

Wage Study for Alabama's Section 5311 Drivers

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Abstract

Driving a transit bus for a Federal Transit Administration Section 5311 agency is a difficult job that requires training and commitment. As such, it is important to hire qualified and competent individuals into these positions. Within the hiring process, starting pay is a major factor in hiring both for drivers and the agency. This paper documents the results from a survey which collected wage data for transit bus drivers in Alabama. The results show that average starting full-time pay for transit bus drivers is lower than that of school bus drivers, other county employees and even fast food workers in the area where the transit service is provided. The paper concludes that starting pay for Alabama's Section 5311 drivers is below the poverty level for a family of four and this low pay has the potential to make future hiring of qualified and competent bus drivers an issue in the future.

Keywords

Rural Transit, Wage Study, Public Transportation, Alabama

1. Introduction

Transit agencies offering rural demand response public transportation service within Alabama are having a difficult time hiring and keeping drivers. The general feeling is that drive pay is responsible for the difficulty in keeping employees. This paper was developed to examine the drive pay in Alabama for the transit drivers hired under the Federal Transit Administration Section 5311 agencies.

The transit agencies operating under the 5311 program offer service to all general public riders, including individuals with disability that are both physical and cognitive, living in the study area with curb-to-curb transportation. Transit bus drivers have a great deal of responsibility associated with transporting passengers. They accept the responsibility, and liability, associated with passenger

care, especially when transporting disabled passengers. These responsibilities include, but are not limited to: customer service and vehicle cleaning, made more important during the era of Covid-19; vehicle monitoring and required pre-trip and post-trip inspections, to verify the condition of the equipment; and most importantly passenger safety. However, with all of the responsibility and work requirements placed on bus drivers, the pay may not be commensurate with the position. Therefore, the satisfaction of employee's might suffer due to the salary, and thus the customer care can suffer (Tiznado et al., 2014 and Samerei et al., 2021).

This paper examines the results of a wage survey conducted for rural transit agencies in Alabama funded under the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Section 5311 Program: Rural Public Transportation. The wage survey was submitted to all agencies in Alabama that receive funds under the 5311 program to examine pay levels for drivers in an attempt to answer the question, "Are rural transit drivers underpaid?" It is important to note, that since these employees are public employees of agencies that are provided with federal funding, all employee salaries are publicly available. This paper contains a summary of the survey and analysis of the responses for Alabama.

2. The Role of the Bus Driver

To begin the analysis, it is important to obtain an understanding of the job responsibilities and training that is required to be a transit bus operator. The following information was obtained from the Baldwin Regional Area Transit System (BRATS), a transit system that offers both fixed-route and demand-response transportation in Alabama.

The basic job description for a transit bus operator is to "Operate the vehicle, carry out pre-trip and post-trip inspections, keep the vehicle clean, and keep accurate reports concerning routes, passengers, vehicles and monies (fares), and assist passengers within established guidelines". In addition, transit bus drivers are required to serve on-call as needed for emergency evacuation. There are 15 essential functions identified for operating the transit bus:

- 1) Maintain control of passengers while they are aboard the vehicle.
- 2) Secure and tie down wheelchairs properly.
- 3) Record the time of each pick up and drop off.
- 4) Record the odometer of each pick up and drop off.
- 5) Remember addresses and directions.
- 6) Properly perform pre-trip and post-trip inspections of the vehicle.
- 7) Report maintenance issues and safety hazards.
- 8) Maintain cleanliness of vehicle.
- 9) Maintain fuel level of vehicle.
- 10) Collect fares of passengers.
- 11) Assist passengers within established guidelines.
- 12) Provide information to passengers.
- 13) Speak professionally and clearly on radio.

14) Assist in emergency evacuation as needed.

15) Participate in training activities.

The skill, knowledge and abilities required for the bus driver position include:

1) Skills and ability to communicate effectively and clearly with general public, especially with the elderly and impaired.

2) Ability to keep detailed records and make accurate reports.

3) Ability to read road signs correctly.

4) Knowledge of rules and regulations of defensive driving.

5) Ability to follow routine oral and written instructions.

