



# Burnout, Job strain and road accidents in the field of public transportation: The case of city bus drivers

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The widely documented relationship between psychosocial work factors and occupational accidents has not been translated into intervention strategies in some high-risk occupational groups, such as public transport drivers. According to the recent scientific evidence, city bus drivers tend to present high levels of occupational stress, burnout, and accidents at work. **Aim:** The aim of this study was to characterize the job strain/burnout profile of professional bus drivers, and associate their stress/burnout profile with their road incidents (road accidents + fines) reported in the past 2 years. **Materials and Methods:** The study sample was formed by 222 Colombian male city bus drivers with an average of 41.36 years of age, a mean of driving experience of 18.63 years and, in average 6.82 years working in their current transport company. The study participants had a mean of 0.51 road accidents and 1.19 traffic fines in the past 2 years. It was designed a questionnaire composed by four sections: (a) Demographics, (b) job strain (Karasek's job content questionnaire), (c) burnout (Maslach Burnout Inventory), and (d) self-reported health. Data collection process was conducted in 2014-2015 and analyzes along 2016. **Results:** A high proportion of city bus drivers report job strain (40.5%). The average scores of emotional exhaustion ( $X = 21.01$ ) and cynicism ( $X = 17.88$ ) were also high. Cluster analysis was used to characterize the job strain/burnout profile of professional bus drivers. Two job strain/burnout profiles significantly different were found (low job strain/burnout:  $n = 34.3\%$  and high job strain/burnout:  $n = 65.7\%$ ). The bus drivers with high job strain/burnout profile reported significantly more accidents than those with low job strain/burnout profile ( $F_{(2,216)} = 269.1, P = 0.00$ ). **Conclusions:** This study confirms that the prevalence of occupational stress and burnout are significantly high among Colombian bus drivers. In addition, it was found that the bus drivers' job strain/burnout profile is related to their performance behind the wheel. Therefore, the intervention on these factors represents a potentially successful strategy for the prevention of road accidents and risk behaviors that lead to penalties and fines.

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## INTRODUCTION

Traffic crashes use to be defined as a major public health concern [1], considering that this phenomenon causes a high number of deaths and injuries every year, and worldwide [2]. Nowadays, there is a growing number of occupational groups classified as at high psychosocial risk. Among them are professional drivers, especially those who perform public transport services such as urban and inter-urban bus drivers [3,4]. In this occupational group, several studies have found very high rates of work stress, burnout, and occupational accidents, including traffic crashes [5,6].

Work stress has been associated with worker morbidity and mortality in numerous epidemiological studies [7-9]. Besides, growing evidence in bus drivers and mixed occupational groups

associates psychosocial work factors with burnout, poor physical and mental health, counterproductive work behaviors, increased risk for accidents, and poor job performance [10-15].

## Work Stress and Professional Driving

Work stress is one of the factors more frequently associated with the occurrence of accidents and occupational injuries [9,13]. The demand-control (DC) model [16] associates work stress with a problematic interaction between high psychological demands and low decision latitude (decision authority and skill discretion) named job strain [17]. There is abundant research linking job strain with negative health outcomes and job performance, including studies on bus drivers [18-20]. In this occupational group, driving inexperience, work overtime, shift work, emotional labor, low decision latitude, and lack of

social support (from colleagues and supervisors) have been documented as highly prevalent stressors [21,22].

### **Burnout in the Field of Professional Driving**

Burnout is a psychological syndrome, which increases as a response to the chronic exposure to work-related stressors [23-26]. Theoretically, burnout includes 3 main components: Emotional exhaustion, or the feeling of emotional overwhelming at work, cynicism (also known as depersonalization or disengagement), defined as detachment from others or indifference at work, and reduced professional efficacy (also referred to as professional accomplishment), which is the tendency to evaluate one's efforts and achievements in a negative manner [27,28].

Burnout is associated with negative health outcomes such as anxiety [29], depression [29,30], sleep disturbances [31-33], headache [34], gastrointestinal disease [35], hypertension [36], muscle tension [34], and chronic fatigue [37], and especially in the case of professional drivers, with poor job performance [38,39]. Burnout is also associated with negative organizational outcomes such as absenteeism and high turnover intention [40,41]. Intervention research has found that the continuous task evaluation and improvement, [42-45] and the socioemotional support from co-workers and family are key factors in the management and prevention of burnout.

