



# How Corrections Departments Are Preparing People for In-Demand Careers That Support America's Infrastructure

In November 2021, Congress passed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to strengthen U.S. infrastructure in key areas such as green energy, roads, and transportation.<sup>1</sup> The approximately \$550 billion investment is expected to create an estimated 1.5 million jobs per year over the next 10 years.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the U.S. labor market and changed how people in the country look for and engage in work.<sup>3</sup> With demand for workers rising, employers are more open than ever to hiring people with conviction histories.<sup>4</sup> Departments of corrections (DOCs) are positioning people in their custody to secure these career-track infrastructure jobs. In recent years, DOCs have developed strategic partnerships with employers, colleges, and community-based organizations to provide job training in high-demand industries.

People leaving prison need these training programs.<sup>5</sup> More than 600,000 people return to the community from state and federal correctional facilities each year—and even more are released from local jails and detention centers.<sup>6</sup> Upon release, formerly incarcerated people face a wide range of legal and regulatory barriers to reentry that affect all aspects of life—from where they can live to where they can work.<sup>7</sup> Research suggests that job placement alone is not enough to reduce recidivism, but a pathway to a career in a high-quality industry may be.<sup>8</sup> Stable employment secured within the first months after release that leads to a higher-level position, higher wages, and more job security substantially contributes to a person’s success after prison and their ability to maintain their freedom from incarceration.<sup>9</sup>

This brief presents five case studies of state DOCs and their partners that have created robust job training programs that provide incarcerated people opportunities to earn industry-relevant credentials and prepare for in-demand careers after release.<sup>10</sup> Through these programs, combined with reentry preparation, DOCs and their partners are creating opportunities for people to return to the community job-ready, with relevant certifications and licenses, necessary identification and documentation, and connections to employers willing and ready to hire formerly incarcerated people.

## Green Energy

The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the employment of solar photovoltaic installers will grow by 27 percent from 2021 to 2031, and employment of wind turbine service technicians will grow 44 percent during the same period.<sup>11</sup> **Colby Community College** is preparing people who are incarcerated in the Norton Correctional Facility in the **Kansas Department of Corrections (KDOC)** for careers to fill this industry need through its Associate of Applied Science in Sustainable/Renewable Energy, which is focused on solar photovoltaic and wind technology.<sup>12</sup> Students earn their

degrees in four semesters. They can also participate in an additional two-semester training program to earn technical certificates in solar photovoltaic or wind technology. The online program focuses on core concepts of clean energy and specific aspects of solar and wind technology, such as installing, troubleshooting, maintaining, and designing equipment. Academic instruction in the program is complemented by hands-on training “boot camps,” where students work on live photovoltaic components and troubleshoot problems they might encounter on a job site. Boot camps also provide opportunities for companies in the field to connect with students and share upcoming employment opportunities. Colby College gets input on its program design from its industry-driven advisory board, which is made up of business and industry representatives in manufacturing, distribution, and installation who share their views on what skills employers in the field are looking for in employees. People who start the program while incarcerated but are released before completion have continued the program online in the community or on the Colby College campus. Program staff report that graduates have embarked on successful careers in solar photovoltaic or wind technology, typically earning \$25 per hour and upward of \$70,000 per year. Median annual pay is \$47,670 for solar photovoltaic installers and \$56,260 for wind turbine technicians.<sup>13</sup>

## Construction

**Washington State Department of Corrections (WA DOC)**, in partnership with the **Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges**, offers robust pre-apprenticeship programs in various trades for incarcerated people in WA DOC facilities.<sup>14</sup> The Trades Related Apprenticeship Coaching (TRAC) program operates at WA DOC’s two women’s facilities and connects students to high-wage jobs through the local construction union.<sup>15</sup> WA DOC also offers a similar program in its men’s facilities—the Construction Trades Apprenticeship Preparation program. Washington State Correctional Industries (CI), a division of WA DOC that provides skills and on-the-

job training for incarcerated people, covers the costs of materials, instruction, and other related facility costs for the TRAC program, and CI staff also serve as program instructors.

