

Some Metro drivers make more than \$40,000 in overtime pay amid labor shortage

https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/some-metro-drivers-make-more-than-40-000-in-overtime-pay-amid-labor-shortage/article_e81d92b2-322e-11ee-8f5a-132a4ad1b4a3.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter



Willie Penson, who has been a MetroBus driver for 20 years, poses for a portrait at North Hanley Transit Center in St. Louis County on Friday, Aug. 25, 2023. Penson made more than \$20k in overtime last year.

ST. LOUIS — Two Metro drivers made more than \$40,000 in overtime pay last year, and non-salaried employees of Metro's parent company earned a total of \$7.1 million in overtime, according to a Post-Dispatch analysis of payroll data.

In all, 32 bus, rail and van drivers earned more than \$20,000 in overtime in 2022 from Metro's parent company, Bi-State Development, with the top-earning driver pulling in \$42,095.

It's a significant jump in overtime pay from 2021 when the top-earning driver collected \$17,310, and all non-salaried workers received a total of \$2.5 million.

The overtime data was obtained as part of the Post-Dispatch's annual [Public Pay database](#) project, which this year collected payroll data from more than 120 public agencies in the area.

The hefty overtime payouts are directly related to a nationwide labor shortage that has left employers scrambling to fill positions, said Taulby Roach, president and CEO of Bi-State. Unemployment rates in Missouri averaged a historical low of about [2.5%](#) in 2022, meaning employers had a much smaller employee pool from which to hire.

For some drivers, overtime pay makes up nearly half of their yearly pay. And, in rare instances, drivers nearly double their base salaries with overtime. Some weeks, those drivers work more than 60 hours, said Catina Wilson, vice president of MetroLink's main union.

"It takes a special kind of person to drive strangers behind your head," Wilson said.

Hourly pay for MetroLink drivers in 2021 ranged from \$18 to \$26 an hour — so for a 40-hour work week, those drivers would earn between \$37,000 and \$54,000.

Metro **budgeted** for 1,117 bus, light rail and van driver positions in fiscal years 2022 and 2023, but it recorded payments to only 1,072 workers in those positions during the 2022 calendar year.

And though overtime pay for non-salaried workers increased significantly in 2022, Metro actually saved about \$3 million overall because of having fewer workers to pay. Total gross pay for non-salaried employees dropped from \$86.1 million in 2021 to \$83.3 million last year.

'Not a bad job'

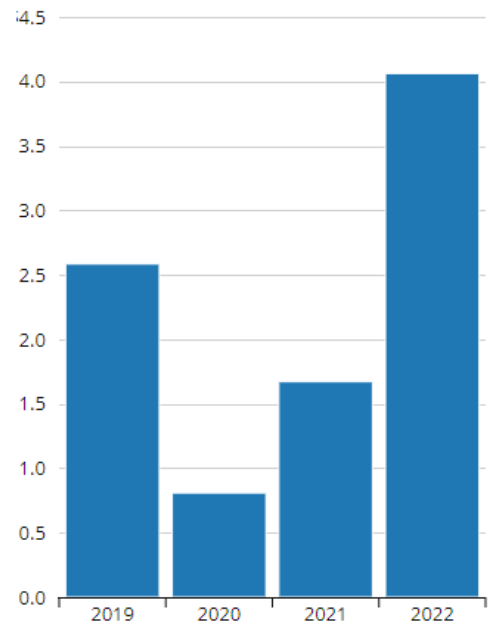
Overtime for Metro drivers is mostly voluntary, Wilson said. They normally welcome the extra pay, but she said some of the top earners expressed concerns about spending more time driving than with their families. Still, she said, they felt compelled to serve the area and fill in staffing gaps.

"They do it because they want to make sure there are buses on the street," Wilson said. "It's important to them that the last person standing on the platform gets home."

Jeffrey Wright said he drives more than 10 hours a day for the company. According to pay records, he made the third-most of any employee in overtime pay last year with \$35,000. He said he decided to become a bus operator because he drives better than most, merging the large blue and green bus with ease amid St. Louis traffic.

"I don't like to drive," Wright said, "but I'm good at driving."