### **Professional Drivers' Health and Road Safety**

Early research findings suggesting that professional drivers are at high-risk for different types of occupational illness remain true today [46]. For instance, recent studies report that drivers' illness is associated with sickness absence, turnover intention, and accidents [3,47]. Research on bus drivers also report that fatigue, shift work [38,48], age, driving experience, previous accidents and their severity, the type of vehicle (public light bus/charter bus/school bus/minibus), and route are correlated with the risk of being involved in road accidents [49,50].

In practical terms, a professional driver who suffers health problems, such as cardiovascular disease or obesity, may have up to twice the risk of have an accident while driving [51,52] and increase the impact of subjective determinants on risky driving behavior [53]. This increased risk for road accidents compromises the health and safety of not only professional drivers but also other users of the road, such as their passengers, other drivers, and pedestrians [8].

Empirical evidence collected over the past 50 years suggests that compared with other occupational groups, professional drivers tend to have a higher prevalence of cardiovascular [54,55], musculoskeletal [46], and gastrointestinal diseases [35]. Regarding with mental health problems, it was found that depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorders are highly prevalent in professional drivers, and are contributing factors for work-related accidents [6,8,54].

### **Road Accidents**

In the context of professional driving, accidents are not planned events in the road, which causes material damages and/or injuries. The potential health damage to the road users makes road accidents a public health concern [2,49]. Age and experience are documented predictors of the risk of road crash [3,51,56,57]. However, little research had investigated the association between psychosocial risk at work and driving performance [58].

One of the factors most frequently used to explain traffic accidents are the drivers' risk behaviors. Unsafe driving behavior has been associated with work stress in several studies, especially in the case of public transport drivers. For instance, Kontogiannis found that behaviors on the road significantly predict traffic accidents in professional drivers [14,59]. Taking into account that the safe operation of motor vehicles depends on a combination of psychomotor skills and environmental factors, variables such as work stressors [58,60,61], cognitive overstimulation [55], weather, road conditions [62], driving performance [51,33], and prolonged interaction with other road users [63] are key factors to consider in the management of safety issues in the transport industry [6].

Regarding to accident prevention, previous research results suggest that healthy drivers working under optimal conditions are less prone to road crashes [3]. Furthermore, occupational stress prevention programs may be beneficial for both the employee and transport companies, taking into account the potential accident cost reduction [3,64].

### **Study Framework**

Researches in job strain and burnout among drivers have increased [65,66]. Due to the high influence of public transport drivers on road safety, issues such as their work stressors, mental, and physical health need careful consideration. It is known that physical and psychological health of the bus drivers is a critical factor in their performance [67,68]. Any impairment can have undesirable consequences for passengers and bus operating companies in the form of health problems, economical, and occupational costs [50,69].

Taking into account that bus transportation is one of the most popular modes of public transport worldwide, the need to address the psychosocial work environment of bus drivers for improvement should be a priority.

### **Objective of the Study**

The aim of this study was to (a) characterize the job strain/burnout profile of professional bus drivers, and (b) associate their stress/burnout profile with their road incidents reported in the past 2 years.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Sample

The sample was composed by  $n = 222$  Colombian city bus drivers between 20 and 79 years of age, with a mean of  $X = 41.36$  (standard deviation [SD] = 11.13) years. The average driving experience of these bus operators was  $X = 18.63$  (SD = 9.816) years. On average, this sample of professional drivers had  $X = 6.82$  (SD = 6.59) years working in their current transport company. Furthermore, over the past 2 years, participants of this study had  $X = 0.51$  (SD = 1.18) occupational accidents at the wheel and  $X = 1.19$  (SD = 1.59) traffic fines while driving during working shifts. Women ( $n = 4$ , not included in the final sample) were excluded due to their very low representation in the bus drivers' occupational group.

The number of participants represents an error margin for the general data of  $\pm 2.65$  with a 95% confidence interval in the most unfavorable case of  $P = Q = 50\%$ .

### Procedure, Design, and Ethics

Participants have completed the questionnaire, designed in a paper version, at the facilities of the transport companies that agreed to participate in the study. The survey was conducted guaranteeing the anonymity of the participants and emphasizing on the fact that the data would only be used for research purposes. It was used an informed consent statement, signed by both parties before the participants answered the questionnaire. Surveys were completed for 220 drivers, and the response rate was approximately 97%.

### Description of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was administrated in Spanish language and consisted of four sections. In the first section, demographic variables (age, driving experience) and road incidents (accidents + traffic tickets or "fines" in the past 2 years) were collected.