The TRAC program is a 16-week hands-on pre-apprenticeship recognized by the Washington State Apprenticeship and Training Council. Students spend six hours a day lifting, carrying, building, hammering, and tamping—all skills needed for construction jobs in the community. The goal of TRAC is to prepare program participants for a registered apprenticeship program and, ultimately, a job in a unionized field that provides representation, security, career advancement, and benefits. For example, a recent graduate from the program joined a union and, as an apprentice, will earn close to \$25 an hour plus \$13 per hour in benefits including retirement and health insurance.<sup>16</sup> The graduate will receive wage increases every 1,000 hours and, after 6,000 hours, will complete their apprenticeship and become a journey-level worker, qualifying them to work with higher-level job responsibilities in their trade.<sup>17</sup>

Participants in TRAC complete 460 hours of instruction, receive safety and technical training in heavy construction, and can test for preferred entry into union apprenticeships. Program participants must be between five and 36 months from release, have at least a high school diploma or GED, and take an entry test in applied math to determine the level of instruction needed. Due to the physical demands of commercial construction work, applicants must be able to lift 80 pounds. They must also meet WA DOC requirements for general program participation, such as being infraction-free for three months before applying.<sup>18</sup>

WA DOC has written agreements with four local unions representing carpenters, ironworkers, cement masons, and laborers. They have collaborated to create a curriculum to ensure that the skills taught in the program align with the requirements to join the union as well as with employers' expectations. Students learn the necessary academic, safety, and technical skills as well as the interpersonal skills needed to retain employment and interact with others on a job site. WA DOC also attributes the success of the TRAC program to its collaboration with community partners and other local groups, such as the Apprenticeship and Non-Traditional Employment for Women,

Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, Regional Pre-Apprenticeship Collaboration, and the Construction Center of Excellence.<sup>19</sup> These groups support the program by providing essential reentry supports for participants, such as clothing and work tools and assistance in securing identification documents. Partners also collaborate with WA DOC to provide virtual job site tours with contractors and representatives from union training centers for apprenticeships.

WA DOC reports that TRAC program graduates have a recidivism rate of less than 5 percent, compared to the general DOC recidivism rate for women, which is about 15 percent.<sup>20</sup> Since the program launched in the late 1990s, over 600 students have graduated, many of whom participated in registered apprenticeships and employment post-release. Staff estimate that in the past nine years, 250 students have graduated from the TRAC program and 80 have entered into registered apprenticeships. In 2022, WA DOC received a grant under the Second Chance Act from the Bureau of Justice Assistance to expand its pre-apprenticeship model to include a manufacturing training component.<sup>21</sup>

**The Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) National Network** is a program that was established in the late 1980s to help small- and medium-sized U.S. manufacturers—those with fewer than 500 employees—compete with international companies.<sup>22</sup> Funded by the U.S. Department of Commerce, MEPs are established in all 50 states and Puerto Rico, although they go by different names across jurisdictions. In order to build on local MEPs' successful efforts in workforce development, community colleges and other organizations came together to create an America Works program, a nationwide initiative to link all MEPs.<sup>23</sup> America Works's mission is to share information and increase cooperation and collaboration in manufacturing workforce development. This has included an effort to work with prisons to train incarcerated people for manufacturing careers.

**MAGNET**, a non-profit consulting group that is a part of the Ohio MEP, operates the **ACCESS to Manufacturing Careers Program** for people released from the **Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction** as well as young adults in the community.<sup>24</sup> The ACCESS Program is a one-month, 120-hour training program

on basic skills for manufacturing jobs. Through this program, participants learn basic math, how to read blueprints, safety protocols, and business skills. The ACCESS Program uses a hybrid learning model, in which students primarily learn online using laptops and have opportunities for hands-on learning in a classroom.<sup>25</sup> The program is shaped by the needs of the Ohio Manufacturing Sector Partnership, an alliance of local employers that guide curriculum, build and support the program by meeting and speaking with participants, offer virtual plant tours, and commit to interview participants at the end of the program. More than 80 people applied for the first cohort of the reentry program in 2020, and 12 began the program. Nine of those participants graduated and 13 companies interviewed them for entry-level jobs in manufacturing.<sup>26</sup> According to the organization’s website, wages start at \$13.50 per hour, plus benefits.

