

School Bus Driver Shortage in the Hudson Valley



Gwen Borsenberger

Kirstyn Cerone

Megan Conroy

Likkia Moody

JoAnn Parker

It has been challenging for employers to find qualified employees for a multitude of reasons. This problem is a national one, but it is acutely seen in the Hudson Valley for reasons unique to this area. Lack of affordable housing, an aging population, high cost of living and taxes are just a few of the factors that make for a scarce workforce in the region. Once the pandemic hit, this already existing issue became heightened. The beginning of the 2021 school year brought parents to their knees with a shortage of bus drivers in the Hudson Valley unlike any seen before. The shortage forced the Pine Bush School District to close entirely for one day. Other districts in the area have faced the challenge different ways, including asking parents to drive their own children to school (Kott, 2021). Several school districts reported staffing challenges, regardless of if they owned and operated their own buses or if they contracted their bus services. This paper analyzes the school bus driver shortage by examining the national and regional state of unemployment, the issues unique to school bus drivers, the widespread impacts of the shortage, and potential solutions to this problem.

History of Unemployment and Employment:

In investigating the state of workforce and, more specifically, the bus driver shortage, an understanding of the history of employment and unemployment is necessary to determine whether it's a contributing factor to the shortage. Employment over the last one hundred years has seen many trends. The average job growth in the United States has averaged 2.1% since 1939, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Private service-providing industries have experienced growth, while goods-producing industries have fallen over the years (Current

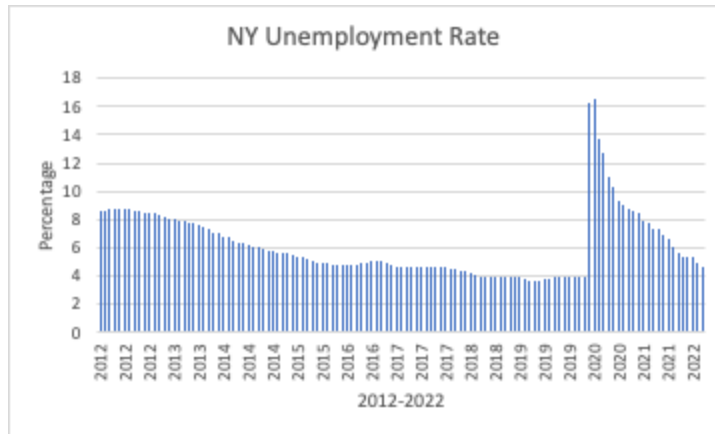
Employment Statistics survey: 100 years of employment, hours and earnings, 2016). Other trends include how the automotive industry was the top employer in the 1950's and then in the 60's there was an evolution of an office and with technology impacting how jobs were performed and automation continues to evolve jobs in the current times. Another significant shift is agriculture was at one time our primary job in this county. (A retrospective on The History of Work, n.d.) (Visualizing 150 years of U.S. Employment History: How sector shares of jobs have changed over time, 2019).

The current concept of unemployment emerged in 1940 (Card, 2011). According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics the definition of unemployed is a person who does not have a job, has actively looked for work in the prior 4 weeks, and is currently available for work. (How the Government Measures Unemployment, n.d.) A survey of the Monthly Report on the Labor Force (MRLF) started in December of 1939. The first report reflected an 8.8% unemployment rate. The unemployment rate averaged 5.75% from 1948 through 2022, reaching a high of 14.70% in April of 2020 and a low of 1.2% in May of 1944. Historically, while the rates will ebb and flow, they will fall during the expansion phase of the business cycle and with other major events (e.g. wars, droughts and presidential elections). In February of 2020, immediately before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rates were stable and low at 3.5% in New York and 3.9% nationally.

