

# Why truck drivers spread COVID-19

👤 The independent ⌚ May 18, 2020 📁 Cover Story, In The Magazine, The News Today



## What it means for taxis, bodaboda

**Kampala, Uganda | THE INDEPENDENT** | On average, each cross border truck driver in Uganda has contact with at least two sex partners per week, according to research.

Given that over 31,588 long distance truck drivers are estimated by researchers to be living in Uganda at any given time, the numbers of sex contacts of truck drivers can be staggering. That poses grave danger in the country's battle to contain the coronavirus disease COVID-19.

In her address to the nation on May 14, the Minister of Health, Dr. Jane Ruth Aceng said the rapid assessment survey done in the country showed that there is no COVID-19 transmission within the Ugandan community. Another 303 community samples tested were found negative for COVID-19.

But on the day Dr. Aceng spoke, the Ministry of Health announced 21 new COVID-19 cases from 1,593 samples of truck drivers. The new COVID-19 cases were truck drivers from Ugandan, Kenyan, Tanzania, and South Sudan. They pushed the total number of COVID-19 cases to 160 in Uganda.

"Uganda's coronavirus risk, for now, remains cross-border truck drivers," she said.

Long-distance truckers and other transport workers are known to be a risk in acquiring and spreading infectious diseases; especially sexually transmitted diseases, and are now being considered to be contributing to the spread of COVID-19 along trucking routes.

## Beyond targeting truckers

The situation is worsened because the truck drivers mainly make sex contact with female sex workers who are another equally high risk group. According to the research, a female sex worker has contact with seven truck drivers a week; that is a different truck driver every day.

Apart from the sex workers, truck drivers make contact with many other people along the routes they ply. Studies have shown that people living in the vicinity of truck stops along major highway corridors tend to have higher prevalence of communicable diseases like HIV/AIDS than the general community population.

The high risk of COVID-19 spread that truck drivers pose is mainly because of their high mobility. Earlier studies on HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) prevalence among long-distance truck drivers from East and Central Africa have shown that prostitutes, truck drivers and other highly mobile populations, characteristically have multiple sex partners.

Apart from Long Distance Truck Drivers and sex workers, the other highly mobile groups in Uganda are the taxi operators and the boda-boda motorcycle taxi operators. The government on March 25 banned taxi and bodaboda operation. As the Ministry of Health signaled that there would be no extension past expiry of the latest lockdown on May 18, focus was on whether taxis and bodaboda would be allowed to resume operation in the phased lifting. That decision is not easy to make.

There are relatively few studies conducted on disease spread among and by local transportation workers, such as taxi drivers and boda bodas. There is one titled "High-risk motorcycle taxi drivers in the HIV/AIDS era: a respondent-driven sampling survey in Kampala, Uganda" done in 2014.



This study found that although 60% commercial motorcycle drivers in Kampala were not married, up to 52% had at least one child. They also had a higher HIV prevalence than population estimates for men. Overall, 7.5% were infected compared to an HIV prevalence of 4.5 % and 4.1% for men in Kampala. The prevalence of syphilis, 6.2%, was about twice that of the syphilis prevalence of 3% among men and women.

This indicates that bodaboda are at greater risk for acquiring and transmitting diseases than the general population. But these are old studies done on HIV/Aids. They can only offer windows of conjecture about what could possibly be happening with COVID-19, which is not even a sexually transmitted disease. A bodaboda rider from Wakiso District was among the 11 positive cases of Covid-19 declared in early April. That single case led to contact tracing of at least 38 cases.

Truckers, bodaboda and taxi drivers and sex workers pose COVID-19 risks for different reasons. The high risk of truck drivers is attributed to transactional sex that occurs due to pro-longed time away from families or partners.

This makes it inevitable that the Long Distance Truck Drivers (LDTDs) will solicit sex along transport routes. And sex workers are usually their target.

The sex workers are driven to enter the risky business because of poverty, according to many researches done. As national-level income inequalities grow, women along transport routes and are poor and unemployed turn to sex work as a means for survival.

The meeting between the truckers and sex workers is once again proving to be the perfect combustive mixture for COVID-19 as it has been for other diseases such as HIV/AIDS in the past.

And so the numbers of COVID-19 infections continue rising, day-by-day, mainly fuelled by infections among tested cross border truck drivers.

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The infection rates, although low compared to figures from other regions; especially Europe and the Americas hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, are causing fear and panic. The infection among truck drivers compares very unfavourably with the negligible numbers of infections among tested samples of members of the local communities in Uganda.

And the numbers reeled off daily by Minister of Health on her twitter handle @JaneRuth\_Aceng appear to confirm the worst case scenario:

Today, 14 May, 2020, 21 new COVID-19 cases confirmed from 1,593 samples of truck drivers. This brings the total number of COVID-19 cases to 160 in Uganda. The new cases include: Ugandans, Kenyans, Tanzanians and South Sudanese who arrived via Mutukula, Busia and Elegu borders. All 303 community samples have tested negative for COVID-19.

Today, 13 May, 2020, 13 new COVID-19 cases confirmed from 1,741 samples of truck drivers bringing the total number of COVID-19 cases to 139.

The new cases are 7 Ugandans, 5 Kenyans and 1 Eritrean who arrived from Tanzania, South Sudan and Kenya via Mutukula, Elegu and Malaba.

