

The UBER WORKPLACE *in* D.C.



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

*Kalmanovitz Initiative
for Labor and the Working Poor*



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Executive Summary

The on-demand ride-hailing industry presents challenges for its new workforce. These include: drivers not knowing how much they earn; increased financial risk and debt; and dangers to health and safety. In keeping with the mission of the Kalmanovitz Initiative for Labor and the Working Poor to advance public policy that improves workers' lives, this report about a two-year investigation of the working conditions of 40 Uber drivers in the Washington, D.C. area reveals that:

- 1. Uber drivers do not know how much they earn or lose.**
 - 100% of drivers experienced difficulties with, or barriers to, calculating their actual compensation.
- 2. Data about the Uber workplace is limited.**
 - Regulators and researchers do not have access to basic information about labor conditions.
- 3. Uber drivers are encouraged to take on financial risk and debt.**
 - 33% of drivers took on debt as a result of their work on the ride-hailing platform.
- 4. Uber drivers report challenges to their health and safety.**
 - 30% of drivers reported physical assaults or safety concerns.
- 5. Despite these challenges, the Uber workplace remained attractive.**
 - 50% of drivers would recommend the job to a friend.
 - 45% of drivers planned to keep working the job for at least six more months.

Introduction

Municipal officials and civil leaders in cities across the USA are grappling with the unexpected arrival and rapid growth of new chauffeur services that use smartphone technologies to dispatch drivers on-demand. These new services — the most visible of which is Uber — have drawn no shortage of media attention. But the labor challenges that this new industry presents have gone relatively unnoticed, especially in Washington, D.C. What are the impacts of these new chauffeur services on their drivers?

To answer this question, we spent two years examining data about 40 individual drivers who entered and, in some cases, left the Uber workplace in the Washington, D.C. area. Through analysis of transcribed interviews and detailed surveys, this qualitative dataset suggests several challenges that the Uber workplace presents for its drivers. From this investigation, we make recommendations to community organizations, residents, and city officials so they can address the identified challenges and consider interventions to improve labor conditions in the on-demand ride-hailing industry.

Background and Legislative History

Uber first appeared in Washington, D.C. in 2011 as a modified black car service; licensed livery drivers provided on-demand trips in luxury sedans. These drivers, who underwent regular screenings and paid registration fees, were considered independent contractors or, in company speak, “partners,” who used the Uber app to connect with potential riders. This arrangement was similar to existing patterns in the black car industry except that Uber allowed customers to book trips using an app on their smartphone and to pay for the service through the same app. This new option meant that customers and drivers never exchanged cash. While traditional livery services in the city were required to set rates based on elapsed time alone, Uber’s car service set fares based on hours and distance, and instituted dynamic pricing -- a pricing model that allowed Uber to increase fares during particular times of the day. In addition, Uber allowed customers to track the location of their requested vehicles.

In 2013 Uber expanded on its operation in D.C. with the rollout of UberX. Whereas Uber’s black car service worked with drivers already licensed, UberX opened the door to any individual with a private automobile and a regular driver’s license. As a low-cost alternative to local taxis, UberX enjoyed almost immediate popularity and turned the city into one of the company’s top five markets in the country.¹

1 Hall, Jonathan and Alan Krueger. 2018. An analysis of the labor market for Uber’s driver-partners in the United States. *International Labor Relations Review* 71(3), 705-732.

Opposition to UberX came largely from two sources: the taxi lobby and the disability rights community. The primary issue objection of the taxi lobby was that UberX created unfair competition; unlike taxi drivers, UberX drivers were not required to undergo regular screenings and pay registration fees, giving them an unfair advantage. For D.C. based disability activists, the objection was one of accessibility. UberX drivers were not required and generally did not comply with the America's with Disabilities Act (ADA) by providing comparable service to disabled clients.

In 2014 the D.C. Council adopted regulations to govern Transportation Network Companies (TNCs), a new category used by the Council to describe Uber, Lyft, and the now-defunct Sidecar. The Vehicle for Hire Innovation Amendment Act of 2014 ("VHIAA") required background checks, set general vehicle standards, mandated insurance coverage, and arranged for the collection of 1% of gross receipts for all UberX rides provided in the city. Under the VHIAA, regulatory authority over TNCs was delegated to the Department of For Hire Vehicles, a new entity that replaced the D.C. Taxi Commission and one whose powers were limited. The Department is prohibited from requiring companies to submit a list or inventory of vehicles or operators. Reports on

safety and consumer protection are prohibited from public release. Finally, journalists, researchers, and policymakers may not use the federal Freedom of Information Act to access basic information about the operation of TNCs in its jurisdiction.

