

Are supply chains stuck in detention?

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Research from David Correll, a research scientist at the MIT Center for Transportation and Logistics and co-director at the MIT FreightLab, has been getting some attention in Washington recently.

Correll's [research](#) focuses on data-driven approaches to understanding

U.S. [truck drivers](#)' utilization, retention, and quality of life. His work on how trucker "detention time"—the unpaid time drivers spend at warehouses waiting to be loaded and unloaded, often lasting hours—has contributed to supply chain bottlenecks in recent months, is impacting policy.

Plans from the White House have referred twice to unpaid detention time as means to improve trucking conditions. At the same time, recent remarks from President Biden cite Correll's findings to address the logistics morass in the freight industry that might be contributing to shortages and inflation across the United States.

His analysis of about 4,000 over-the-road drivers' working hours between 2016 and 2019 and interviews with drivers and other industry professionals indicate that truck drivers spend an average of six-and-a-half hours per day on the road, well below the 11 per day they are legally allowed. Drivers lose much of that remaining time to detention at warehouses. For instance, a driver may have an appointment to unload their truck in the morning, only to arrive and be told they can't be seen for several hours, forcing them to wait in the parking lot—frequently without pay. Additionally, drivers often face less-than-hospitable treatment from warehouse management, even being forbidden from using the restrooms.

This underutilization of U.S. truck drivers has amounted to what Correll calls a "misdiagnosis" of the recent supply chain snarls, commonly referred to as a "driver shortage." In November, Correll [testified](#) at a House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee hearing, explaining, "My research leads me to see the current situation not as a headcount shortage of drivers, but rather an endemic undervaluing of our American truck drivers' time." As a result, he said, "Forty percent of America's trucking capacity is left on the table every day."

There is good news and bad news in terms of a solution to this problem. The good news is that Correll's work estimates that adding just 18 minutes of average drive time to existing truckers' workdays would make up for the perceived shortage with no need for additional drivers. He said that the fundamentals of the trucking industry are sound: "We're facing a software problem, not a hardware problem."

The [bad news](#) is that a complex array of factors is involved in achieving that number. He told Congress, "We tend to frame this, to use a television analogy, kind of like it's a detective show. Like, if we just analyze this issue consistently enough or cleverly enough, we're going to ID the one culprit. [Instead,] I think it's a reality weight-loss show. We're all just sort of living with the consequences and prioritizations that we've made in America over years and over [the course of] the pandemic. And the only way that we can do better is to reprioritize in a way that respects truck drivers' time, respects truck drivers' dignity, and harmonizes our systems."

But at the very least, Correll said at a recent MIT FreightLab research talk, "Just treating truck drivers with respect and giving them a bathroom would go a long way."

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