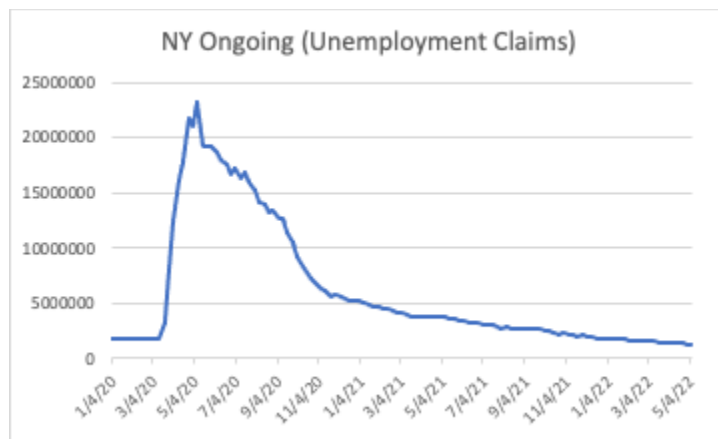


(Amadeo, 2022)

Unemployment claims sharply increased with the onset of COVID-19. The week of March 21, 2020, the new unemployment claims increased to 3,238,000, up from 1,834,000. Then the peak occurred the week of May 9, 2020, when claims reached 23,130,000, which was followed by a slow decline thereafter (see below table) (National & state historic unemployment claims, 2021). One year later, the ongoing claims were at 3,887,000 (March 20, 2021), still higher than the initial spike seen with the onset of COVID-19. The average unemployment benefit check for a New York resident is \$345.75, with the maximum being \$504.00 (Adamczyk, 2021). The CARES Act, passed in response to the impact of COVID-19, provided an additional \$600 per week through July 31, 2020. The Act also extended the length of time a person may receive benefits (varying by state). The unemployment rate in April 2022 in New York was 4.5%, which is 0.6% higher than it was in March of 2020 (Data Highlights from the New York Department of Labor's Jobs and Labor Force Press Release: April 2022, 2022)

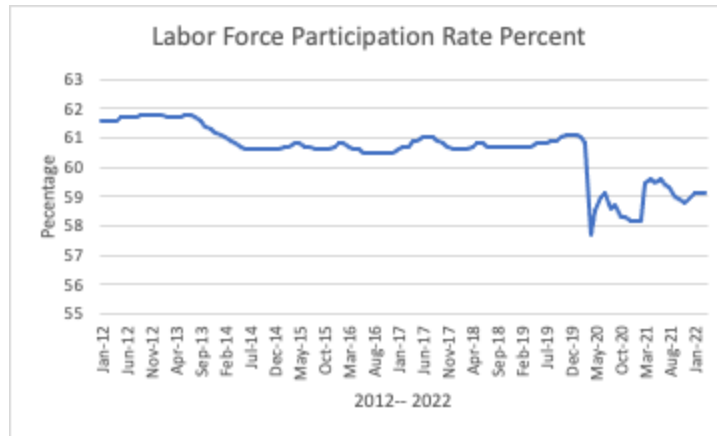


(Databases, Table & Calculators by Subject, 2022)



(Unemployment Claims, 2022)

Historically in New York, about 61% of the available work force was participating in labor, but this has dropped since COVID-19 to just about 59%. (Database, Table & Calculators by Subject, 2022)



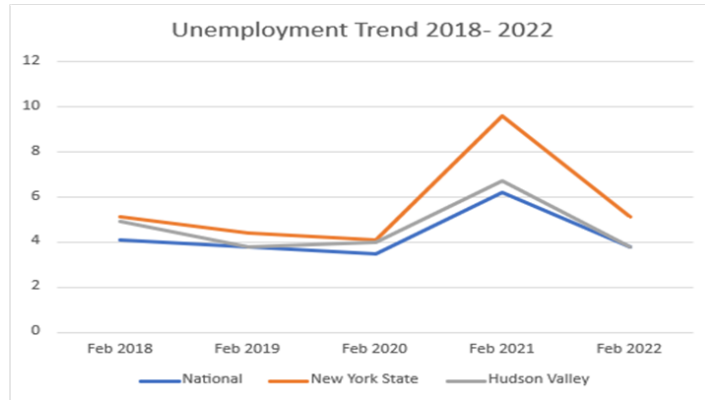
Based on the numbers, on a national and state level, there are still more people claiming and receiving unemployment benefits now than there were immediately before COVID-19. There are also fewer people participating in the workforce. The question begs: why are employers struggling to find employees?