The 2 section included the 27 items of the Colombian job content questionnaire (JCQ) [70]. The JCQ has been widely used to assess psychosocial factors in the workplace and their effects on health. The response scale includes a 4-point Likert scale (1 = "totally disagree" and 4 = "totally agree"). The 27 items of the JCQ are grouped in 6 sub-scales: Support from supervisors (4 items,  $\alpha = 0.87$ ), peer support (4 items,  $\alpha = 0.79$ ), skill discretion (6 items,  $\alpha = 0.75$ ), decision authority (3 items,  $\alpha = 0.69$ ), psychological demands (6 items,  $\alpha = 0.66$ ), and job insecurity (4 items,  $\alpha = 0.53$ ). Decision latitude was calculated as de sum of skills discretion and decision-making. Job strain was computed as the ratio between psychological demands and decision latitude (demands/decision latitude).

The 3<sup>th</sup> section was composed by the Spanish version of the Maslachs' Burnout Inventory (MBI) [71,72]. This questionnaire consists of 16 questions (1-7 scale) grouped in 3 subscales:

Emotional exhaustion (5 items,  $\alpha = 0.88$ ), depersonalization/cynicism (5 items,  $\alpha = 0.67$ ), and professional efficacy (6 items,  $\alpha = 0.78$ ) [73].

Finally, the 4<sup>th</sup> part consisted of questions about height and weight and self-reported physical health: Do you smoke (yes/no)? are you physically active (yes/no)? do you suffer (a) diabetes, (b) hypertension, or (c) cancerous illness?.

Data collection process was conducted in 2014-2015 and analyzes along 2016.

### Data Processing

Descriptive analyses and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were used, respectively to characterize and compare mean scores of working variables. Further, K-means cluster analysis was used to characterize the job strain/burnout profile of professional bus drivers. The scores of job strain, emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and professional efficacy were used as clustering variables. The effect of the bus drivers' job strain/burnout profile on their road incidents was tested using one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). All statistical analyses were performed using<sup>a</sup>IBM statistical package for social sciences, version 22.0.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the variables included in the study and the bivariate correlations between them. It was found that this sample of Colombian city bus drivers had an average of job strain slightly below the risk score (values  $>1.0$  indicates an unfavorable imbalance between demands and decision latitude). The average levels of exhaustion and cynicism were relatively high, but the average professional efficacy was not under averages presented by other studies. Job strain was negatively and significantly associated with professional efficacy. Indeed, professional efficacy was, at the same time, inversely correlated with cynicism and emotional exhaustion, the other two indicators of the MBI model.

### Job Strain, Health Indicators, and Working Hours of City Bus Operators

Within the sample of bus drivers who participated in the study, it was found that 40.54% of them have job strain (occupational stress indicator used by D/C model). The average age of drivers who present job strain is  $X = 41.64$  (SD = 11.04) years. Through ANOVA it was determined that, in terms of this variable, there are no statistically significant differences between drivers who present job strain and those without this risk factor ( $F_{(1,220)} = 0.96$ ;  $P = 0.754$ ).

In the case of this population, the mean of working hours was  $X = 15.25$  (SD = 1.82) hours per day. It were no significant differences between average hours weekly worked by drivers who

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations between the study variables**

Study variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Driving experience	18.40	9.42		0.835**	0.105	-0.239**	0.000	-0.094	0.117	-0.051	-0.084	0.094	0.137*	0.076
2. Age	41.16	11.02			0.108	-0.179**	-0.004	-0.137*	0.075	-0.134*	-0.082	0.102	0.105	0.108
3. BMI	26.58	3.07				-0.083	0.005	0.082	0.072	0.052	0.146*	0.102	0.086	0.198**
4. Road incidents	1.53	1.47					0.080	0.130	0.086	-0.149*	0.046	0.113	-0.004	0.013
5. Job strain	0.99	0.25						0.171*	0.044	0.052	0.014	-0.030	-0.144*	0.028
6. Emotional exhaustion	21.01	7.29							0.502**	-0.397**	0.024	-0.017	-0.027	0.035
7. Cynicism	17.88	7.48								-0.317**	-0.029	-0.016	0.097	-0.051
8. Professional efficacy	31.99	8.86									-0.069	-0.044	-0.057	0.073
9. Sedentarism (yes %)	59											0.035	0.142*	0.045
10. Hypertension (yes %)	8												0.264**	0.242**
11. Diabetes (yes %)	3													0.039
12. Dyslipidemia (yes %)	24													

\* $P < 0.05$ , \*\* $P < 0.01$ . BMI: Body mass index

have job strain was  $X = 100.12$  ( $SD = 12.66$ ), versus  $X = 97.82$  ( $SD = 14.33$ ) hours worked on average per week for drivers not presenting job strain ( $F_{(1,220)} = 1.51$ ;  $P = 0.22$ ).