Today, 12 May, 2020, 4 new COVID-19 cases confirmed from 1,478 samples of truck drivers. This brings the total number of COVID-19 cases to 126 in Uganda. The new cases include: 2 Ugandans, 1 Kenyan who arrived via Elegu and 1 Tanzanian who arrived via Mutukula border.

Today, 11 May, 2020, 1 new COVID-19 case confirmed from 2,296 samples of truck drivers. This brings the total number of COVID-19 cases to 122 in Uganda. The new case is a Ugandan truck driver who arrived from Juba via Elegu. All 558 community samples tested negative for COVID-19.

## Confusion in EAC

The Ministry of Health on April 28 launched a rapid assessment survey of the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic in communities. The survey targeted market vendors, truck drivers and communities along their routes, border crossing points and local communities, health workers, and the security forces among others.

The investigation teams were taking a blood samples and nose and throat swabs from individuals to test for the novel coronavirus.

According to the ministry, the survey results were to be released on May 4, with subsequent decisions to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. The results were eventually released on May 14. Minister Aceng said out of 14,061 participants of the targeted 23,000 samples, only four sporadic cases tested positive including; two police officers, a Ugandan student returnee from Bukoba in Tanzania and a truck driver in Rakai. She said that translated to just 0.03% community transmission in Uganda.

From the rapid assessment survey there is indeed no COVID-19 transmission within the Ugandan community, Aceng said.

Uganda has since March when the first COVID-19 case was registered instituted a series of measures to contain the virus' spread. Among the measures has been a lockdown to limit public interaction, banning all public gatherings and closing schools. So far the country has registered low levels of infection compared to other countries, but that could be down to the low levels of testing, especially at the community level.

That has left easy to target clusters as the main contributors to known infections. First it was the air travel arrivals at the only international airport at Entebbe and now it is the cross-border Long Distance Truck drivers.

On April 24, Members of Parliament asked the government to get tougher on curbing the increasing number of coronavirus by truck drivers crossing into the country. The MPs said the high cases were likely to lead to increased spread of the virus within Uganda, especially if the truck drivers interact with many people along the routes that they ply. Uganda had just recorded the highest single day number of infections, 11, in one day.

"The new cases from truck drivers are worrying," said Budama South MP, Jacob Oboth Oboth, "The border districts are vulnerable to the truck drivers whose inter-personal relations are not-questionable and likely to cause danger to the country."

Many MPs demanded that truck drivers are first tested in their countries of origin and given certification of clearance for COVID-19 before departing for Uganda. They said should apply to all East African Community (EAC) member states.

Many truck drivers enter Uganda from Kenya through Malaba, Busia and and Tanzania through Mutukula border posts.

Increasing tests at the borders have led to delays and rising confusion among the East African Community member states about how best to test the drivers without causing additional problems.

During the second national prayers hosted at State House Entebbe on May 09, President Yoweri Museveni announced that the leaders of Kenya, Tanzania, South Sudan and Rwanda and Uganda were in talks to have a common position for drivers to be tested where they are coming from. He said instead of testing at the border, the joint teams of the four countries and their health teams will test the truck drivers before they take off from their countries of origin.

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## Sex workers and truckers

There has also been a focus on the hotspots of Long Distance Truck Drivers. A hotspot is defined as an area along the transport corridor that is frequented by truckers and sex workers and which is usually characterised by high levels of commercial sex.

Hotspots are typically trading centres along transport corridors where truckers park for the night; a typical hotspot can have more than 100 trucks parked at night.

An earlier study titled "Sexual risk behaviours, condom use and sexually transmitted infection treatment-seeking behaviours among female sex workers and truck drivers in Uganda" was conducted at 12 hotspots along two major transport corridors in Uganda (the northern corridor (Busia/Malaba–Katuna) and Kampala –Bibia).

Seven hotspots were surveyed on the northern corridor (Busia, Malaba, Lugazi, Lukaya, Lyantonde, Ruti and Katuna) and five hotspots on Kampala–Bibia route (Arua Park, Bweyale, Karuma, Gulu and Bibia).

The study found that on average, sex workers had 28 partners in 30 days while truckers reported an average of seven partners. UP to 94% of sex workers and 87% of truckers reported condom use in the past month; however, only 21% of truckers and 45% of sex workers reported using condoms consistently during that time.

More than half of truckers reported that they suffered from STIs in the past year, and 93% of sex workers and 92.9% of truckers sought treatment for STIs in the past year. Of these, 78% of truckers and 86% of sex workers sought treatment at least three days following recognition of symptoms. These findings suggest that sex workers and truckers engage in high-risk sexual behaviours characterised by multiple sexual partnerships, low consistent condom use and delayed treatment-seeking behaviours.

Other earlier studies on HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) prevalence among long-distance truck drivers from East and Central Africa have shown that prostitutes, truck drivers and other highly mobile populations, characteristically have multiple sex partners.

One study done in Kenya found that 18% of 331 truck drivers who participated tested positive for HIV. Additionally, 4.6% tested positive for syphilis, and 4.5% and 4.3% suffered from urethral discharge. The study found no difference in the HIV prevalence rate between married and single men.

Older drivers were more likely to be infected with HIV than younger drivers, with the age group of 40-49 having the highest prevalence rate. The participants' ages ranged from 18-61 years, with a mean age of 31 years. Researchers suspect that this is due to the fact that older drivers have been exposed longer and have more money with which to purchase sex. The report concluded that truck drivers constitute a high risk group, and should be targeted accordingly.

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