In subsequent years, Uber released a series of related services: UberPool, UberXL; UberSUV; and UberFamily. In each of these iterations, drivers are paid a portion of their customer's fare. The portion varies based on Uber's commission, incentive programs, and applicable fees.

In 2018 the D.C. Council approved a 6% tax on TNC services to support Metro, and passed a data-sharing requirement for ride-hailing services. The Private Vehicle-For-Hire Data Sharing Amendment Act of 2018 requires quarterly transmissions of data on: numbers of drivers; trip location pick-ups and drop-offs; dates and times of ride requests, pick-ups and drop-offs; total miles driven by drivers enroute to a pick-up and during a ride (but not while waiting for a ride request); and average fares and distances driven. These pending datasets remain exempted from FOIA. In addition, the legislation notes that data may be requested *only* in relation to transportation planning and public safety — not, for instance, in relation to labor standards or disabled rider access.

Existing Research

This report builds upon previous studies about how, if at all, digital technologies affect working conditions and adhere to current labor standards. Scholars have begun to examine whether and where digitally-mediated labor platforms create more instability and precarity for workers than traditional service jobs.² In a study of workers on the Task Rabbit platform for on-demand errands, sociologists Juliet Schor and William Attwood-Charles of Boston College found that traditional labor protections were eroded.³ Legal scholar Valerino De Stefano of the University of Leuven concluded that stable incomes are “a mirage” for most platform workers.⁴ Tax policy experts at American University found that half of on-demand workers surveyed did not understand their tax filing obligations or available deductions, credits, and liabilities.⁵ Studies about the emotional labor and unpaid aspects of on-demand work, social isolation, disciplining mechanisms, and gamification have expanded this literature

about the costs and benefits of platform work.⁶

In a foundational study about the ride-hailing industry, University of California-Hastings law professor Veena Dubal documents how the burdens that San Francisco ride-hailing drivers bear are *greater than* those of taxi drivers in terms of the costs of wear and tear on vehicles, gas, and insurances.⁷ On the particularities of Uber, researcher Alex Rosenblat meticulously mapped the company’s opaque algorithmic and semi-automated management system, and traced many of the ways in which Uber collects enormous amounts of data from its drivers, even during the “dead mile” period when drivers are not being paid.⁸ Uber’s app, for instance, uses acceleration sensors to track speeding and breaking. More importantly, Rosenblat’s work shows the full control that Uber has to change the pay rates of drivers through their ever-changing price algorithms.

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- 2 Pasquale, Frank. 2016. Two narratives of platform capitalism. *Yale Law & Policy Review* 35, 309-319; Scholz, Trebor. 2017. *Uberworked and Underpaid: How Workers Are Disrupting the Digital Economy*. Cambridge, UK and Malden, USA: Polity Press; Slee, Tom. 2017. *What's Yours is Mine: Against the Sharing Economy*. Or Books; Hill, Steven. 2015. *Raw Deal: How the “Uber Economy” and Runaway Capitalism Are Screwing American Workers*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press; Rogers, Brishen. 2015. The social costs of Uber. *University of Chicago Law Review Dialogue* 82, 85-102; Horan, Hubert. 2017. Will the growth of Uber increase economic welfare. *Transportation Law Journal* 44, 33-105; Ravenelle, Alexandra. 2019. *Hustle and Gig: Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy*. UC Press: Oakland, CA.
 - 3 Schor, Juliet and William Attwood-Charles. 2017. The “sharing” economy: labor, inequality, and social connection on for-profit platforms. *Sociology Compass* 11(8), e12493.
 - 4 De Stefano, Valerio. 2015. The rise of the just-in-time workforce: On-demand work, crowdwork, and labor protection in the gig-economy. *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal* 37, 471-507.
 - 5 Bruckner, Caroline. 2016. *Shortchanged: The tax compliance challenges of small business operators driving the on-demand platform economy*. Washington, D.C.: Kogod Tax Policy Center. Available: <http://www.american.edu/kogod/news/Shortchanged.cfm>
 - 6 Wood, Alex, Graham, Mark, Lehdonvirta, Vili, and Isis Hjorth. 2018. Good gig, bad gig: Autonomy and algorithmic control in the global gig economy. *Work, Employment, and Society* 33(1), 56-75; Shapiro, Aaron. 2018. Between autonomy and control: Strategies of arbitrage in the “on-demand” economy. *new media & society*, 20(8), 2954-2971.
 - 7 Dubal, Veena. 2017. The drive to precarity: A political history of work, regulation, and labor advocacy in San Francisco’s taxi and Uber economics. *Berkeley Journal of Employment & Labor Law* 38, 73-135.
 - 8 Rosenblat, Alex. 2018. *Uberland: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Rules of Work*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press; see also Rosenblat, Alex and Luke Stark. 2015. Algorithmic labor and information asymmetries: A case study of Uber’s drivers. Available: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2686227; Calo, Ryan and Alex Rosenblat. 2017. The taking economy: Uber, information, and power. *Columbia Law Review*, 1623-1690.