Local Unemployment:

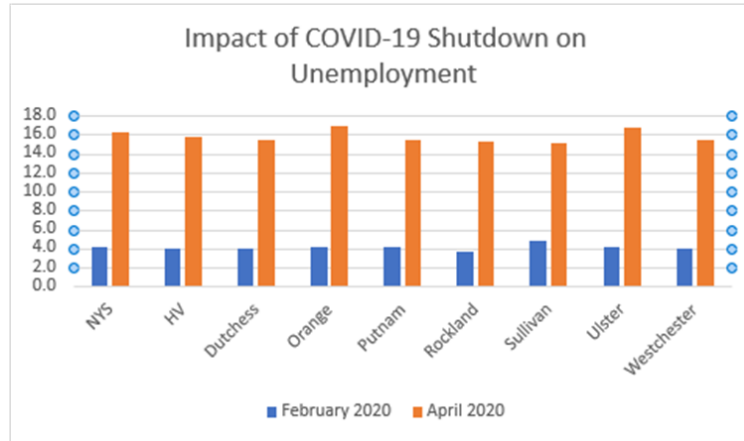
Over the last five years, the Hudson Valley has been on par with the national unemployment trends. In 2018 for example, the national unemployment rate was 4.1% and the Hudson Valley unemployment rate was 4.9%. During this same period, New York was a little higher at 5.1% and, overall, the Hudson Valley’s unemployment rate has been less than that of New York State. Then, when the national unemployment rate dropped in 2019, the rates for New York and the Hudson Valley did as well. (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.; New York Department of Labor, 2019)

When looking at the unemployment rate from 2018 to 2020, the unemployment for the country, state, and Hudson Valley stayed within one percentage point across the three Februarys. In the Hudson Valley, the unemployment rate in February of 2018, 2019, and 2020

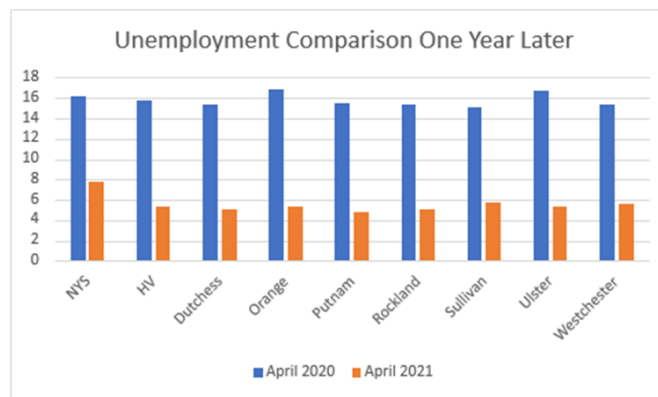
were 4.9%, 3.8%, and 4.0% respectively. In 2019, unemployment in the Hudson Valley, New York, and nationally were 3.8%, 4.4%, and 3.8% respectively. (New York Department of Labor, 2019, 2020, 2022).



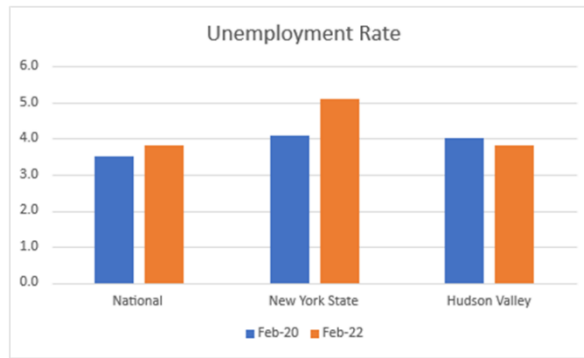
Both New York State and the Hudson Valley were significantly impacted by COVID-19, and both exceeded the national average for unemployment. Like the national trend, unemployment more than tripled between February 2020 and April 2020. In the Hudson Valley, that meant the unemployment rate went from 4.0% to 15.7% in about two months. Each county in the region saw at least a ten-percentage point change in unemployment. Orange County had the largest change, reaching 16.9%, while Sullivan County, which had the highest unemployment rate in the Hudson Valley pre-pandemic (4.8%), experienced the smallest change during COVID-19. (New York State Department of Labor, 2021)



By April 2021, however, the unemployment rates in New York as well as the rest of the country had dropped. The NYS unemployment was 7.8%, just over eight percentage points better than April 2020. The Hudson Valley’s unemployment rate dropped to 5.3%, ending lower than the national average that month (6.0%).(New York State Department of Labor, 2021)