6) Math skills in order to keep correct figures on fares, adding miles traveled and gallons of gas and oil purchased.

7) Knowledge and understanding of the Alabama State Highway Public Transportation Highway rules and regulations.

8) Ability to deal with general public in a professional, courteous and polite manner.

9) Ability and patience to work with individuals with special needs.

10) Ability to operate a direct link radio and to communicate effectively and clearly.

11) Ability to work in computer software programs and GPS units.

12) Ability to remember addresses and directions.

13) Ability to follow oral and written instructions.

Transit bus drivers also are placed in a training process that covers a variety of safety and passenger service elements. All new hires are required to undergo training in professionalism, personal protective equipment (PPE) and proper sanitation of the vehicle, vehicle operating safety training conducted through ride-along trips by senior personnel, passenger safety training including wheel-chair securement and handling disruptive passengers, defensive driving and basic driving hazards, and pre-trip and post-trip vehicles inspection training to verify vehicles operating condition which includes: checking engine fluid levels, tire wear, lift condition and operability, and condition of emergency equipment to name a few items. These trainings are required prior to transporting passengers.

3. The Survey

To answer the question of driver pay equity, an online survey was developed using Google Forms and submitted via email to the manager/senior administration professional at every transit agency in Alabama that receives FTA Section 5311 funding. The questions for the survey are shown in **Table 1**. The surveyed allowed for respondents to enter their responses as either a number or text, allowing for explanations of the answers if the agencies felt this was necessary. A total of 24 agencies responded to the survey, out of 30 possible agencies. The county where the headquarters for the agencies that responded is shown in **Figure 1**, note that while some agencies cover multiple counties only the main location is displayed. For the agencies that responded, they were classified as either urban

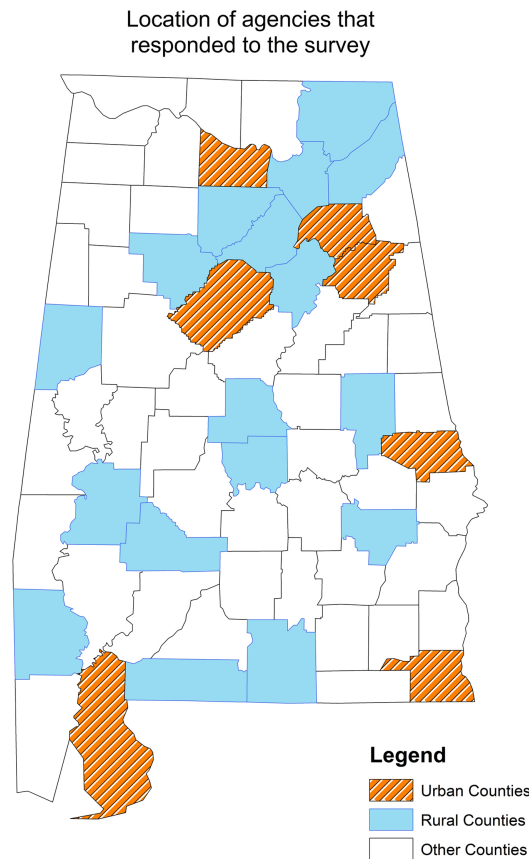


Figure 1. Counties where data were collected.

Table 1. Survey questions.

What is the name of your agency and which county are you headquartered?

How much do you pay new full-time drivers (Hourly Rate for new hires)?

How much do you pay new part-time drivers (Hourly Rate for new hires)?

What is the rate of pay for the highest paid driver in your agency (Hourly Rate)?

Is a CDL required? Do you offer additional pay for a CDL if optional (Hourly Rate)?

What is the pay for a new school bus operators in your area (Hourly Rate for new hires)?

What is the pay for a 5307 driver in your area, if applicable (Hourly Rate for new hires)?

What is the starting pay for workers in fast food restaurants in your community? For example, what is advertised for starting pay at McDonald's or Burger King?

What is the pay for other county employees who drive county vehicles (Hourly Rate for new hires)? For example, those who drive garbage collection vehicles or on county road crew.