This emerging set of research suggests that digitally-mediated labor platforms, the most visible of which is Uber, are part of a long-term erosion of worker rights and an on-going shift of risk from employers to low-wage workers.⁹ Labor platforms have been found to bolster the immunity of labor intermediaries, expand managerial control over workers, and orchestrate a sense of “fungibility and superfluity” with the platform workforce.¹⁰ Rather than a disrupter — to use the classic market language of innovation — platform applications may actually reinforce and exacerbate existing inequalities in the labor market.¹¹

Methodology

In 2016 the research team conducted and transcribed 40 interviews with self-identified Uber drivers in the D.C. area. Since all Uber drivers are rated after each trip, and since drivers can be kicked off the platform if their rating falls below 4.5 out of 5 stars, the possibilities for coercion are numerous and factored extensively into research design. The researchers did not conduct interviews or surveys while riding as passengers in an Uber ride so as not to shape a participant’s answers by the promise of a good rating.

The research team enlisted drivers through UberPeople, an online forum for D.C.-based Uber drivers. The 40 interviews were conducted almost entirely in person (38) at public libraries or coffee shops in the Washington, D.C. region and were roughly an hour in length. Questions for drivers, who received a small financial reward for their participation, ranged from the broad to the specific. In addition to exploring drivers’ motivations, work histories, and feelings about Uber as a company, the questions explored the more quotidian elements of the job — from daily routines and strategies for making money, to the basic nature of the labor process itself. Demographic, education, and household financial information from 34 of these 40 drivers was collected through a short

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- 9 Kessler, Sarah. 2018. *Gigged: The end of the job and the future of work*. St. Martin’s Press; Ticona, Julia, Mateescu, Alexandra, and Alex Rosenblat. 2018. *Beyond disruption: How tech shapes labor across domestic work and ride-hailing*. A report from Data & Society. Available: <https://datasociety.net/initiatives/future-of-labor/mapping-inequalities-across-the-on-demand-economy/>
- 10 Van Doorn, Niels. 2017. Platform labor: on the gendered and racialized exploitation of low-income service work in the ‘on-demand’ economy. *Information, Communication & Society* 20(6), 898-914; see also Tomassetti, Julia. 2016. Does Uber redefine the firm? The postindustrial corporation and advanced information technology. *Hofstra Labor & Employment Law Journal* 34(1), 1-78. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2763797>;
- 11 Berg, Janine, and Hannah Johnston. 2019. Too Good to Be True? A Comment on Hall and Krueger’s Analysis of the Labor Market for Uber’s Driver-Partners. *ILR Review* 72(1), 39-68.

online survey. These demographics largely mirror estimates found in Uber-sponsored studies of the ride-hailing industry.¹² Forty-eight percent of the drivers self-identified as people of color. The ages of drivers ranged from 23-60, with an average of 39. Three-fourths of the drivers were born in the U.S. The remainder emigrated from Ethiopia, Nigeria, Cameroon, the United Kingdom, Peru, and South Korea. The drivers in this study were 80% male and generally well-educated; only five drivers had not attended any college while 14 drivers had attended or completed graduate school.

The drivers that participated in this study are not representative of all drivers everywhere or even those in the D.C. area. But the data collected and reviewed here is evidence of the structures of work that Uber drivers navigate and the kinds of worker challenges that many face in one of the most visible platform workplaces. To contextualize these findings, this report draws on analyses of policy documents and media reports and field observations around the region, including airport TNC lots and an Uber “green light” hub.

Case Study

DEBT

Aman¹³, an Ethiopian immigrant living in Washington, D.C., took out a \$35,000 loan to purchase a Lincoln Town Car in 2012 after he had been approved to drive for Uber Black, the brand-new private car service. At the time he drove a taxi, which meant he already had the chauffeur license that was then required to drive for Uber Black. In five or six hours of driving for Uber Black, he earned what would have taken him eight hours in a taxi. But not long after he took out the loan for the Lincoln Town Car, Uber changed a policy about how old cars could be. The Lincoln Town Car no longer qualified for Uber Black. He and his peers in the Ethiopian community who were facing similar situations unsuccessfully contested the new policy:

*The thing is, we don't have union, and nobody going to listen to us, and we just accepted whatever they [Uber] say. So we don't have any choice to fight with these people. They're millionaires, they have the money, so they can do what they want, and there's no competition. And nobody going to listen to us, so we don't have anybody, so what can you do? Nothing.*¹⁴

Aman tried driving instead for UberX, the new low-cost option for which his car did qualify, but even after a 16-hour workday he did not earn enough to make his car payments and the \$40 weekly fee to Uber for a phone. The following year, Aman moved several times and ultimately filed for bankruptcy.