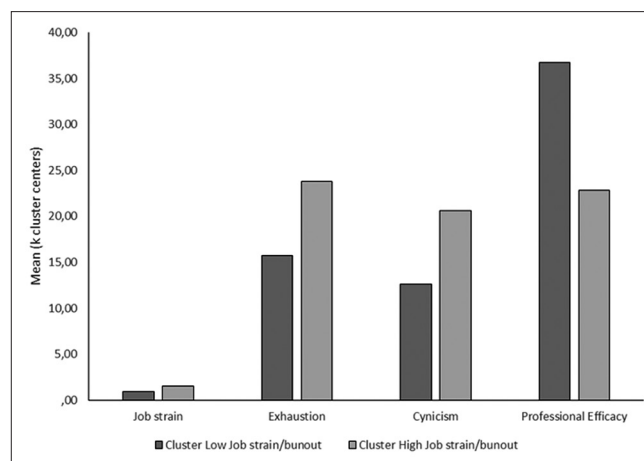
Regarding health indicators studied, some important findings should be mentioned there: First, only 20.8% of the sample of city bus operators perform constantly some type of physical activity, implying that 79.2% of them keep a sedentary lifestyle. It is identical to that of smokers (20.7%) percent. Nearly, 7.7% of participants suffering from hypertension; 2.7% of diabetes (without discriminating whether Type 1 or 2), and 1.4% from cancerous diseases.

## Cluster Analysis

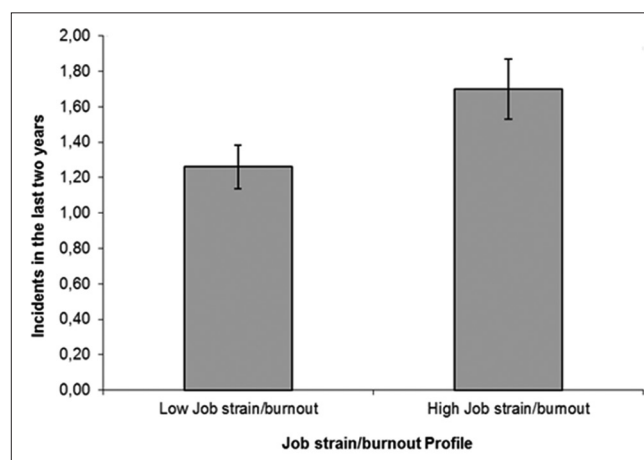
The cluster analysis produced two groups significantly different (low job strain/burnout:  $n = 34.3\%$  and high job strain/burnout:  $n = 65.7\%$ ). The solutions with a greater number of clusters did not show significant differences for all the classification variables, nor did form theoretically definable clusters. Figure 1 shows the means (centers of the clusters  $k$ ) of the classification variables used in the cluster analysis. The averages of job strain and cynicism were significantly lower in the profile named low job strain/burnout ( $F_{(1,216)} = 1.228$ ,  $P = 0.04$  and  $F_{(1,216)} = 74.27$ ,  $P = 0.00$ , respectively). Meanwhile, the average of professional efficiency was significantly higher in the low job strain/burnout profile than in the profile named high job strain/burnout ( $F_{(1,216)} = 269.1$ ,  $P = 0.00$ ).

## Bus Drivers' Job Strain/Burnout Profile and Road Incidents

ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect of the bus drivers' job strain/burnout profile on road incidents, after controlling for driving experience ( $F_{(2,216)} = 269.1$ ,  $P = 0.00$ ). Other documented covariates (age, sedentary behavior, hypertension, diabetes, dyslipidemia, and body mass index) were excluded from the analysis due to their non-significant associations with road incidents. In particular, the average of incidents was significantly higher in the high job strain/burnout profile ( $X = 1.7$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ) than in the low job strain/burnout profile ( $X = 1.2$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) [Figure 2].