Overtime paid to Metro drivers, 2019-2022
In millions of dollars, by calendar year



SOURCE: Bi-State Development

DATA SHARE

Wright said he works overtime voluntarily, putting his family and his own needs into account as he works the additional hours for Metro. He said although he made a decent amount of money working those hours, he wishes the job's base salary paid better.

"It's not a bad job," Wright said. "And I've had every job you could think of."

It's not just drivers who make big money working overtime for Bi-State. Mechanics can earn hefty payouts, too — the top-earning mechanic this year pulled in \$51,965 in overtime. With mechanics increasingly scarce, Roach said, those employed by Bi-State are stretched thin keeping the buses up to national standards.

"By golly, if I have some employees (willing to be) working Saturdays and Sundays, why wouldn't we do that?" Roach said.

The company is short 59 mechanic positions, said Jerry Vallely, communications manager for Metro. That contributed to excess overtime for supervisors who worked extra to make up for the shortage.

A maintenance supervisor of the Ewing Street Rail Systems, a rail yard where most of the maintenance for Metro's light rail operations takes place, made \$37,752 in overtime pay — good for 45% of his base salary.

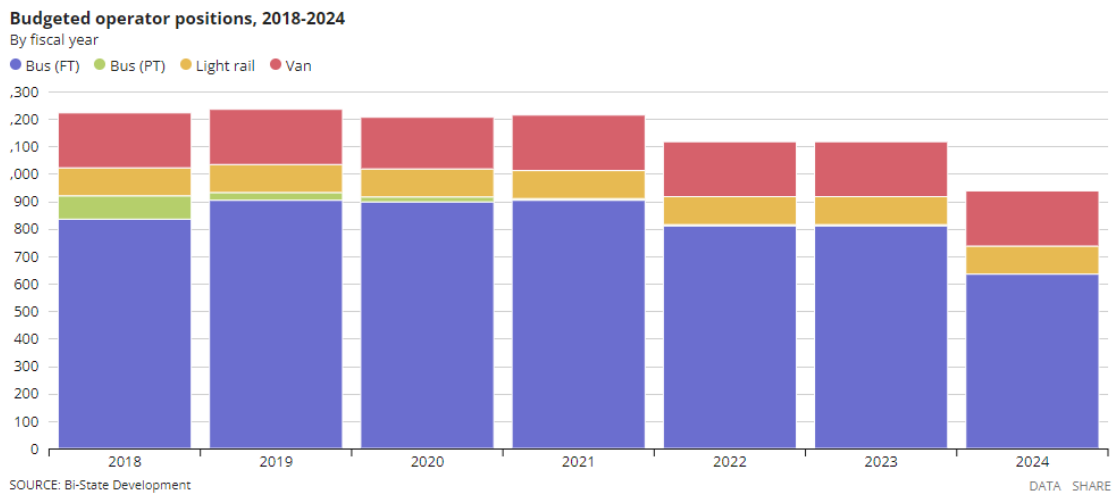
Risk of burnout

Overtime pay is a good way to keep employees on board, Roach said. And it tends to improve morale.

"My workforce likes overtime," Roach said. "They tend to be a happier workforce."

Still, Jessica Gold, an assistant professor of psychiatry at Washington University, said working excessive amounts of overtime can lead to burnout in any industry, including for transit workers. Gold specialized in research about burnout among health care workers during the shortage during the COVID-19 pandemic, and said working excessive hours has proven to have negative effects on a worker's reflexes and fine motor skills.

"Burnout can lead to a disconnect from the work they're doing," Gold said. "The three symptoms of burnout are emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment."



The workforce remains scarce in 2023. Bi-State slashed the number of full-time bus driver slots in its 2024 budget by 21%, dropping from 811 to 635, and cut the number of maintenance jobs by 19.

In an attempt to recruit more prospective employees, the Bi-State board recently [signed a contract](#) with Local 788, which approved a

3% increase in the drivers and mechanics' salaries for each of the next two fiscal years, plus a \$7,000 signing bonus.

Still, the workforce has not shown signs of growth.

"We are just treading water, folks," Roach said at a recent Bi-State board committee meeting. "We are having stronger efforts (at recruitment), but our base numbers are still not on that recovery trajectory."