Similar job-training programs developed collaboratively by DOCs and MEPs are operating in other states, like Purdue University’s Skills for Success–Manufacturing in Indiana, Basics of Manufacturing in Missouri, and in-prison manufacturing training programs in Montana and Rhode Island.<sup>27</sup>

## Roads and Infrastructure

For more than 50 years, **Lee College** has offered postsecondary education to people incarcerated in the **Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ)**.<sup>28</sup> Lee College offers a Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) Truck Driving program at the John M. Wynne Unit in Huntsville, Texas, as a Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration-approved training facility.<sup>29</sup> Lee College receives about 250 applicants per recruitment cycle. The program counselor screens prospective students across several criteria from TDCJ and the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS), the state agency that issues driver’s licenses for Texas residents. For example, TDCJ requires students to be classified as “trustys” so that TDCJ can

relocate them to the Wynne Unit.<sup>30</sup> Students cannot be enrolled in another program and cannot have a charge for an automotive vehicle-related crime (for example, driving while under the influence). DPS requires anyone applying for a CDL Class B license to have a clean driving record (when they were last in the community) and no outstanding fees, tickets, or child support payments.<sup>31</sup> Federal regulation also requires anyone applying for a CDL license to have a non-commercial driver's license.<sup>32</sup> Lee College provides test preparation for students who need support taking the non-commercial driver's license written and driving tests so that they can continue on to the CDL program.

The CDL Truck Driving program is delivered over six months. Generally, the cohort includes 36 students, led by two Lee College instructors. The program consists of 10 classes that run six hours per day, five days a week. Students complete coursework related to skills they will need on the job post-release, such as truck backing, checking tires, tying loads, using a forklift, and workplace skills. They also test their knowledge using practice CDL written exams. Lee College brings students to the closest DPS office in the community, an hour away, to take the written test and obtain their learner's permits. After passing the written CDL test, students clock in hours of truck driving using 18-wheeler trucks. These trucks, purchased by the program or donated by local trucking companies, allow students to practice behind-the-wheel driving on a pre-planned route on Interstate 45 and other skills needed to pass the driving test like stopping, backing, and parking. Sleeper cabs have been modified to allow several students to ride in the trucks with the instructor and learn from each other. Once the instructor determines that they are ready to take their driving skills test, Lee College transports up to three students at a time to DPS to take the driving test. Once students have obtained their CDL, the TDCJ transportation division allows them to serve as state truck drivers and sends them to hubs across the state, with a prison employee supervising. Students complete thousands of hours of driving practice through the program and enter the workforce as seasoned drivers.<sup>33</sup>

The Lee College Truck Driving program costs students a fraction of the price of most commercial CDL programs—about \$1,500 compared to upward of \$6,000 in the community—including the cost



of two written and driving tests in the event that someone fails their first test.<sup>34</sup> The state provides interest-free loans to participants to cover program tuition, which must be repaid after they are paroled. Incarcerated students may also pay for the course by using need-based federal financial aid.<sup>35</sup> TDCJ also received workforce grants to provide truck-driving simulators and computers to take assessments.

The program has close relationships with employers in the trucking industry, aiding graduates in securing jobs soon after release. Recent graduates have gone on to work at cement companies, trucking companies like J.B. Hunt, and others. Some companies, like the supply chain services company McLane, recruit drivers among students who are still enrolled in the Lee College program, bringing their human resources representatives to help students complete pre-applications and interviews.<sup>36</sup>

On average, 70 to 75 percent of program participants obtain their CDLs.<sup>37</sup> The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that the median wage for heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers is \$23.23 per hour or \$48,310 per year.<sup>38</sup> Graduates from the program also receive a Lee College truck driving certificate, equivalent to 22 college credits. Some students connect the skills they receive through this program to the Lee College associate's degree program in business management, like one recent graduate who aims to start their own trucking company.<sup>39</sup> Students can also enroll in business classes outside of the degree track while enrolled in the truck driving program to learn more skills like how to hire employees and file taxes.