**Figure 1: Job strain/burnout profiles of city bus drivers**



**Figure 2: Road incidents by job strain/burnout profiles**

## DISCUSSION

This study was aimed to investigate the job strain/burnout profile of bus drivers, and the association between their stress/burnout profile and the occurrence of road incidents. Interestingly, it was found that most of the Colombian bus drivers (65.7%) have a High job strain/burnout profile and that this group reports more road incidents (accidents + fines) in



comparison with the group of bus drivers with a low job strain/burnout profile. This results are consistent with the literature that points to the high psychosocial risk at work of bus drivers in comparison with other occupational groups [3,4], and with the evidence on the association between work stress, burnout, and negative organizational outcomes [10,37]. In particular, the aforementioned findings support the evidence that job strain and burnout are risk factors for road incidents in the public bus transport systems [5,8,47], occupation in which long working hours (as observed in the results) explain a risk increasing in terms of objective risk factors at work, such as in other high vulnerable groups [74-76].

Previous studies have found significant relationships between job strain and burnout [24]. However, little research has addressed the association between burnout and safety issues in the transport industry. Particularly, among the reviewed sources, only in one study it has been reported a significant direct effect of burnout on accident involvement among large vehicle drivers [77]. This study complements the findings by Chung and Wu providing specific evidence for the bus drivers' occupational group.

With regard to the relationship between the job DC model and road incidents, some research has found a positive association between job strain and road incidents in professional drivers. However, previous researches have failed to detect the association between job strain and driving performance in bus operators [58]. Other studies found indirect effects of work stress on road accidents through mediators such as fatigue [58,78-80] and health problems [5,81]. This study suggests that, in combination with burnout, job strain is significant as risk factor for road accidents among bus drivers.

In terms of accidents prevention, it has been found that the intervention of work stress can play a crucial role in the improvement of occupational safety [51,58,82-84]. However, occupational driving stress is a difficult issue to address, taking into account factors such as (a) the reluctance of transport companies to accept that some of their typical working conditions are associated with high work stress, and (b) the low perception of stress-related risk among professional drivers, linked to their high sense of personal efficacy in the driving tasks. Indeed, some studies have found that even being aware of presenting stress-related symptoms, and even disease, drivers tend to persist in the performance of their jobs [85,86].

Finally, it is worth discussing the health outcomes of the drivers who participated in the study. Numerous studies have discussed the relationship between physical and mental health indicators and road safety outcomes of city bus drivers [3,23,87]. Furthermore, some specific components of health such as individual habits (e.g. sleep, alcohol consumption, physical exercise) have been characterized as critical in coping with work stressors [5,8,82]. As observed in this study, there is a high prevalence of city bus drivers with adverse health habits, such as low physical inactivity (79.2%). These proportions result very high with respect to other occupational groups [88,89], factor which may be addressed also, to promote the occupational health

of workers, especially in occupations with a high prevalence of sedentary lifestyles, such as professional drivers [8,90,91].

In this sense, some studies have shown the interference of the physical and mental diseases on the performance of professional operators of public transport vehicles, proposing that occupational health promotion can substantially improve both traffic and safety in the transport industry [58,92,93]. Furthermore, it remains to mention that health promotion at work cannot only be understood as a positive discretionary action but as mandatory by law in the case of Colombian drivers. Health promotion and intervention of psychosocial factors at work should be adopted as a strategic action, aiming not only to reducing operational, economic costs (as traditionally it has been conceived), but also approaching to the protection and wellbeing of transport workers, road users, and transport systems' customers.

## CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the prevalence of occupational stress and burnout are significantly high among Colombian bus drivers. In addition, it was found that the bus drivers job strain/burnout profile is related to their performance behind the wheel. Therefore, the intervention on these factors represents a potentially successful alternative for the prevention of accidents and risk behaviors that lead to penalties and fines and represent very high costs for transport companies and the health systems.

## Limitations of the Study

Although the questionnaires used in this research have good reliability, remain vulnerable to self-report bias. The cross-sectional design did not allow inferring causality from the association between job strain/burnout and road incidents in bus drivers. Furthermore, the sampling strategy and sample size of the study limits the generalizability of the findings. The homogeneity of the sample does not allow the examination of demographic and occupational variables potentially associated with the bus driver's stress/burnout profile and traffic accidents such as gender, job position, and vehicle type [6]. In particular, gender has been poorly studied in bus drivers. The low female representation in the occupational group makes it difficult to design studies focused on gender differences. The limited evidence available suggests that women are more reactive to traffic and negative interactions with passengers [9], and have a higher rate of work absence [94]. On the other hand, abundant evidence suggests that men are more likely to take risks [95], and have a greater risk of traffic accidents than women [96]. In recent years, the number of women in the workforce has increased in both developed and developing countries. Therefore, more studies on gender, psychosocial risk factors at work and road incidents are required in female bus drivers.

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