

FEWER DRIVERS, GROWING NEEDS

The number of people licensed to drive heavy trucks in Wisconsin dropped 8.9% from 2010 to 2025, even as more goods were shipped on state highways. These commercial drivers tend to be older on average than the rest of the drivers on the road. State and federal efforts may eventually help bring new drivers into the profession to meet demand, and self-driving vehicles might also play a future role.

Seventy percent of the goods, by weight, that move through Wisconsin do so [on highways](#). These shipments grew by 33% between 2019 and 2023, and [federal officials](#) project an additional 50% nationwide increase of freight shipped by truck by 2050.

The volume of these goods, routed through fulfillment centers like those owned by [Amazon](#), [ports](#), and [warehouses](#), shows that heavy trucks are vital to the supply chain. But as our reliance on heavy trucks has grown, the number of people in Wisconsin licensed to drive them has dropped by more than 20,000 drivers, or 8.9%, over the past 15 years. The remaining drivers are also older than others on the road, which suggests the supply of them could shrink even further.

This combination of consistent shipping demand and fewer, older drivers creates the potential for labor shortages. Each year, Wisconsin has about 6,000 job

openings that require heavy truck licenses, according to the state [Department of Workforce Development](#).

Younger drivers are not filling these openings; less than a quarter of licensed heavy truck drivers are under 40 years old. Driver shortages – either overall or in specific niches – could affect the reliability and cost of shipping, putting upward pressure on prices.

In this brief, we [review data](#) from the Wisconsin Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to identify long-term trends in the number of drivers in the state who hold a [Commercial Driver License](#) (CDL), a special license required for anyone operating a vehicle that weighs more than 26,000 pounds.

With these licenses needed to drive everything from semi-trailer trucks to flatbed and dump trucks to large snow plows, a decline in CDL drivers represents a sizable challenge to the movement of goods across the state, construction projects, and even local government and school operations.

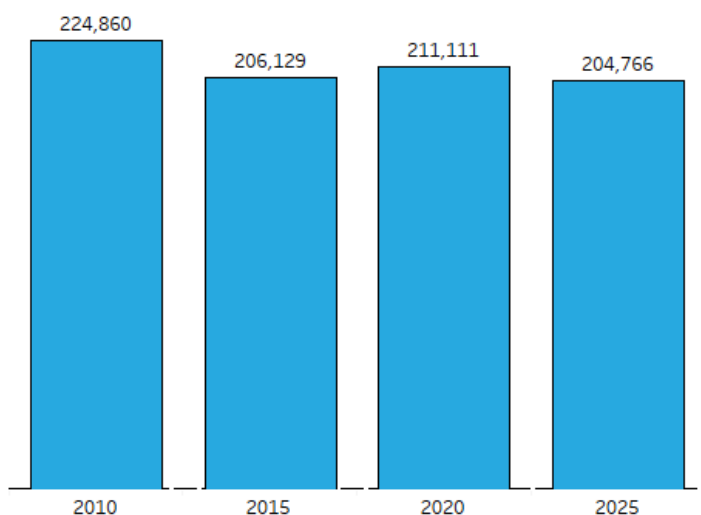
LONG-TERM DECLINE IN LICENSE HOLDERS

As of 2025, there were 8.3% more drivers in the state than in 2010, but 8.9% fewer valid CDL holders: 204,766 in 2025 compared to 224,860 in 2010. The decline in the number of CDL license holders per 100,000 residents was even greater, falling by 13.3% from 3,954 to 3,428 per 100,000 residents. (The Wisconsin DMV tracks both valid and withdrawn CDL licenses, but here we refer only to valid licenses.)

