the others on the road. "Drivers are generally snarly because they are tired, they're hungry, and their schedules suck, and they tend to take it out on other people."

He revels in challenging popular stereotypes of the truck driver, speaking with the precise elocution of a college professor. He discarded his CB radio years ago, weary of hearing the crude and sometimes hateful chatter dispensed over crackly airwaves. He starts his morning listening to the global news report from BBC World Service in London, and then switches to light jazz or classical.

"I love Brahms," he says, as he winds through Kansas.

He celebrates his constant motion as liberation from the cubicle life that confines many workers. But as he hews to the interstates, what he mostly sees are the service corridors of American life, a generic blur of gas stations, fast food restaurants and liquor stores.

"After a while," he says, "all the cities and towns run together."

Traveling south on I-35, crossing from Missouri into Kansas, he rolls past an assisted living facility, a Harley dealership, an Applebee's restaurant, and strip malls full of nail salons and check cashing places. He passes a Hostess Twinkie factory, an indoor skydiving place.

How the Supply Chain Crisis Unfolded

The pandemic sparked the problem. The highly intricate and interconnected global supply chain is in upheaval. Much of the crisis can be traced to the outbreak of Covid-19, which triggered an economic slowdown, mass layoffs and a halt to production. Here's what happened next:

Mostly, he rolls through vast stretches of emptiness, the flat, largely treeless plains punctuated by distant herds of cattle.

He savors certain stretches of road, anticipating them for hundreds of miles. Today's journey takes him through one of his favorites — the Flint Hills of Kansas.

"During the summer, the tall grass, the prairie grass is going full," he said. "It blows gently in the wind. You can just listen to the wind. It's such a calm and soothing feeling."

The Solitary Life

Mr. Graves came to terms with his solitary lifestyle long ago, seeing his profession as a form of liberation from conventional office life despite its trade-offs.

One of the primary reasons young people tend not to stick as truck drivers, Mr. Graves explains, is the challenge of maintaining ties to the rest of the world.

Those with partners at home routinely receive calls and texts demanding clarity on when they will return, a layer of stress added atop the usual anxieties of the job. They reach home weary, anticipating relaxation and appreciation, only to confront the reality of built-up demands — worn-out partners left with sole responsibility for children, needed repairs — along with the fraught emotions of re-establishing connection.

Relationships frequently do not last, Mr. Graves says. He long ago made peace with his solitary existence.

More than a decade ago, he went on a few dates with a woman he met in Tennessee. Then, she began asking him how long he planned to continue driving.

“She said, ‘I’d like for us to have a relationship,’” he recalls. “I was flattered, but you know, what am I going to do if I just stop working? I have no income. I have no job for the time being. I just have love. That’s nice for a couple of days, but, you know, love is not automatically deposited in my payroll.”

Just after 4 p.m., he passes through the low-slung sprawl of Oklahoma City as the interstate widens to three lanes. A truck passing in the left lane hits a bump in the pavement, and its trailer shakes and rattles. Mr. Graves recoils.

“That scared the hell out of me,” he says. “I was afraid he was going to try to avoid it by coming over into my lane.”

Under federal regulations, he is required to take a 30-minute break within eight hours of driving. An electronic device installed in his cab shows the seconds ticking away, with less than 90 minutes left. His body is stiff. He could use a stretch. But he does not want to stop in Oklahoma City, not with rush hour building. He presses on.

By the time he reaches the truck stop south of Springer, the sun is grazing the horizon.

In trucker parlance, a gas station with food and showers is known as an oasis — a word not conjured by this particular place. Trucks are clustered together, their engines idling to produce heat. The toilets reek. The showers are filthy. Metal trays display fried chicken wings that appear to have been here for many hours.

For drivers, a gas station with food and showers is known as an oasis.

A rare sit-down meal in Denton, Texas, before his journey for the day.

But there is no guarantee he will find parking at the next stop, so this is where Mr. Graves opts to spend the night. He slides into a space between two other tractor-trailers and heads into the shop in search of dinner.

He selects a shrink-wrapped turkey sandwich and two Pop-Tarts — “one for dessert and one for breakfast.” He walks back to the truck under a crescent moon, ingests his food and slides into the lower bunk.

The next morning, he stops to fuel at a truck stop in Ardmore, Okla., filling 132 gallons of diesel for \$416.76, the tab picked up by his employer via a company credit card.

Just before the Texas border, the sky still dark, he drives past the WinStar World Casino, the facades decked out like world landmarks — the Colosseum in Rome, Buckingham Palace, the Chrysler Building.

In Fort Worth, he navigates a tangle of cloverleaf merges and then locates his destination in a bewildering warren of warehouses. He drops off his load and then continues south as he listens to a report about the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas on the BBC.

“People buy too much crap,” he says.

Fifteen miles down the interstate in Grand Prairie, Texas, Mr. Graves hitches his tractor to a trailer bound for a Walmart distribution center near Kansas City. The paperwork shows that he is picking up 38,000 pounds of contact lenses, dog food, salsa and ground coffee.

He retraces his route into Oklahoma, passing the night at a truck stop outside the town of Tonkawa. The next morning, he is on the road by 5, crossing into Kansas as a fiery sunrise seeps from the plains.

He pulls off the interstate in Emporia, Kan., and enjoys a rare sit-down meal — a waffle slathered in syrup, hash browns and a cup of coffee.

He drops his trailer at an enormous Walmart lot just after 10 a.m. He is on track to reach Kansas City by midday, with a precious afternoon off. He plans to leave his tractor in the company yard and shell out more than \$100 for a night at a hotel.

But an hour later, a dispatcher in Kansas City sends him a text message over the company satellite system. Another truck carrying pet food has broken down near Columbia, Mo. Can Mr. Graves divert there — two hours away — rescue the load and carry it to a PetSmart distribution center in Joplin, Mo.?

He reroutes, relinquishing his hotel bed for another night at a truck stop.

“I was looking forward to a hot shower,” he says. “I’m tired, man. I kind of want to stretch out. But, hey, I’m just a machine, right?”

Mr. Graves has an appreciation for the natural beauty he sees while driving. "During the summer, the tall grass, the prairie grass is going full," he says of the Flint Hills in Kansas. "It blows gently in the wind."