Almost two years into the pandemic, unemployment rates have returned very close to pre-pandemic levels. In February 2020, the national unemployment rate was 3.5%. Two years later, the rate is 3.8%. The Hudson Valley’s unemployment rate in February 2022 was 3.8%, a small drop from February 2020. While unemployment in the Hudson Valley was impacted by the pandemic, it seems to have recovered and more rapidly than the State and the Nation. (New York State Department of Labor, 2021; Jack, 2022)



With lower unemployment rates today than before COVID-19, it is clear that unemployment numbers do not tell the whole story about workforce in the Hudson Valley.

State of the Workforce - School Bus Drivers:

At the start of the 2020 school year, the media was paying close attention to the state of the workforce. One industry began to surface as a major national issue: school bus drivers. The onset of COVID-19 proved detrimental to the already struggling school bus driver industry. Like other industries, bus companies struggled with record breaking unemployment brought on by the pandemic. However, the school bus driver shortage drew national attention because it is an industry that affects the workforce at large. A shortage of bus drivers leads to overcrowded school buses, more stops, and more delays for students. Its impact frustrates administrators and parents alike. Without dependable and timely school transportation, parents are finding themselves late to work and even needing to call out in instances where schools closed due to driver shortages. As a result, it creates a ripple-effect of reduced or unreliable labor in other workplaces. According to Nick Vallone, Executive VP of Rolling V Bus Company, “the bus drivers’ shortage has been going on for the past few years, but it’s only gotten worse” recently.

The cost associated with the lack of pupil transportation is far-reaching. For those parents that must work, delayed school buses could also necessitate additional childcare, a service that is already unaffordable for many households. The effects are also impacting childhood education, as the instructional time has been reduced to accommodate delays. One article noted that “More than 80% of schools in a national survey stated it already altered high school schedules in response to the shortage” (Kassahun, 2021). Children, already suffering from the trauma of the pandemic, are further anxiety-ridden when the bus is late or does not show up at all.

Sources point to various reasons that this industry has suffered in such a way. During interviews with people in the field, the following factors were cited: low wages and poor benefits, high median age of workers, safety concerns, the work schedule, and the rigorous licensing requirements.

The national average salary for school bus drivers is \$25,979.00 (per Data USA/Census Bureau), which is vastly lower than the median average income which in 2019 was \$31,133. Notably, some of the highest paid bus drivers were found in New York State. Elementary school and secondary schools populate the largest portion of bus drivers nationwide. A bus driver’s pay is often negotiated within a school contract cost offering little room for pay increase. The pay can range from minimum wage up to \$35 an hour, but those higher salaries are seen in Long Island. With enhanced unemployment benefits offered under the CARES Act, those school bus drivers who qualified for the benefit were earning more from unemployment than they were while they were working. Many drivers, however, were unable to collect unemployment because they do not fully pay into the unemployment system. County lawmakers are listening to school bus drivers’ requests for a change in the laws to help them stay afloat financially when school is out for the summer, according to NY State Senator Michael Martucci. A new proposed bill would

change the bus drivers paying into unemployment and get them benefits, and the drivers are optimistic that legislators are finally listening to them.

Another factor that is contributing to the shortage is the schedule for school bus drivers and the part-time nature of the position. School bus drivers have a split-schedule, often working for a few hours early in the day and again in the afternoon, while having the middle of the day off. The odd hours can make it difficult for those with young children to work as a school bus driver because they need to ensure that their own children get on the bus or are otherwise transported to and from school. Further, for a position that already pays less than the median income, those unpaid hours in the middle of the day are a challenge. Bus companies and school districts provide a guaranteed minimum number of hours of work for the drivers, which terms are set in the drivers' contract. This means that the employer will pay the driver for the minimum number of hours, even if the driver did not perform that many hours of driving time. Usually the guaranteed minimum is 4-hours per day but can be as much as 8-hours. Additionally, the school bus drivers work during the school year which further limits their working hours. Some school districts offer a 180-day school year while some guarantee 210 paid days, both still less than the average 260-day full time work calendar. Due to the nature of the job, this position has proven to be well suited for those looking for a second career or for additional income. Accordingly, people that have already retired from another professional typically fill the school bus driver positions. The median age of bus drivers in 2019 was age 55, with the median age for male drivers being 58 and female drivers being 52 years of age. Women made up 56.5% of the total school bus driver workforce.