Do you offer health benefits to your drivers? If yes, what amount do you pay and what amount is paid by the employee?

or rural, where agencies were defined as urban if they have an FTA Section 5307 Agency (Urban Public Transportation) operating in the area and further based on geography into North, Central and South depending on how the state classifies the agencies based on reporting areas as defined by the University of Alabama in Huntsville's Office of Public Transportation regions.

4. The Results of the Wage Survey

The results of the data collected by the survey will be evaluated by question examining the entire state of Alabama, by urban versus rural counties, and by region of the state.

4.1. New Full-Time Hires

The starting salary for new full-time hires was collected from 20 of the 24 agencies, as four agencies indicated that they did not have full-time employees. The 20 agencies that responded to the survey indicated a statewide average starting pay for new full-time hires of \$10.30 per hour, with a range of \$7.25 per hour to \$13.91 per hour. The agencies located in urban counties offered a slightly higher full-time starting salary of \$11.00 per hour for seven agencies while the agencies offered a slightly lower full-time starting salary of \$9.93 per hour for 13 agencies who hire full-time drivers. Examining all 20 agencies across geographical parts of the state, there was surprising equality; with the average full-time starting pay of \$10.24 per hour in the North, \$10.45 per hour in the Central and \$10.24 in the South. However, when examining the impact of both urban/rural and geographical location, there was a large discrepancy in the South region with full-time new hires in the urban areas averaging \$13.46 per hour and full-time new hires in the rural area averaging \$8.96 per hour, see **Table 2**.

Table 2. Average starting salary of new full-time hires.

Location of Agency	Average Starting Salary of Full-Time New Hires
Rural	\$9.93 per hour
Central	\$10.26 per hour
North	\$10.81 per hour
South	\$8.96 per hour
Urban	\$11.00 per hour
Central	\$10.83 per hour
North	\$9.48 per hour
South	\$13.46 per hour
Grand Total	\$10.30 per hour

4.2. New Part-Time Hires

The starting salary for new part-time hires was collected from all 24 agencies. The survey results indicated a statewide average starting pay for new part-time hires of \$10.02 per hour, with a range of \$7.25 per hour to \$13.91 per hour. This value is slightly lower than the value for new full-time hires. The agencies located in urban counties offered the same average pay for new part-time hires as full-time hires of \$11.00 per hour while agencies in the rural areas offered new part-time drivers a starting salary of \$9.62 per hour for 17 agencies. Examining all agencies across geographical parts of the state, there were greater differences; with the average new part-time starting pay of \$9.83 per hour in the North, \$10.27 per hour in the Central and \$9.85 in the South. When examining the impact of both urban/rural and geographical location, there was again a large discrepancy in the South region with new part-time hires in the urban areas averaging \$13.46 per hour and new part-time hires in the rural area averaging \$8.41 per hour, see **Table 3**.

4.3. Comparison of Highest Pay to Starting Pay

The question concerning the highest paid driver in your agency was asked to determine the amount of upward mobility in pay for new hires, essentially are transit drivers locked into their starting wage or is there room for improvement. Examining the data from the 24 agencies, the highest rate of pay for any driver in the state was \$22.00 per hour, the equivalent of \$45,760 per year. This was at an agency where the starting pay was \$13.00 per hour, indicating the ability to receive pay raises totaling \$9.00 per hour. As the survey allowed for text entry, not just numbers, this agency indicated that this particular employee had been employed as a driver for 23 years.

The lowest amount of upward mobility was recorded for an agency where the starting pay was \$8.00 per hour and the highest paid driver was earning

Table 3. Average starting salary of new part-time hires.

Location of Agency	Average Starting Salary of Full-Time New Hires
Rural	\$9.62 per hour
Central	\$10.13 per hour
North	\$10.10 per hour
South	\$8.41 per hour
Urban	\$11.00 per hour
Central	\$10.83 per hour
North	\$9.48 per hour
South	\$13.46 per hour
Grand Total	\$10.02 per hour

\$8.92 per hour. Unfortunately, there was not detail related to the length of time this employee had been hired, so it was not possible to validate of the agency typically had limited mobility or if all their drivers were recent hires who didn't have the seniority to earn more.