**The Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC)** offers the Gladiator Program, a national pre-apprenticeship program in reinforcing ironwork, in partnership with the local ironworkers union—the **International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers**—for adults and youth in minimum, medium, and close (maximum) custody facilities.<sup>40</sup> CDOC funds the Gladiator Program, which costs around \$5,000 per cohort of 10-15 students, including certifications, tools, and supportive funding for training and union dues post-release. The program aims to prepare participants for an ironwork apprenticeship with a union and later employment in the field. The Gladiator Program includes 40 hours of instruction on steel reinforcing bars (rebar), tying,

welding, and safety procedures. To prepare for the physical aspect of ironwork, students spend several days working on concrete slabs to get rebar experience, with guidance from union representatives who teach students on site. Students can complete the necessary training through the union to be placed in employment pathways after completing the program. Graduates earn a certificate of completion and other essential certifications, such as one from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).<sup>41</sup> Post-release, CDOC employment navigators work with the union to place program graduates into apprenticeships. The union also provides supportive services like transportation to job sites and tools.

To date, 151 adults and 118 youth have graduated from the program. Many people transition into careers in ironwork or related construction roles like safety specialist, welder, cost estimator, and resourcing.<sup>42</sup> Ironworkers are estimated to earn, on average, \$27.48 per hour or \$57,160 per year.<sup>43</sup>

## Utilities

**Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC)** opened its first Vocational Village site in 2016, a skilled trades training program that has since expanded to three locations across the state.<sup>44</sup> The Vocational Village programs provide intensive, hands-on job training in various building trades, CDL and forklift operation, automotive technology, computer coding, Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machining, cosmetology, horticulture, food technology, 3D printing and robotics, and tree trimming.

In 2019, MDOC launched the Line Clearance and Tree Trim Program, designed in collaboration with partner and local energy services company **DTE Energy**. Graduates of the program become eligible to join the local **International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Union** and become qualified to fill a role with a local tree trim

supplier. Candidates for the tree-trimming program are selected with consideration of release location to ensure it aligns with DTE Energy's coverage area.<sup>45</sup> The program is open to people assessed at low-, moderate-, and high-risk levels and those who may have a limited or no work history, as well as those with more extensive job experience.<sup>46</sup>

The student experience in Vocational Village programs is immersive; students are housed together outside of the general population at the same facility alongside those participating in academic postsecondary programs to foster a learning culture.<sup>47</sup> Classes include six-and-a-half learning hours per day taught by DOC instructors using the local union's training curriculum—the same curriculum used in the union's program in the community. Vocational Village programs provide students access to state-of-the-art equipment to simulate the experience people will have working in the field. In the Line Clearance and Tree Trim program, for instance, students have access to trees brought into the program space from elsewhere on the facility property and custom-built, full-sized telephone pole structures to practice skills needed for the tree-trimming certification. Students can also participate in the CDL program and leverage that credential to expand potential careers (for example, tree-trimming truck drivers). Other certifications available include first aid, Tree Care Industry Association Ground Operations Specialist, and electrical hazard.

To date, roughly 40 students have gone through the tree-trimming program.<sup>48</sup> Graduates continue on to apprenticeships in the field when they are released. Although participation in the program does not guarantee employment after completion, it equips participants with the skills needed to excel in a high-demand field and a critical connection to the union. Jobs in tree trimming have a median annual wage of \$46,970.<sup>49</sup>

MDOC has seen success with the Vocational Village model overall. Across three facilities, the Vocational Village programs serve approximately 450 students. The Vocational Village has an overall employment rate of 60 percent.<sup>50</sup> The program's recidivism rate is about 9.8 percent compared to the state rate of approximately 27 percent.<sup>51</sup>

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Across the country, DOCs, education providers, employers, and community-based organizations have created strategic partnerships to deliver industry-relevant job training to incarcerated people preparing to join the workforce. Through these partnerships, education and reentry stakeholders can develop strategies to improve the process for people leaving prison to enter in-demand sectors of the economy. The following recommendations drawn from the case studies described above can guide DOCs and reentry partners in establishing high-quality job training programs in prison:

- **Create strong partnerships between DOC and education providers alongside other relevant stakeholders.** All stakeholders must continually communicate and coordinate to deliver high-quality job training programs like those highlighted above. These stakeholders may include DOC and other criminal legal system agencies (for example, public safety, probation and parole, and community supervision), community-based organizations, unions, and local employers. Partnering with colleges and universities presents additional opportunities for providing job training, such as Pell-eligible career and technical programs or academic degree pathways that connect to in-demand jobs.<sup>52</sup>
- **Ensure that job training programs connect to fields without significant barriers to employment for formerly incarcerated people.**<sup>53</sup>
- **Develop clear pathways for students that connect the job training programs to credentials (such as degree, certification, and licensure) and in-demand career fields and jobs.** Program staff can support students on these pathways with targeted academic and career advisement.
- **Ensure that training programs are informed by up-to-date information from job market analyses for your state or jurisdiction—especially for high-density release locations.** Revisit offerings to reflect emerging

industries and areas of growth. Chambers of commerce and state workforce boards can be helpful resources to identify emerging employment industries for corrections departments and their partners.

- **Continue to advance equity in programs by analyzing offerings, policies, and practices with equity in mind.** Specific policies and practices, though intended to be fair, can create disparities in access to programs across identities like race and gender. For example, eligibility criteria that require a person to be infraction-free for a period before applying, have a short time until release, or be at a lower-security level facility may have disparate impacts on program participation across racial identities. Think critically about program implementation to help ensure that all interested participants have equitable access to these programs. Providing job training in women’s facilities—including in skilled trades and nontraditional employment fields for women—can help advance gender equity.
- **Consider policy changes that help address barriers to program delivery.** Many programs in trades connected to infrastructure require heavy machinery, equipment, and possibly physical plant changes. Additionally, the logistics of program delivery may require changes to policy and practice (for example, changes to schedule and movement for participants, allowing program participants outside of prison grounds). Work with partners to create a program model suitable to the prison context and memorialize any changes to DOC practice through policy updates.
- **Create avenues for employers in these fields to reach in and engage people pre-release.** DOC can provide these interactions through the job-training program model (for example, employers as job-training providers) or specific events (such as program visits, job fairs, or pre-release interviews in-facility or virtually). Consider allocating a role on the program implementation team to identify potential employers to work with program participants.

- **Provide wraparound supportive services and warm handoffs to colleges and community-based partners to support a successful transition to the community.** Educate and involve community supervision staff to help reinforce connections to key support networks for program graduates post-release, such as on-campus college partners and community-based organizations. Ensure that these stakeholders work together and do not duplicate services.
- **Collaborate to create a data infrastructure to track program outcomes internally and among program partners.** Outcomes data for job training programs, beyond the number of program completions, can be difficult for DOCs and their partners to track. Metrics such as the number of jobs offered to graduates, graduate employment rates, wage data post-release, and statistics on graduates who pursue further education can help DOCs share successes and advocate for the expansion of in-prison job training programs. DOCs should work with college partners, probation and parole departments, and their state Department of Labor to create an infrastructure for program data collection, sharing, and use.
- **Engage legislators to remove legislative barriers to employment in in-demand fields and other obstacles to reentry for formerly incarcerated people.** For example, in Nevada, the DOC, Department of Health and Human Services, and its Division of Welfare and Supportive Services supported successful legislation to suspend, rather than terminate, Medicaid when a person becomes incarcerated and that allows DOC to enroll (or re-enroll) that person six months before release.<sup>54</sup> In 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom passed a California law that creates a path for prison firefighters to have their records expunged to remove barriers to becoming professional firefighters in the community post-release.<sup>55</sup>
- **Provide training for partners such as unions and employers on how to best support people released**

**from correctional facilities.** Many employers may not be familiar with the unique needs of the incarcerated population while completing a prison program or after release. Training can help familiarize partners with this population. Community-based organizations and other local reentry service providers are well-versed in these challenges and are well-equipped to support DOCs in providing training for employers.<sup>56</sup>

- **Empower formerly incarcerated program graduates who have joined the workforce to share the program’s impact and how it helped forge their career paths.** Program graduates who are currently incarcerated and awaiting release should also be empowered as credible messengers for the program.
- **Continue work to expand program offerings and access to reach more interested candidates.**

Vera commends the states highlighted for their established partnerships to advance employment for formerly incarcerated people and strengthen U.S. infrastructure. Reentry stakeholders should continue to work together to pursue strategies to support the successful reentry and employment of people returning from prison.