School bus driver safety has consistently been a top concern among those in the industry. Since the onset of COVID-19, spread of the virus was greatest safety risk. Even as schools reopened and drivers took to their routes, it is difficult to ensure that the children will wear

their masks and take the necessary precautions. Because of the shortage, there are a limited number of monitors and aides available to oversee the students, and the expectations are high considering the buses are overcrowded and the routes are longer after being consolidated. Prior to the pandemic, however, safety was still a leading concern in the profession. One bus driver in Monroe reported the average number of passengers per bus ranges from 30 to 50 children. With the only adult on the bus being the driver, it becomes increasingly difficult for the bus driver to drive the bus and keep watch on the children. Although the buses are frequently outfitted with cameras, that only offers a mechanism for review of an action after the fact. Furthermore, dealing with the parents' bad behavior towards the drivers when they show up late or miss a stop due to an unfamiliar route is difficult. With the routes now being combined due to a driver shortage, it makes for an even tighter schedule for the drivers, adding more stress.

In addition, potential applications are often discouraged from applying for the school bus driver position because it requires a commercial driver's license (CDL) and two additional endorsements. For those that do not already have a CDL, the licensing process is lengthy, expensive, and the passage rates are low. For those that take the first steps, some quit before making it through the training or upon failing any of the tests. Many in the industry feel that the tests are unnecessarily difficult, requiring knowledge and skills that are not practical for school bus drivers. In response, from January through March of 2022, the Department of Transportation and the Department of Education temporarily waived the requirement for bus drivers to be able to identify engine components in order to obtain their CDL (U.S. Department of Education Announces Joint Temporary Action with U.S. Department of Transportation to Help Address School Bus Driver Labor Shortage, 2022). Other measures are already being taken at the state level. New York State Governor Hochul announced new steps to tackle the bus driver shortage, including opening

new testing sites for commercial drivers trying to get their licenses, removing the two-week waiting period between permit and road tests for new drivers, and reaching out to law enforcement, military, and fire departments to try to find already-qualified drivers who can pitch in, as well as a state-wide outreach campaign to generate increased interest in the profession (Lieberman, 2021) (Tillman, 2021).

Potential Solutions:

Upon close examination, it is clear that the school bus driver labor shortage predates the COVID-19 pandemic. Because the shortage is created by multiple factors, it will take a multifaceted approach to address it. According to a joint survey conducted by multiple national transportation agencies, in a question that allowed for multiple answers, 50% of respondents said the rate of pay is a major factor affecting their ability to recruit and retain drivers, 45% cited the “length of time to secure a CDL”, 38% the “availability of benefits” and 38% the “hours available to work” (NAPT-NASDPTS-NSTA Release Findings of School Bus Driver Shortage Survey, 2021).

The first way to address the shortage is to make it widely known. Parents, students, and school employees know and have known about the shortage, but those who don't have a child in school or direct contact with the school district may not. By bringing awareness to the issue and, more specifically, how far reaching this problem truly is, more people may be incentivized to get involved. We are all inundated with problems that were created or exacerbated by COVID-19, however, the school bus driver shortage should be a top concern for everyone. Each year, some 25 million kids use school buses to get to school (American School Bus Council, n.d.). Ensuring that the youth in our community have access to education is vital to our progress as a nation.

Because many of the problems attracting and retaining school bus drivers require legislative reform, the solution requires everyone affected to advocate for change. Parents, drivers, employers, and the community at large should be contacting their local, state, and even federal lawmakers for assistance. That includes advocating for increased state funding to allow for higher wages to be offered, as well as retirement and health benefits. A portion of all state taxes paid will be allocated toward school funding, including transportation of pupils (Pupil Transportation Services, 2022). The school year is only 180 days, and drivers usually are not compensated for holidays, personal time off, or summers without work. Further, many do not receive benefits or regular pay raises unless it is included in the driver's contract. If additional state funding could be allocated towards pupil transportation, bus driver wages and benefits can be increased. This would allow for better attraction and retention of school bus drivers.