Examining the difference in wage growth across the state, the statewide difference in pay between the highest and starting pay was \$3.24 per hour. With salary increases a strong motivational factor in job satisfaction (Kosteas, 2011), this limited growth potential seems very disheartening. There were also differences in salary growth between urban and rural agencies, with urban agencies have an average difference between starting and highest pay of \$5.57 per hour and rural only have a difference of \$2.28 per hour. Geographical difference show that the South had the highest potential for salary increases with the average difference of \$4.26 per hour, the North having \$3.81 per hour and the Central only having \$2.13 per hour. When examining the geographical and urban/rural classification of the agencies, being in the urban counties in the South and North have the greatest possibility for salary growth of \$7.13 per hour and \$6.34 per hour, respectively. See **Table 4** for complete results.

4.4. Commercial Driver's License Requirement

A commercial driver's license (CDL) represents an advanced license that requires a written exam, practical training, and a driving test. As such, those possessing a CDL license have demonstrated a higher level of achievement in the art of driving. For the agencies contacted in this wage survey, eight required the driver to have completed the requirements for a CDL while 16 agencies didn't require a CDL license (Note, that the ability to have a CDL for employment is mainly focused on the agency policy and vehicles operated by the agency). For the agencies that required a CDL, the starting pay was \$1.12 per hour more for agencies that required a CDL.

Table 4. Average difference in pay between highest salary and starting salary.

Location of Agency	Average Difference in pay between Highest Salary and Starting Salary
Rural	\$2.28 per hour
Central	\$1.94 per hour
North	\$1.91 per hour
South	\$3.12 per hour
Urban	\$5.57 per hour
Central	\$2.88 per hour
North	\$6.34 per hour
South	\$7.13 per hour
Grand Total	\$3.24 per hour

4.5. Comparison to Bus Driver Pay

A common competitor for transit bus driver talent is the local school system. Anecdotally, it is often said that “a transit agency trains bus drivers as a way to join the school system once they get experience”. As such, a comparison of starting pay as a school bus driver versus a transit bus driver was included.

Across the state of Alabama, starting school bus drivers make an average of \$6.12 per hour more than transit bus drivers. It should be noted that most school bus drivers do not have the ability to work full-time, but the increase in starting hourly wage is large. There is little difference between the starting hourly wage between urban and rural bus drivers with the average increase in salary being \$6.69 per hour and \$5.80 per hour, respectively. When factoring geographical location to the analysis, within the North region, urban agencies have the largest discrepancy between the transit driver starting salary and school bus driver starting salary at \$9.40 per hour, while agencies in the South region, rural areas only have a difference in pay of \$3.00 per hour between transit and school bus drivers. See **Table 5** for complete results.

4.6. Comparison to 5307 Drivers

For the urban areas, in addition to the school system, transit drivers have the option to drive for the FTA Section 5307 programs. Therefore a comparison of starting pay for drivers in the Section 5307 agencies was made. Obviously, the agencies will only be in the urban locations of the state, as that was how the urban agencies were defined in this study.

Examining the data, the starting hourly wage for drivers at the Section 5307 agencies was \$2.36 per hour higher than for drivers at the Section 5311 agencies. In the North and Central region the difference was \$2.83 and \$2.84 per hour respectively and in the South region there was no difference in starting pay.

Table 5. Average difference in pay between starting salary for school bus driver and starting salary for transit bus drivers.

Location of Agency	Average Difference in pay between School Bus Salary and Transit Salary
Rural	\$5.80 per hour
Central	\$5.59 per hour
North	\$6.71 per hour
South	\$3.00 per hour
Urban	\$6.69 per hour
Central	\$3.96 per hour
North	\$9.40 per hour
South	\$5.34 per hour
Grand Total	\$6.12 per hour

4.7. Comparison to Fast Food Workers

With all the requirements and training presented in the beginning of this paper, potential new transit hires might opt for different careers. To address the alternatives, a quick comparison of wages to fast food workers in the local area was conducted to show an alternative.

Statewide, fast food workers earn a starting pay that is \$1.21 per hour higher than the starting pay for transit bus drivers. While this difference is small, the requirements of the job may make alternatives to driving a transit bus beneficial. When examining the urban versus rural and geographical differences, the increase in pay for fast food workers is similar with the urban agencies in the Central region having the largest difference at \$4.17 per hour and the South region having the smallest difference at an average of \$0.15 per hour. See **Table 6** for complete results.