The decline between 2010 and 2015 was the single largest drop, falling by 18,731 or 8.3%. Commercial drivers partially rebounded by 4,982 (2.4%) between 2015 and 2020 but fell again from 2020 to 2025 by 6,345, or 3.0%. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: Fewer Wisconsin Residents Hold Commercial Driver Licenses Than in 2010

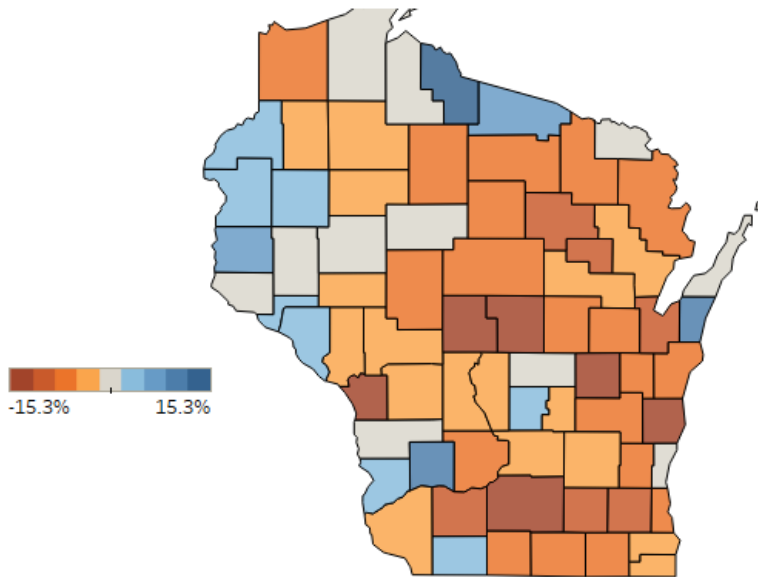
Valid CDL holders by year



Source: Wisconsin Department of Transportation

Figure 2: Most Counties Have Fewer Commercial Driver License Holders

Percent change in number of CDL holders by county, 2010-2025



© 2026 Mapbox © OpenStreetMap

Source: Wisconsin Department of Transportation

The statewide drop was reflected in declines across most of the state's 9 counties, led by 15% drops in Winnebago and Dane County from 2010 to 2025. Dane County's 1,403 drop in license holders led the state. Milwaukee County saw a similar decline of 1,385 CDLs, but that only accounted for a 6.9% decrease in the county (see Figure 2).

Seventeen counties in the state, however, saw an increase in CDLs during this period. Of these, Iron County had the largest percentage increase at 13.2%, and St. Croix County had the largest total increase of 296 valid CDLs. The counties with increasing numbers of CDL holders tended to be less populated rural counties.

The story of decline in license holders is similar for people licensed to drive buses. [Previous Forum research](#) identified falling numbers and rising ages for licensed bus drivers as of 2022, and more recent data suggests this trend continues. From 2022 to 2025, the number of licensed school bus drivers fell by another 13.5%, down to 12,330. [Shortages](#) in the number of people licensed to operate school buses have continued to impact some districts. The number of drivers licensed to operate passenger buses have also declined dramatically, falling by 13.8% or 6,327 over the same time period. Note that anyone licensed to drive a school bus can also drive a passenger bus. Fewer bus drivers

can impact student [transportation](#) to schools and extra-curricular activities and can make transit service [more expensive](#).

A 2022 Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) [white paper](#) identified some factors that may be behind the shrinking numbers of drivers, including retirements and a loss of licenses due to poor driving records, drug tests, or other rule-based disqualifications. A relative drop in pay over time, difficult working conditions, and long hours also contributed. Research by the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) suggests that, nationwide, driver numbers increase in response to rising pay, suggesting a functioning labor market.

AGING DRIVERS

Not only are there fewer heavy truck drivers, but they are older than the general driving population. In [2025](#), the average age for all CDL holders was 51.4 years old, compared to 50.4 years old for all regular 18 and older, the minimum age to hold a CDL. As Figure 3 on the following page shows, 58.7% of licensed commercial truck drivers were at least 50 years old in 2025, and nearly a quarter were between 60 and 69 years old. Far more CDL holders were in the 50 to 59 and 60 to 69 age groups than the rest of the driving population. Available data do not detail how many of these license holders still drive professionally.