12 Hall, Jonathan and Alan Krueger. 2018. An analysis of the labor market for Uber's driver-partners in the United States. *International Labor Relations Review* 71(3), 705-732.

13 All names of drivers in this paper are pseudonyms.

14 Interview with authors, 23 May 2016

In all, 33% of the Uber drivers we interviewed experienced this “debt trap,” whereby they took significant financial risks and incurred debt to get the chance to earn a wage. Drivers invested upfront nearly all of the costs of running a car service: the vehicle itself, maintenance, gas, insurance, and taxes. On top of that they incurred tolls, parking tickets, dead miles (the distance driven while going to pick-up a passenger), safety devices (dash cameras and mace), and rider extras (water and mints). For drivers who had full-time salaries, the financial risks felt negligible. For the majority in this study, however, the financial risks required to work as an Uber driver were palpable and a topic of concern in interviews. Half of the drivers in this study reported monthly household incomes of \$2,000 or less, which is below the federal poverty line. A driver named Diana, who had an annual income of less than \$30,000, said that she did not know how she would afford the \$1,200 needed to fix her steering wheel that had been damaged during an Uber ride. She worried about the car’s safety, but kept driving for Uber in hopes of earning enough to get it fixed.

One 48-year old driver, Joan, got caught up in Uber’s debt trap after she hit a pothole and damaged her car’s suspension system.¹⁵ She spent nearly all the money she had to get the car fixed. Then, when efforts to repair the vehicle failed, she spent more to lease a car from Uber. While the Uber Xchange program offered lower credit barriers than traditional lenders, the payments which Uber automatically deducted from drivers’ paychecks, were high. It resembled a company

town. Joan paid \$138, more than the national lease average of \$100 per week. Before she worked for Uber, Joan would collect giveaway items from Craigslist and re-sell them on eBay or at flea markets. Her regular income of roughly \$35,000 as a school bus driver covered her mortgage but not groceries for herself and her son. Joan started driving for Uber a couple nights after work, making for 16-hour days. But within a year Joan quit Uber and returned the car. Even after driving six to seven days per week, she found herself behind on bills.

Three other drivers in this study participated in Uber’s Xchange leasing program. For one of these women, Beatrice, the debt she took on to drive for Uber did not seem so different from that to which she was accustomed.¹⁶ She had worked for the past seven years as a contractor without benefits in the asbestos removal industry. Before that, she had jobs in daycares, at restaurants, and as a cross-country truck driver. In the week before we met, Beatrice drove for Uber for 14 hours. After Uber took out its 25% commission and booking fees, she earned about \$300. Then she took out her weekly expenses of \$170 for the lease and \$63 for the vehicle insurance. What these expenses meant was Beatrice had netted less than \$5 per hour. Moreover, these rates meant that if Beatrice continued to drive for Uber, she would have \$12,040 worth of annual expenses in addition to the costs of gas and vehicle maintenance, which could be significant as she put 3,000 miles on her car in the last month alone.

¹⁵ Interview with authors, 5 August 2016

¹⁶ Interview with authors, 1 August 2016

The costs of Joan and Beatrice's subprime leases were exorbitant. According to the Federal Trade Commission, Uber regularly deceived drivers about these costs.¹⁷ A Massachusetts Attorney General found that Uber's former lender charged higher-than-allowed interest rates to drivers in low-income communities.¹⁸ The leasing program looked similar to subprime mortgages, which preyed on people of color. That Joan, and Beatrice happened to be black women makes the parallel even starker. At the end of 2017, Uber phased out its in-house leasing program. But the company still advertises third-party leases at similar rates to drivers.

A SLIPPERY WAGE

The Uber workplace involves a complex and difficult-to-track set of earnings and expenses, which we call a “*slippery wage*.” When we asked a 53-year old Uber driver named Suzanna about her weekly pay, she said, “It’s really hard to talk about that because it changes every time they change the rules.”¹⁹ Like the rest of the drivers we interviewed, Suzanna didn’t know how much she earned or lost. The fluctuating algorithms on which pay is based and the numerous expenses drivers must deduct made it difficult for all 40 drivers in our study to make sense of their overall compensation. Sung-ho, 45-year old South Korean immigrant who worked as a freelance blogger, described how the novelty of being able to drive his car wore off when he tried to figure out his expenses:

Hey, it’s a great feeling. It’s great at first. But ultimately when you weigh in the cost of the gas, the maintenance... To be profitable on Uber, you’ve got to be driving a beat-up car or a used Prius or something like that, where you don’t have as much fuel expenses.... You can’t offer mints, waters, none of that stuff.²⁰

It’s really hard to talk about [the pay] because it changes every time they change the rules.