In addition to increased hourly wages and additional benefits, bus companies and school districts have also implemented other incentives and tactics. Some companies are offering sign-on bonuses, hoping that this will attract new applicants considering a career in school bus driving. Others are addressing the long-term concern of sufficient wages by guaranteeing 8-hour shifts. The hope is that the 8-hour shifts will increase the base wages, reduce the frequency of overtime, and will also save administrative time by reducing the hours expended on coordinating routes and additional work for the split-shift workers (Barker, 20).

Advocating for legislative change also means addressing the federal and state licensing and certification requirements for school bus drivers. Additionally allowing third party testing and making testing more accessible could decrease the difficulty and length of time currently required for licensure. Contacting State and Federal representatives to encourage reformation of the licensing requirements to make them more specific to the operation of school buses might help to

make the licenses more attainable which, in turn, will create more qualified candidates to fill the school bus driver positions.

In addition to being a voice for change, one might consider driving a school bus to make a direct contribution to your community. The position of school bus driver is not just an important job, but it's also an opportunity to be involved in an honorable profession in service to your community. Becoming a school bus driver is perfect for people who enjoy being a role model for today's youth, whether they be a recent college graduate, a retiree looking for a part-time job, or even someone who is self-employed and looking for some extra income. Additionally, some of the benefits include having your summers and holidays off, as well as the availability for extra work if desired.

Finally, be kind to your local school bus driver. There are some things that lawmakers and employers cannot fix, and one of those is the mistreatment that many school bus drivers claim to experience. In addition to driving the school bus, drivers also serve as chaperones to the kids and as janitors when sanitizing the bus after their routes. They deal with the screaming parents of their students and students' bad behavior. In a society that thanks our first responders, veterans, and volunteers, we should be mindful that our school bus drivers are providing a vital service to the community. We depend on them, and this shortage exposes the fact that we have taken them for granted for too long.

Conclusion:

The workforce of America is going through an evolution that began before the onset of the pandemic. For some industries, COVID-19 exacerbated an already declining workforce. Where technology has led us down a path of advancement and automation, COVID-19 has quickened the

transition from man to machine in some industries but not others. A more rapid change is occurring as entire generations, encouraged to pursue higher education, refuse to settle for low-wage labor, leaving too few people to fill those unwanted positions. That, coupled with a more open emphasis on worker rights and mental health, means that those who would be willing to accept a low-wage job now have wherewithal to hold out for a position that also includes an attractive 'culture', strong respect for work-life balance, and other benefits. All of this has led to a decreased desire for the workforce to choose school bus driving as a job. With changes to legislation and development of better industry practices, there is hope to revitalize the industry and solve the bus driver shortage crisis.

References

A Retrospective on The History of Work . (n.d.). Retrieved from Atlassian:
<https://www.atlassian.com/history-of-work>

Adamczyk, A. (2021, January 12). *This is the average unemployment insurance payment in every U.S. state without the extra \$600 in federal aid* . Retrieved from cnbc:
<https://www.cnbc.com/2020/07/23/average-unemployment-insurance-payment-in-each-us-state.html>

Amadeo, K. (2022, May 5). *Unemployment Rate by Year since 1929 Compared to Inflation and GDP*. Retrieved from the balance :
<https://www.thebalance.com/unemployment-rate-by-year-3305506>

American School Bus Council. (n.d.). Retrieved from American School Bus Council:
<http://www.americanschoolbuscouncil.org/about/>

Barker, M. (20, March 2019). *How To Fix FUSD Bus Driver Sortage? Make It A Full Time Job*. Retrieved from GV Wire: <https://gvwire.com/2019/03/20/how-to-fix-fusd-bus-driver-shortage-make-it-full-time-job/>

Card, D. (2011, February). *Origins of the Unemployment Rate: The Lasting Legacy of Measurement without Theory* . Retrieved from
<https://davidcard.berkeley.edu/papers/origins-of-unemployment.pdf>

Current Employment Statistics survey: 100 years of employment, hours and earnings. (2016, August). Retrieved from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics :
<https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2016/article/current-employment-statistics-survey-100-years-of-employment-hours-and-earnings.htm>

Data Highlights from the New York Department of Labor's Jobs and Labor Force Press Release: April 2022. (2022, April). Retrieved from New York Department of Labor:
https://dol.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2022/05/nys_highlights_0.pdf