## ENDNOTES

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- 6 See E. Ann Carson, *Prisoners in 2016* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018), 10, <https://perma.cc/V3CY-AXXD>.
- 7 See Economic Mobility Project and Public Safety Performance Project of The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Collateral Costs: Incarceration’s Effect on Economic Mobility* (Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010), <https://perma.cc/B4FZ-EABV>.
- 8 See Joe LaBriola, “Post-Prison Employment Quality and Future Criminal Justice Contact,” *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 6, no. 1 (2020), 154-172. Here quality means that compared to the average of all industries, the industry has higher average quarterly earnings, employment tenure, firm-level quarterly wages per employee, and industry-level statewide unionization rates. Examples of high-quality industries in this Michigan-based study include manufacturing and transportation or warehousing.
- 9 Ibid.
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- 12 “Manufacturing a Future Post-Release: Two Paths to High-Skill Manufacturing Jobs,” webinar moderated by George Chochos, presented by National Reentry Resource Center, April 27, 2022, <https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/events/manufacturing-future-post-release-two-paths-high-skill-manufacturing-jobs>.
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- 14 Video interview of Sarah Sytsma and Steven Petermann, Washington State Department of Corrections, by Kayla James, senior program associate, Vera Institute of Justice, April 1, 2022.
- 15 See Washington State Department of Corrections, “Correctional Industries (CI),” updated 2022, <https://www.doc.wa.gov/corrections/programs/correctional-industries.htm>.
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- 25 See also Matthew Fieldman, “Innovative Manufacturing Training Program Provides Second Chances & New Career Opportunities to First Graduating Class,” press release (Cleveland, OH: MAGNET, July 28, 2020), <https://perma.cc/FPP9-HVM7>.
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- 27 See Purdue University, “Skills for Success – Manufacturing,” <https://mep.purdue.edu/services/workforce-development/skills-for-success-manufacturing/>; Missouri Enterprise, “The Basics of Manufacturing Job Training Program,” <https://www.missourienterprise.org/know-how/workforce/job-training-program-basics-of-manufacturing/>; and “Manufacturing a Future Post-Release: Two Paths to High-Skill Manufacturing Jobs,” webinar, 2022. For MEPs generally, see Manufacturing Extension Partnership, “Find Your Local MEP Center,” <https://www.nist.gov/mep/centers/map>.
- 28 Video interview of Felix Buxkemper and Donna Zuniga, Texas Department of Criminal Justice, by Kayla James, senior program associate, Vera Institute of Justice, April 29, 2022.
- 29 Lee College, “Huntsville Center Degrees and Certificates: Truck and Heavy Equipment Operator,” archived October 11, 2022, <https://perma.cc/AJ52-65F3>.
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- 33 Video interview of Felix Buxkemper and Donna Zuniga, Texas Department of Criminal Justice, by Kayla James, senior program associate, Vera Institute of Justice, April 29, 2022.
- 33 Lee College, “Huntsville Center Degrees and Certificates: Truck and Heavy Equipment Operator,” archived October 11, 2022, <https://perma.cc/AJ52-65F3>.
- 34 Video interview of Felix Buxkemper and Donna Zuniga, Texas Department of Criminal Justice, by Kayla James, senior program associate, Vera Institute of Justice, April 29, 2022.
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- 37 Ibid.

- 38 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, Heavy and Tractor-trailer Truck Drivers,” BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, updated October 4, 2022, <https://perma.cc/7FCD-NHFK>.
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## CREDITS

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