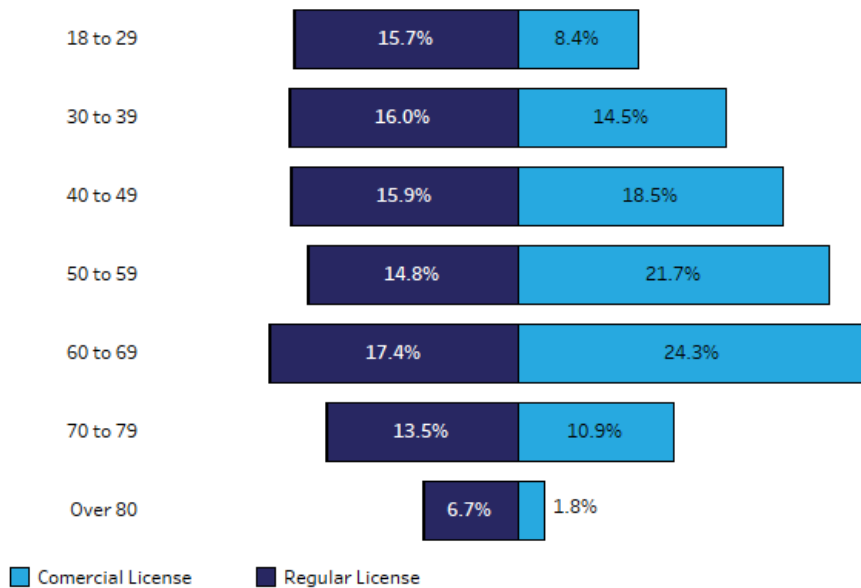
New drivers do not seem to be replacing older drivers, as only 8.4% of commercial drivers are under 30 and fewer than a quarter are under 40. Some amount of this disparity may be due to demographic differences, since there are more people of working age over 40 than under 40, but missed recruitment and retention opportunities may also be at fault. If current conditions hold, the number of CDL holders will continue to drop as drivers age out of the workforce, accelerating the trend of losing drivers to retirement.

Men tend to dominate the truck-driving field, and in 2025 96.8% of all CDLs were held by men with an average age of 51.5. The small group of women with CDLs was 48.8 years old on average.



Figure 3: Nearly a Quarter of CDL Holders Are 60 and 69 Years Old

Percent of valid total CDL and regular driver license holders by age group, 2025



Source: Wisconsin Department of Transportation

LICENSING PROCESS

Commercial driver licensing requires substantial training, making it difficult for the labor market to quickly respond to short-term driver shortages. Drivers must pass written and skills tests to get a CDL. Typically, these licenses are valid for up to 8 years, with shorter periods for special license authorizations like hauling hazardous materials. Federal rules mandate [medical testing](#), which must be updated at least every [two years](#), and drug testing requirements that potential licensees must meet as well.

Applicants for their first CDL are required to complete Entry Level Driver Training, which includes classroom and behind-the-wheel instruction. Once completed, prospective drivers can then stand for their official tests. The training program is offered through driving schools, community colleges, and other programs statewide. These training programs require a financial and time commitment to complete. For example, the knowledge portion of the training offered by [Madison Area Technical College](#) lasts up to 3 months and costs \$730. However, efforts to shorten these courses may impact how well new drivers are prepared to operate heavy trucks on the state's highways.

EFFORTS TO ADD MORE DRIVERS

To increase the total number of drivers, [state leaders](#) have taken steps to increase access to training

programs. In [2024](#), the Wisconsin Legislature and Gov. Tony Evers created a grant program to support residents seeking their first CDL. These grants are sent to driver training schools or employer-sponsored programs and cover up to \$3,000 or half the cost of the training. In 2026, [\\$250,000 in grants](#) were awarded across the state through this program, enough to aid about 170 new license holders. It remains to be seen if such grants address the root causes discouraging individuals from pursuing or retaining a CDL.