Databases, Table & Calculators by Subject. (2022, May 21). Retrieved from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics : <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LASST3600000000000003>

Database, Table & Calculators by Subject . (2022, May 21). Retrieved from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics : <https://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LASST3600000000000003>

Deliso, M. (2021, August 12). *Why school districts nationwide are facing bus driver shortages*. Retrieved from abc NEWS: <https://abcnews.go.com/US/school-districts-nationwide-facing-bus-driver-shortages/story?id=79124876>

How the Government Measures Unemployment . (n.d.). Retrieved from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics : https://www.bls.gov/cps/cps_htgm.htm#unemployed

- Unemployment Claims*. (2022, May 7). Retrieved from usafacts: <https://usafacts.org/covid-recovery-hub/>
- Jack, K. (Ed.). (2022, April). *Employment in New York State April 2022*. Retrieved from New York Department of Labor: <https://dol.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2022/04/april-einys-2022.pdf>
- Kott, C. (2021, September 21). *School bus driver shortages plagues Kingston* . Retrieved from hv1: <https://hudsonvalleyone.com/2021/09/22/school-bus-driver-shortage-plagues-kingston/>
- Kassahun, P. (2021, October 26). *School bus driver shortage impacting classroom time in some WNY school districts* . Retrieved from wkbw: <https://www.wkbw.com/news/local-news/school-bus-driver-shortage-impacting-classroom-time-in-some-wny-school-districts>
- Lieberman, M. (2021, September 20). *No Bus Drivers, Custodians, or Subs. What's Really behind Schools' Staffing Shortages?* Retrieved from Education Week: <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/no-bus-drivers-custodians-or-subs-whats-really-behind-schools-staffing-shortages/2021/09>
- NAPT-NASDPTS-NSTA Release Findings of School Bus Driver Shortage Survey*. (2021, August 31). Retrieved from NASDPTS Website: <https://nasdpts.org/news/10974409>
- National & state historic unemployment claims*. (2021, January 29). Retrieved from USAFACTS: https://usafacts.org/visualizations/weekly-unemployment-claims/?utm_source=bing&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=ND-Economy&msclkid=671d16ff175e169fe3907485a8a48b99
- New York Department of Labor. (2019, April). *Employment in New York State April 2019*. Retrieved from New York Department of Labor: <https://dol.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2021/09/enys0419.pdf>
- New York Department of Labor. (2021, April). *Employment in New York April 2021*. Retrieved from New York Department of Labor: <https://dol.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2021/04/9-einys-april-2021.pdf>
- New York State Department of Labor. (2021, June). *Employment in New York State June 2021*. Retrieved from New York State Department of Labor: <https://dol.ny.gov/system/files/documents/2021/06/einys-june-2021-v14.pdf>
- Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics*. (2022, March 21). Retrieved from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes533051.htm>
- Pupil Transportation Services*. (2022, March 9). Retrieved from New York State Education Department: <https://www.p12.nysed.gov/schoolbus/#:~:text=One-third%20of%20these%20students%20are%20transported%20on%20district,of%20%242.0%20billion%20in%20the%202021-22%20school%20year.>

School Bus Safety . (n.d.). Retrieved from NHTSA: <https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/school-bus-safety>

Tillman, R. (2021, September 22). *Nationwide shortage of bus drivers forces creative solutions*. Retrieved from Spectrum News NY 1: <https://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2021/09/22/school-bus-driver-shortage-solutions->

U.S. Department of Education Announces Joint Temporary Action with U.S. Department of Transportation to Help Address School Bus Driver Labor Shortage. (2022, January 4). Retrieved from U.S. Department of Education: <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-announces-joint-temporary-action-us-department-transportation-help-address-school-bus-driver-labor-shortage>

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.). *Civilian Unemployment Rate*. Retrieved from U.S. Bureau of Labor Statics: <https://www.bls.gov/charts/employment-situation/civilian-unemployment-rate.htm#>

Young, A. (2021, November 1). *School bus driver shortage causing frustration for some Western NY families* . Retrieved from Spectrum News1: <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nys/buffalo/education/2021/11/01/school-bus-driver-shortage-causing-frustration-for-some-buffalo-families>