



Addressing the U.S. Truck Driver Shortage: The Role of Foreign-Born Drivers, Visa Policy, and Supply Chain Impacts

Introduction

The United States depends on its trucking workforce to keep goods moving across the country. According to the [American Trucking Associations' trends report](#), trucks moved 11.27 billion tons of freight in 2024, accounting for 67% of surface trade between the U.S. and Canada, making the industry an indispensable part of the economy. Yet the sector faces a persistent and growing shortage of truck drivers. In 2025, industry estimates placed the gap at between [60,000 and 80,000 drivers](#). This shortage has significant implications for supply chains and could lead to inflationary pressure.

Foreign-born drivers have been instrumental in addressing these labor gaps, accounting for [nearly one in six U.S. truck drivers](#). However, recent policy changes — including the U.S. Department of State's [pause on visa issuance](#) for foreign-born commercial drivers and an [executive order](#) mandating changes to the [government's guidance](#) on English language proficiency for truck drivers — threaten to worsen the shortage.

The trucking industry is comprised mainly of [small businesses](#), with 92% of carriers operating ten or fewer trucks. Because these small carriers rely heavily on foreign-born drivers, the pause in visa issuance and stricter English proficiency tests could disproportionately affect them, creating staffing challenges and potentially disrupting supply chains.

This paper examines the significance of foreign-born truck drivers, the visa pathways they utilize, the challenges they encounter, and the implications of restricting access to this essential workforce.

The Importance of Foreign-Born Truckers

The U.S. trucking industry has long benefited from immigrant labor. Between 2000 and 2021, the number of foreign-born truckers more than doubled, rising from 316,000 to over [720,000 drivers](#). Today, about [18% of U.S. truck drivers are foreign-born](#). These workers not only fill labor shortages but also bring critical skills and experience, often acquired in their countries of origin. Their contributions are especially visible in long-haul and regional freight sectors, which face [higher turnover](#) and recruitment challenges.

Foreign-born truckers play an outsized role in stabilizing supply chains. With an aging workforce — the [average age of drivers of heavy trucks is 47](#) — and declining interest from younger workers, the industry increasingly relies on immigrant drivers to meet demand. In some regions, particularly along the southern border and in metropolitan areas, [immigrant drivers represent an even larger share](#) of the trucking workforce. Without them, existing supply chain bottlenecks are likely to become even more severe.

Visa Pathways for Truck Drivers

Although foreign-born workers comprise an important portion of the trucking labor force, their ability to enter and work in the United States legally has historically been constrained by limited



visa options. While trucking is not explicitly listed as a specialty occupation under most visa categories, some companies have been able to hire immigrant drivers utilizing [certain visa categories](#):

H-2B visas: Trucking firms have used [H-2B visas](#) to bring in seasonal or temporary drivers, although caps on the number of visas issued each year create limitations on their use.

EB-3 visas: Some foreign-born truck drivers have been sponsored for green cards under [EB-3 immigrant visa preference categories](#) after their sponsoring employers satisfy [PERM labor certification process](#) requirements, including demonstrating that there are a lack of U.S. workers available to fill positions.

E-2 visas: Although less commonly used, some drivers and small trucking operators have utilized this [investor visa](#) to establish businesses that also provide commercial trucking services.

Cross-border permits: Truckers from Mexico and Canada, [under USMCA provisions](#), have historically crossed the border with goods, although these arrangements are limited and tightly regulated.

Challenges Facing Foreign-Born Truckers

In August 2025, the U.S. Department of State [announced](#) a pause on new employment visas for commercial truck drivers. Officials cited safety concerns, such as English language proficiency and proper vetting of foreign licensing credentials. This decision effectively froze all visa pathways for newly arriving foreign-born truckers, despite industry leaders' [warning](#) that the policy would exacerbate the labor shortage.