4.8. Comparison to Other County Workers

Within Alabama, most transit bus drivers are employed as county employees, with the Section 5311 agencies being part of the county government. Therefore, a comparison of wages for other county employees who drive county vehicles is relevant. These other county employees often require a CDL license because of the gross tonnage of the vehicles and drive garbage trucks or other vehicles as part of the county road crew. Across Alabama, other county employees make an average of \$2.58 per hour more than transit drivers. While there are larger increases in the urban agencies in the Central and North Regions, \$5.28 per hour and \$4.71 per hour respectively, the rural areas of the state have consistent lower salaries of around \$2.11 per hour. See **Table 7** for complete results.

Table 6. Average difference in pay between starting salary for fast food workers and starting salary for transit bus drivers.

Location of Agency	Average Difference in pay between Fast Food Salary and Transit Salary
Rural	\$0.91 per hour
Central	\$1.12 per hour
North	\$1.39 per hour
South	\$0.19 per hour
Urban	\$1.93 per hour
Central	\$4.17 per hour
North	\$1.49 per hour
South	\$0.05 per hour
Grand Total	\$1.21 per hour

Table 7. Average difference in pay between starting salary for other county workers and starting salary for transit bus drivers.

Location of Agency	Average Difference in pay between Other County Employees Salary and Transit Salary
Rural	\$2.11 per hour
Central	\$2.17 per hour
North	\$2.01 per hour
South	\$2.15 per hour
Urban	\$3.62 per hour
Central	\$5.28 per hour
North	\$4.71 per hour
South	\$1.71 per hour
Grand Total	\$2.58 per hour

5. Additional Compensation

While driver pay was the primary focus of this study, hourly wage is not the only consideration when accepting a job. Therefore, the benefits provided by the agency were asked to get an idea of the total compensation for a Section 5311 transit driver in Alabama.

According to the survey results, six agencies did not offer any health insurance benefits to drivers. However, four of these agencies did not hire full-time drivers so the lack of health insurance is understandable. For those that offered full-time employees health insurance, seven agencies offered health insurance at no cost to the employee, while there was a charge for adding family members to the insurance. For those agencies that didn't cover 100% of the insurance costs, the average employee contribution was \$52 per month, which is only 2.8% of the driver's average monthly pay at these agencies.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the wages offered at Alabama's Section 5311 Rural Public Transportation agencies to answer the question, "Are rural transit drivers underpaid?" From the results, the average starting hourly pay for transit bus drivers in Alabama of \$10.30 per hour, or \$21,424 per year, doesn't provide enough income for a family of four to live above the poverty level, which is currently set at \$26,500 per year (Poverty, 2021). In addition, this study shows that there is limited potential for wage increases as a transit driver, thus not providing for the option to increase wages significantly during employment.

When compared to school bus drivers and other county employees, transit bus drivers have the lowest average salaries. School bus drivers have the highest average salary in terms of pay per hour, however, as most school bus drivers do not work full-time, this comparison maybe slightly skewed. The comparison to

other county employees, who presumably receive the same benefits package as county transit drivers, the customer service requirements and safety considerations of transporting passengers, make the transit driver pay seem woefully minimal. Even when compared to starting workers in the fast food industry, transit bus drivers earn less per hour.

The limitations of this work include the fact that all Alabama transit agencies did not respond to the survey, implying that there could be slight changes in the averages and that this is the experience in a single state implying that other states might not have the same issues. The future expansion of this research is to work to identify locations where pay for transit workers is higher and identify appropriate means to increase driver pay within Alabama.

In conclusion, this study shows that Section 5311 transit drivers in Alabama are underpaid. Given the demands of the job, passenger and safety consideration, and overall work environment it is clear that drivers do not take these positions for financial gain. Therefore, those that drive transit vehicles for employment demonstrate a desire to serve their community. However, this lack of pay will potentially lead to more difficulties in finding qualified, competent transit bus drivers in the future.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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