– Suzanna



17 *Los Angeles Times*. 2017, 20 January. Uber pays \$20 million to settle claims it deceived drivers about pay. Available: <https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-tn-uber-ftc-20170120-story.html>

18 Fernandes, Deirdre. 2015, November 5. Santander auto-loan unit to pay back \$5.4m. *Boston Globe*. Available: <https://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2015/11/05/santander-agrees-million-settlement-over-high-auto-loan-rates/Nc1pZuFeh8WR18RpnLJjul/story.html>

19 Interview with authors, 10 August 2016

20 Interview with authors, 24 August 2016

Diana did not know how she would afford the \$1,200 needed to fix her steering wheel that had been damaged during an Uber ride. She worried about the car's safety, but kept driving for Uber in hopes of earning enough to get it fixed.



Harry Campbell, a top blogger of the ride-hailing industry, estimates that drivers need 20 pieces of information to calculate their earnings.²¹ But the rules and details of work for Uber change, sometimes hourly. Since it has been operating in Washington, D.C., Uber has reduced its base rate for drivers several times, added a rider safety fee (and then increased it, calling it a booking fee), and raised the commission it takes from new drivers. These changes, which are built into the heart of the Uber platform, seem to have a point: to keep Uber drivers on the road and in the dark. As one driver put it, the Uber workplace is a system of “smoke and mirrors.”²² Of the 40 drivers in this study, 83% knew what percentage of their fares Uber took but 38% did not know how Uber determined the amount drivers took home on a single fare (whether, for instance, the booking fee is removed before or after Uber takes its commission), whether they were required to buy commercial insurance, or how tax filing worked at the end of the year. This varying degree of knowledge about compensation details could have been expected if the majority of drivers in our study were new to the Uber platform. But they were not. Seventy percent of the drivers in this study had worked on the Uber platform for at least seven months.²³

Suzanna, discussed above, put it this way: “You’d be better off working at McDonald’s.”²⁴ She had worked for most of her life as a writer. When she was laid off from her last job as an editor for a financial news service during the Great Recession, she was shocked that she could not get another one. She spent the next few years taking care of her sick father and helping her mother run, and then close, a baby furniture store. Her deceased husband had worked for the federal government so she and her son, who has special needs, did not have to worry about how unemployment affected their access to health insurance: “Being a widow sucks, but if you’re going to be a widow, be the widow of a federal employee.” Similarly, 53% of the drivers in this study

21 Campbell, Harry. 2017. “How to calculate per mile earnings instead of per hour.” Blog post. Available: <https://therideshareguy.com/how-to-calculate-per-mile-earnings-instead-of-per-hour>

22 Interview of Uber driver Bert with authors, 24 August 2016

23 Of course, what it means to work for Uber can vary. Some drivers worked every week; others offered rides only occasionally. And all had the possibility to sign out of the platform for three weeks and then to sign back in.

24 Interview with authors, 10 August 2016

had access through other jobs to benefits, including health care, paid vacation, or sick days.

At the time that we spoke with Suzanna, she had been driving for Uber for about a year. On Friday and Saturday nights, she generally drove from 6pm or 7pm until 3am or 4am. But, these long hours did not mean that she would actually get a steady stream of passengers, earn a profit, or stay out of the kind of significant debt that beset Aman and Joan. Suzanna explained: “Even if you do everything right, you can have a night where you make almost nothing. It’s very much luck of the draw.” She said she would be “terrified” if Uber were her only source of income; on weekdays she was a contract inspector for potential housing foreclosures, another unpredictable, low-wage job.

PLATFORM RETENTION

Given the various constraints and risks outlined in this report, the Uber workplace remained attractive to half of the drivers in this study who thought they would recommend the job to a friend. A similar number of participants (45%) said that they planned to work on the platform for at least six more months from the time of their participation in this study. Fifty-six percent of drivers said they were attracted to the platform because of its flexible work hours. For 90% of drivers, their goal when they started on the platform was to add to existing income. Below are some of the explanations that point to the flexibility of the platform as its strength and the desires on the part of drivers to supplement their incomes.

