

Researcher's article makes the case for truckers and COVID-19 vaccination

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Credit: Darwis Alwan

The COVID-19 vaccine has arrived and currently, priority populations are at the top of the list to receive inoculations. Seniors over 65, individuals with underlying health conditions, healthcare workers and

essential frontline workers are those who will be the first to receive vaccinations.

Among the frontline workers not included in this first inoculation group are [truck drivers](#). A University of Houston-Downtown researcher, however, hopes to shed light on why these professionals should be recognized as essential personnel during the pandemic and be among the first workers to receive vaccinations.

Dr. Michael Lemke, UHD Assistant Professor of Health and Human Behavior, recently contributed the article "Commercial Drivers Should Be a Priority Population for COVID-19" to the American Journal of Industrial Medicine (AJIM). Lemke, a former commercial driver himself, has conducted previous research on the challenges of being a long-haul trucker during the pandemic. In his latest article for AJIM, he notes that the role of the truck driver is vastly underappreciated during the pandemic.

"Truck drivers have played a vital role throughout the COVID-19 pandemic," he said. "They also continue to play an essential and irreplaceable role in distributing COVID-19 vaccines. Without enough truck drivers, vaccines and other critical medical and household supplies would be nearly impossible to allocate to anyone."

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) provides guidance on which groups are the first to receive the COVID-19 vaccination. The previously mentioned populations are part of phase 1a of the vaccinations. Lemke's article helps make the case that truckers should at least be part of the next phase of inoculations—1b. Transportation professionals are currently part of the following phase—1c.



Credit: Lê Minh

According to Lemke, the very nature of truckers' jobs puts them at high risk of both contracting and transmitting the virus.

"Commercial drivers travel long distances and interact with numerous people, which creates risk for disease acquisition and transmission across broad geographies and demographics," Lemke said.

The general health profiles of these professionals also places them among high risk groups, he added. The trucking industry has high rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes. Further complicating the well-being of truck drivers are the many healthcare disparities they face

(lack of access to physicians while on the road; not having time off).

Truck drivers are responsible for 71 percent of the freight that is transported within the United States, and they play a critical part of a \$700 billion industry. Beyond these dollars and the common sense suggesting that Americans depend on these drivers for essential goods, there is a much deeper significance to his recent AJIM article.

Lemke's hope is that his research will help drivers gain recognition for their service during the pandemic but also receive the support needed to continue their service to the public and the economy.

"Truck [drivers](#) have helped make the public health policies possible throughout the [pandemic](#)," he said. "They have been the key to the delivery of medical supplies that have helped save lives, and now they are absolutely essential in people actually getting the vaccine—and yet they are overlooked and excluded from the first and second waves of vaccines for essential workers. This isn't just a practical issue. It's a social justice issue. The article is just one step in recognizing these essential workers that are often forgotten or disregarded."

More information: Michael K. Lemke. Commercial truck drivers should be a priority population for COVID-19 vaccinations, *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* (2021). [DOI: 10.1002/ajim.23220](https://doi.org/10.1002/ajim.23220)

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