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One reason for supply shortages: No one to drive the trucks

Exploding demand for deliveries during a demographic shift is driving a nationwide deficit of truckers

By **Angela Yang** Globe Correspondent, Updated October 7, 2021, 5:27 p.m.



Trucks entered Boston on the expressway during afternoon traffic. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Local coffee shop constantly out of your favorite ingredient lately? Can't find what you're looking for at the store? Packages arriving late?

The problem might be as simple as having too few people to drive the stuff around.

A shortfall of truck drivers is one factor clogging every facet of the supply chain right now, and Massachusetts is feeling the impact. It's not a new problem, industry experts say, but like so much else, the global pandemic has made it worse.

It's even affecting America's oldest county fair.

This year, the Trucking Association of Massachusetts had hoped to participate in a Touch-a-Truck event Friday at the Topsfield Fair, parking a truck there for kids to climb on and play around. But executive director Kevin Weeks said his group had to back out. They couldn't spare a driver.

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One reason, Weeks said: The need for trucking just “exploded” during the pandemic, with all the online shopping from consumers working from home.

Then there's the impact of the pandemic on truck drivers themselves, who skew older.



Gerard Geise, 62, stopped for a break in Framingham on the Massachusetts Turnpike en route to Chelsea from Pennsylvania. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Sharing a truck with another driver — who has spent hours in the cab on the previous shift — always posed some risk, Weeks said, especially for older folks more vulnerable to COVID-19. And while the association lobbied for truckers to move up in the vaccination line, it and other trucking groups were largely unsuccessful.

With many rest stops closed during the early stage of the pandemic, truck drivers also struggled to find places to shower and sleep along their routes. Dining options were limited, too: Many fast-food restaurants shuttered indoor ordering, and 18-wheelers

aren't built for a drive-through lane.

Through it all, Weeks said, truckers were working “probably more than they want to work” while trying to stay within safety guidelines that dictate the maximum number of hours they can drive. The combination of these dilemmas has pushed some drivers to leave the industry or retire early.

“Nobody wants to put anybody in harm’s way, whether it’s the driver or the contents of the truck or certainly the vehicles and the people that are around them,” he said. “So it’s difficult, and they’re coping as best they can, delivering as much as they can as quickly as they can. But the fact of the matter is it takes longer to get things now.”

And as older drivers age out of trucking, younger ones aren’t replacing them fast enough. Qualifying to be a commercial driver requires a lot: a stellar driving record and passing background checks, drug testing, and a slew of other requirements. And the long-haul life’s not for everyone; turnover among newly minted drivers is high.

Gerard Geise, 62, has been behind the wheel of his tractor trailer since the 1980s. He said he makes a good living, but the job is stressful. Not only are more cars on the road, but there’s less camaraderie among drivers now than in decades past.

“Back in the ‘80s and ‘90s, you would stop to help people on the side of the road and you would ask for help and not have any problem getting it,” Geise said. “These days, it’s really difficult to even get to know people and it just seems like [a] very backstabbing kind of mentality.”

And Geise is driving more since the pandemic began, often working 14 hours at a time — the maximum he’s allowed to log without taking a break. Meanwhile, trucking companies have begun offering retention bonuses in hopes of getting drivers to stay.

While Geise plans to give it another five years, he said other drivers have found it increasingly difficult to love the trade like they used to. Larger companies tend to treat

their drivers as “just a number,” Geise said, and increased government regulation, such as an electronic device that logs drivers’ hours, has made the work environment more unpleasant.

“Before, you worked as you needed to. If you were tired, you could stop and take a nap,” Geise said. “Now, you’re kind of racing a clock and don’t have any breaks throughout that day other than maybe a half an hour or so.”

The latest census counted [more than 3.5 million truck drivers](#) in the United States — an all-time high — but the American Trucking Associations reported in 2019 that the industry will need to add about [1.1 million drivers](#) this decade to keep up with demand. That’s even before the pandemic touched everything.

Still, there are young workers who seem eager to join the industry, according to Mark Greenberg, president of New England Tractor Trailer Training School. He said the school’s enrollment rates remained steady throughout the pandemic, helped by public relations efforts to remind communities about the economic importance of trucking.

“It’s still a fun opportunity for people to enter an industry that gives them freedom of individuality and no direct supervisory oversight. That’s very appealing to some people,” Greenberg said. “Obviously, it’s a bit challenging, but it does offer some great opportunities to literally see the country and be independent while you’re doing it.”

But this generation of late teens and early 20somethings is simply smaller than the one before, according to data published this year by labor market analytics firm [Emsi](#), which means trucking companies everywhere are competing not just with one another but with other industries among a shrinking pool of available young adults.



Sheree Lingua of Connecticut, who retired from a previous job, fueled up her truck in Framingham on the Massachusetts Turnpike. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

ABF Freight, a subsidiary of Arkansas-based logistics company ArcBest, is still looking to fill open driver positions in Massachusetts and across North America.

The company is hiring in a “challenging environment,” said ArcBest chief human resources officer Erin Gattis, and has begun connecting with high school students about careers in trucking. It’s also offering sign-on bonuses, fully covered health insurance, even a pension.

“These job candidates, they have lots and lots of options,” she said. “That’s why it’s so

important for us, more than ever, to just reinvest in our employees, making sure they understand how much they're valued.”

With worldwide backups caused by port closures, shipping delays, and widespread staffing shortages, Gattis said truck drivers are vital to keeping the supply chain moving. Already, industries across Massachusetts have felt the toll of the trucking crisis.

Restaurants have had to slim down menus because of hard-to-get ingredients or replace them with alternatives, said Massachusetts Restaurant Association president Bob Luz. And what's unavailable can be unpredictable.

“It's not every day, every product,” Luz said. “It's really hit or miss.”

Some food service distributors have also stopped delivering to smaller accounts, leaving many restaurants no choice but to collect their products directly from warehouses.

Retailers are also suffering from low inventory, which is pushing more shoppers to buy online instead of in stores.

“I don't think there's hardly any line of product that stores feel that they are fully stocked on,” said Jon Hurst, president of the Retailers Association of Massachusetts. “I would have a hard time thinking of a type of seller that has not been touched by this problem.”

All of it highlights the role of global distribution chains, said Weeks of the Massachusetts truckers group, with trucking essential to keep it all moving. He hopes people appreciate that a little more than they did before.

“People didn't necessarily take the trucking community for granted as much as they usually do,” Weeks said. “But little by little, we'll fall into the shadows again. People just anticipate things will come to their house and things will be on the shelves. And that's what we do.”

Angela Yang can be reached at angela.yang@globe.com.