Ajay: “It’s flexible. I have two boys. I’m divorced. And it gives me a chance to kind of be [there] for them, like during the summers, for example, and work around the schedule.”²⁵

Zaki: “The extra [money from Uber] is money I wouldn’t have otherwise. I can get a job as a bartender, but then I would have a set schedule. I’d have to work certain evenings, and I wouldn’t like that. I like my weekend nights.... If I had a regular job I would say I don’t have as much flexibility, which is one reason I would say Uber is awesome. You do create your own schedule. It’s very flexible. You do whatever you want to do with your time. That’s the one positive thing I’ll say about it.”²⁶

Dwayne: “If I wanted to work at Starbucks, I would have to have a schedule, if I wanted to work anywhere else. So really that’s the only big benefit that I have. I work when I want, and if I want to take off a month or whatever, I’m fine.”²⁷

Samuel: “I can turn it off whenever I want, so if I’m out driving one night and I have a client that calls in and needs something, I just turn it off and go take care of what they do, and if it’s not too late for me or whatever then I just turn it back on and go get some more rides. I think the flexibility is a huge bonus for that.”²⁸

These responses complicate the picture of the Uber workplace, but they do not negate the concerns expressed earlier. For many drivers the possibility of employment that is both flexible and stable is enticing and worth pursuing. The question before civic leaders and municipal officials is how to balance the flexibility that

²⁵ Interview with authors, 25 August 2016

²⁶ Interview with authors, 28 June 2016

²⁷ Interview with authors, 26 August 2016

²⁸ Interview with authors, 19 May 2016

I don't pick up in southeast D.C. or [Prince George's] County because I don't know the area. It has nothing to do with racism, demographics, or anything like that.

– Rick



attracts Uber drivers while also addressing the workplace concerns of many of those same drivers. These concerns, which this report outlines, are often addressed in other workplaces by legislators who evaluate and regulate labor standards.

THE GAME OF WORK

The Uber drivers interviewed and surveyed in this study had no guarantees about how much they would earn, when there would be surge pricing, or whether they would come down with an illness and be unable to work. As became evident in our conversations and surveys with drivers, the conditions in the Uber workplace do not best resemble those of low-wage jobs in the retail and restaurant industries, temporary staffing agencies, or even digital workplaces for crowd-work. Instead the debt trap and slippery wage mean that the Uber workplace resembles a casino where drivers must pay-to-play the game of work. The Uber workplace is thick with elements of gamification, a behavior management strategy that uses gaming elements to encourage workers to be productive, but it moves beyond a mere game. Financial investments and debt are on the line. When drivers got into their cars, they routinely wondered whether they were going to make money.

Half of the drivers in this study discussed their work on the Uber platform as a game to be won. Sometimes the competition was against Uber. Suzanna, who we quote above, demonstrated this attitude:

In order to make any money, you have to figure out how to exploit the system that Uber's set up. It's [sighs] how do I even explain this in words? The mentality is not 'I'm going into business for myself.' It's 'I'm buying into this system and I'm going to do my best to trick that system.' That's what it's about.²⁹

Our exchange with Bert, a sixty-year old construction worker who had been laid off, echoed this perspective:

Bert: I found the way to defeat it. I will accept [Uber] Pool trips now, but I never get a second request.

Interviewer: How do you do that?

Bert: Turn [the audio recorder] off, I'll tell you.

²⁹ Interview with authors, 10 August 2016

Later in the conversation, after Bert had disclosed his secret, he spoke more about navigating Uber's conditions of work:

When the pope was visiting, they [Uber] were like, "It's going to be super busy, let us know if you're going to drive, we want you out, it's going to be super busy." They completely underestimated the business. There was absolutely no demand at all. But they had hundreds of drivers who signed up to drive who made nothing.... So there's this trend that says, if Uber says it's going to be busy, do the complete opposite.³⁰

A driver named Joe described a similar strategy of seeing the job as a game to be won: "It's the driver trying to outsmart Uber and Uber trying to outsmart the driver."³¹

Many drivers in this study also approached their job on the Uber platform as a competition against peers. One unexpected finding in this study was an articulation among drivers that they were smarter than their peers. Forty-five percent of the drivers we interviewed talked specifically about how intelligent *they* were — intelligent enough, each said, to defeat Uber's complex and ever-changing maze of rules. These drivers talked at length about how Uber stacked the rules of work against them, and expressed a mix of worry and empathy that many of their peers were unable to "win" at the rigged game of work. A 27-year-old driver named Rick demonstrated this perspective:

I don't want an hourly wage, because I think I can do better than the average driver, because I consider myself smarter and more efficient with my time. I don't want somebody to say, all right, we're going to pay for your gas and give you \$20/hour base, because I'd rather take that gamble.³²