There are also federal programs that provide funding for driver training, including a relatively modest [\\$3.4 million](#) nationwide grant program announced in 2025 for veterans seeking CDL training. Federal [Workforce Pell](#)

grants for students seeking driver training are also newly available. As of July 2026, students entering high-skill, high-wage, and in-demand occupations, including commercial driving, may be eligible for grants through the program. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the estimated average award for CDL Workforce Pell programs is expected to be [\\$2,200 per student](#) but may vary based on the financial need of the student and the cost of the program.

On the other hand, federal officials recently [shut down](#) a number of driver training schools nationwide, including three in Wisconsin. The federal officials questioned whether the schools were providing appropriate training and testing for learners' permits in languages other than English. (Final tests are conducted in English.)

Shutting down training schools is not unheard of, although state DOT officials indicate that their periodic reviews of schools' CDL training practices – which occasionally result in school closures – focus on safety-related requirements rather than language. Appropriate training is important given the danger of improperly operating a heavy truck. Yet reducing training opportunities could further limit the number of licensed drivers.

Since the three schools shut down by federal officials were located in an area with [multiple schools](#) providing training, the impact on training opportunities from this



action was likely limited. Closing schools in other areas of the state with more limited options, however, may increase barriers to new drivers entering the workforce.

A ROLE FOR SELF-DRIVING VEHICLES?

Some have suggested that [autonomous vehicles](#) will help fill the gap left by aging heavy truck drivers. Currently, state law requires that someone be behind the wheel and in control of any vehicle on the road at all times, so truly automated vehicle operation is not allowed for commercial or other drivers at this time.

Yet the trucking industry and state law have already taken some steps in that direction. [Platooning](#) of heavy trucks, a process that can automatically coordinate braking and acceleration across multiple vehicles, as controlled by the lead vehicle's driver, was made legal in 2017. (Each coordinated truck must still have a driver at the wheel.) It is unclear how many vehicles are currently employing this practice; the Wisconsin Department of Transportation describes it as "rare."

State officials are preparing for other advancements in autonomous technology. The department is researching the possibilities of incorporating data sharing technology into highway infrastructure that can directly communicate to vehicles current road conditions and the status of traffic changes due to construction. It also has an [advisory committee](#) dedicated to preparing state law and infrastructure for future developments in autonomous vehicles.

[Roehl Transport](#), a Wisconsin-based company, has been part of a project testing automated driving systems, and has deployed vehicles on regular routes hauling goods between Dallas and Houston. This example, and other Wisconsin experiences, shows that in the future there may be less need for trained drivers behind the wheel. However, legal and technological progress in this area has been relatively slow, and any use of autonomous vehicles will ultimately be a political decision that is difficult to predict.

CONCLUSION

Fewer drivers today are licensed to operate heavy trucks and buses, and many existing drivers are at or near retirement age. With demand for shipping and transportation remaining strong, it is likely that concern over driver shortages will persist into the future. Current efforts focused on providing funding for commercial

driving students may help address these shortages in the long term but have not yet made a substantive impact on driver numbers. It may also be worth considering if there are other barriers beyond access to training programs, like pay or working conditions, that elected officials or businesses could consider to attract or retain more drivers.

Self-driving vehicles may eventually lead to a reduced need for skilled drivers behind the wheel, particularly for long highway routes between cities. However, as the slow progress of deploying even a partially autonomous technology like platooning shows, advances may not come fast enough to address short-term acute shortages. In addition, focusing too much on bringing self-driving vehicles online may further discourage current or prospective commercial drivers, if they believe that they may be replaced in short order.

Finally, continued investment in other types of transportation may allow a shift of goods from one type of transportation to another. Improving freight rail, for example, may help alleviate the driver shortage. Ultimately, as the state's latest [intermodal freight report](#) states, "Trucking plays a vital role....However, an overreliance on any one mode can create challenges within the transportation system." The decline in CDL holders exemplifies that challenge and invites an array of possible solutions.