Prior to this pause, in April 2025, the White House released an [executive order](#) entitled “Enforcing Commonsense Rules of the Road for America’s Truck Drivers.” The executive order [mandated](#) changing the government’s [2016 guidance](#) on English language proficiency and to place “[out-of-service](#)” all truck drivers in the U.S. who are not proficient in English. This change has accentuated the industry’s labor problems.

Trucking Industry Data: Salaries, Demographics, and Occupational Risks

The trucking industry offers competitive wages relative to other non-college-educated professions. In May 2024, the median annual wage for heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers was [\\$57,440](#) (about \$27.62 per hour). Specialized roles — such as those involving hazardous materials, tanker operations, or long-haul trucking — [often pay significantly more](#). Despite this, recruitment remains difficult due to the lifestyle demands and safety risks associated with the job.

Demographically, truck driving is an [aging sector](#), with nearly 28% of drivers age 55 and older, and concerns remain about retirements of drivers outpacing recruitment. Even as [self-driving trucks are beginning](#) to be rolled out, the technology is still young and [not available or accepted in many areas](#). Foreign-born drivers help reinvigorate this workforce, bringing in younger drivers willing to make a career in the industry.

In recent years, as the U.S. trucking industry has struggled with severe labor shortages, there has been a noticeable movement toward employing refugees, asylum seekers, TPS recipients,



and [Afghan evacuees](#) as truck drivers. Some foreign-born drivers have even [started](#) their own trucking businesses, creating additional jobs and economic growth.

Truck driving is one of the [most dangerous professions](#) in the country. The Bureau of Labor Statistics consistently ranks heavy truck driving among the occupations with the highest number of workplace fatalities. [Risks include](#) highway accidents, fatigue, weather conditions, and exposure to hazardous cargo.

For these reasons, truck driving has become less appealing to many native-born American workers. The industry also faces high turnover, with many U.S.-born workers opting for less risky jobs that offer greater flexibility and stability. In response, immigrant workers are increasingly stepping up to [fill these critical roles](#), helping keep the supply chain moving despite ongoing labor shortages.

Supply Chain Impacts of the Truck Driver Shortage

The shortage of truck drivers directly threatens the resilience of U.S. supply chains. Trucks transport [approximately 71%](#) of goods by weight in the U.S., from consumer products, to food, to construction materials. When there are fewer drivers, freight rates rise, delivery delays grow, and companies struggle to maintain just-in-time supply models. Shortages of truckers [increase the risk](#) of spoilage for perishable goods, delay construction projects dependent on timely material delivery, and contribute to inflationary pressures as shipping costs are passed down to consumers.

The August 2025 [visa pause](#) will likely intensify these challenges. By restricting new foreign-born drivers, the policy reduces the pipeline of workers at a time when retirements are accelerating and domestic recruitment remains weak. [Industry groups warn](#) that without access to immigrant drivers, the labor gap could widen even further, [leading to increased transportation costs](#) and supply chain disruptions. The combination of the visa pause and the executive order on English proficiency exacerbates the shortage and may worsen bottlenecks across the supply chain.

Policy and Practical Recommendations

Resolving the truck driver shortage requires a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the essential role of foreign-born drivers. Policymakers and industry leaders should consider the following steps:

Reestablish Visa Pathways: Resume the issuance of visas for truck drivers who comply with all the legal requirements.

Expand Training and Language Support: Given the national need and impact, federally funded programs should be offered to support English language acquisition and CDL preparation for foreign-born applicants. This should include focused programs to help drivers meet the executive order's English proficiency requirements.

Conclusion

A functional and sufficiently staffed trucking industry – primarily composed of small freight companies – is essential for continued U.S. economic growth. The industry's long-term health



depends on a steady flow of skilled drivers. Foreign-born truckers fill essential roles in this workforce, providing critical capacity in an industry facing chronic shortages. Restrictive visa policies risk undermining not only the livelihoods of immigrant drivers but also the stability of national supply chains. Addressing the driver shortage will require a balanced approach that values safety, worker protections, and economic necessity. Reintegrating foreign-born truckers into a legal and well-regulated workforce is not just a matter of immigration policy, it is an economic imperative.