Drivers acknowledged many of the risks involved in the Uber workplace, but described themselves as somehow exceptional: They believed that they had figured out how to make money while many others had not. Suzanna put it this way: "People that are not smart are really getting taken advantage of, and they don't think about the expensive operating costs."³³ That drivers did not know each other likely shaped this sense of superiority and the extent to which isolation is a fundamental socio-spatial relation of the Uber workplace. Forty-five percent of drivers we interviewed did not have any friends or acquaintances who worked for Uber when they began work on the platform. Another 40% knew *only one* friend or acquaintance who had worked for Uber. Even after working for Uber for some time, many drivers did not know any peers. There is no breakroom or gathering point in this workplace. The monthly meet-ups arranged on the UberPeople.net forum bring together fewer than two dozen drivers. Indeed, 75% of the drivers in this study said that they had never had a drink or meal with anyone else who had ever driven for Uber. The lack of physical space in which workers met or congregated creates a material barrier to collective identities and deeply shapes the geography of labor and possibilities for collective bargaining in the platform workplace.

³⁰ Interview with authors, 25 August 2016

³¹ Interview with authors, 19 May 2016

³² Interview with authors, 24 May 2016

³³ Interview with authors, 10 August 2016

Sometimes Friday nights I will work all through. Like I'll probably come home...hang out for a bit, hit the road, and then stay out [until] maybe 7am, 8am... Sometimes I find that I'll maybe do ten rides by 5am. And then go home, take a nap for 2-3 hours, shower, hit the road again in the afternoon, and then work again damn near all night.

- Ben



WORKER HEALTH AND SAFETY

The issue of safety in the Uber workplace was a concern for 30% of drivers. Hank, the stay-at-home father mentioned above, put it this way:

Who do you call if you need help? Should have a Taser in the car? Should you have anything? What are you going to do? What are your rights to say, "This is my car. Get out of the car"? They [Uber] don't do a lot. I mean, they got some stuff on the website about, "It's your right to kick people out of the car." Well, yeah. What am I going to do with four guys? That sort of support would be more helpful. A panic button in the app would be nice. Something like that.³⁴

Two drivers took steps to protect themselves, such as installing a dash camera or keeping a police-issued can of pepper spray within reach. But all drivers felt that Uber would not help them in the case of an emergency.

A driver named Yoni refused drugs from a passenger and was subsequently assaulted.³⁵ Olutun was robbed at gunpoint. He did not however, report the infraction to Uber or the local authorities for fear of deactivation.³⁶ Neither did a female driver named Anh who believed she had unwillingly delivered drugs.³⁷ Gary told us that he felt pressured into letting college-aged students carry open cups of alcohol into his car multiple times.³⁸ He did not want to get a bad rating by risking the passengers' ire and, he added, he did not always feel safe enough to ask them to pour out their drinks. Suzanna once confronted passengers who made her feel unsafe:

³⁴ Interview with authors, 18 July 2016

³⁵ Interview with authors, 10 August 2016

³⁶ Interview with authors, 12 May 2016

³⁷ Interview with authors, 10 August 2016

³⁸ Interview with authors, 12 August 2016

These two guys got in the car, and they're talking in Spanish about setting up an illegal poker game. They didn't know I understood Spanish. And they're asking me to go through red lights and stuff like that. No, I'm not going to do that. Then they started to get hostile. They started to talk trash to me. It got a bit threatening. I pulled over at a McDonald's, and I said, "You need to get out here."³⁹

Another driver named Ben stressed about leaving a passed-out passenger in a yard at her destination. He couldn't wake her up and there was no answer at the door.⁴⁰ The more time he spent wondering what to do, the more potential revenue he lost. Though questions of safety are often directed at passengers in the ride-hailing industry, this study reveals that physical threats and safety questions are pressing in Uber's new workplace.

A common refrain among 8 of the 40 drivers in this study was the motto to "work smarter, not harder." Yet many Uber drivers ended up working very long hours. Hank, a stay-at-home father, told us how he worked all day Saturdays, from 10am until 3am on Sunday.⁴¹ Olotun, a part-time security officer and father of two, worked similar shifts from Friday at 3pm until 7am on Saturday.⁴² Ben, a father of five with a full-time job in informational technology, worked even longer hours:

Sometimes Friday nights I will work all through. Like I'll probably come home...hang out for a bit, hit the road, and then stay out [until] maybe 7am, 8am... Sometimes I find that I'll maybe do ten rides by 5am. And then go home, take a nap for 2-3 hours, shower, hit the road again in the afternoon, and then work again damn near all night.⁴³

Long shifts like these were common among the drivers we interviewed, especially on weekends.

Another strategy Uber drivers used to attempt to mitigate risk and increase the likelihood of profits involved picking *where* to work (or not to work). Some drivers avoided picking up passengers in poor neighborhoods by turning off the Uber app or refusing a ride request. A white, sales representative explained, "I don't pick up in southeast D.C. or [Prince George's] County because I don't know the area. It has nothing to do with racism, demographics, or anything like that."⁴⁴ He said he prefers Arlington, where he lives, or other neighborhoods where he feels more comfortable and safe. Other drivers explained that they concentrate in wealthier neighborhoods because Uber provides them with opportunities to earn more in those parts of the region. Uber maintains that surge pricing reflects demand, which may well be the case, but this algorithmic pricing nonetheless shapes when and where drivers seek to work. The decisions of drivers to choose when and where to work also, in turn, shapes where ride-hailing services are

39 Interview with authors, 10 August 2016

40 Interview with authors, 9 August 2016

41 Interview with authors, 16 July 2016

42 Interview with authors, 12 May 2016

43 Interview with authors, 9 August 2016

44 Interview of Uber driver Rick with authors, 24 May 2016

available, raising questions about transportation equity.

Others like Gary, a 48-year old catering manager, said he focused less on where to work and more on *when* there was likely to be a “surge.” Surges, as he explained, occurred at distinct times and in distinct areas of the city. During a so-called “surge,” he might potentially double, triple, or even quadruple what he might make under normal conditions. For Gary, and 34 other drivers in our study, “chasing the surge” was a central strategy:

*I would drive right now if I could make the money. But now I know they're not offering incentives. It's slow. I wouldn't make any money. But if I knew I would get pings and it would be higher, I would drive right now... I'd drive during the day. I'd drive on weekends. I'd drive whenever I had time. I just don't drive if it's not going to make any money.*⁴⁵

Some drivers arranged their entire schedules around the hopes of encountering incentives. Anthony, a 35-year old high school teacher on summer break, worked a split shift of 7am to 10am and 4pm to 10pm. While Uber certainly made it possible for Anthony to choose *which* hours to drive, he reported that he could only make money during the particular hours in which Uber offered incentives. He was “free” to choose his schedule, but this choice had serious consequences for his earnings.

Forty-eight percent of drivers in our study reported that they valued their free time differently after working on the Uber platform. For a driver named Mark, whatever work-life balance he had struck largely disappeared after he signed up for Uber. On a normal day, Mark explained, he worked a thirteen-hour day – eight hours at his research job and then five additional hours as an Uber driver. After leaving the house at 6am, Mark returned home at 7pm. This schedule was beginning to take a toll.

*It's adversely affected my work life balance, and I don't do things that I used to do. For example, I used to study a lot more in my field. I'm not really keeping up as much with my field. Secondly, I used to work longer hours at my current job. I use to work, say 7:30–6, and now I don't. Part of that is because I don't like my current job and the people, I don't feel like they like me either, so I'm giving them everything they want but no more than that. ... Before I started with Uber I used to ride my bike once a week, all the way from McLean to Alexandria. It's a long ride. And I really love it. Sometimes I would ride twice a week. But now since I started Uber-ing, it now costs money if I ride my bike, so I found myself not riding as often... Although I am basically healthy, knock on wood, I think I'm probably not as good aerobic shape as I was.*⁴⁶

While Uber's impact on Mark's quality of life was not wholly positive, the prospects of making money were simply too great.

⁴⁵ Interview with authors, 12 August 2016

⁴⁶ Interview with authors, 11 May 2016

In 2016 Uber modified its surge pricing model by introducing a new system of “Boosts.” Boosts were automatic surges granted to drivers who had successfully completed a predetermined number of trips during the previous week. Uber’s Boost system had four levels: Bronze, Silver, Gold and Platinum. Rather than simply “chasing the surge,” drivers sought to “chase platinum.” As Ben, who we quote above, explained to us, the system of boosts reoriented his entire strategy into one about the total number of trips he provided. Instead of being selective and strategic about which ride requests to accept and when or where to drive, he approached the Boosts game as a marathon. He explained:

I had some days off from work. So I was on the road. I mean, I just had coffee upon coffee, and I’m just on the road. So I ended up doing about, I thought it was over 100, but I did 94 rides... It was 94 rides in essentially 3 days... After you do 90 rides, I think it’s 90 or 95, they bump you to platinum... And then basically you’re always chasing platinum.⁴⁷

All drivers began at Bronze, but after completing 35 trips in a seven-day period, they are boosted to Silver for the following week. For drivers who reached Silver, every fare within a designated area of the city was automatically “surge priced” at 1.4 or 1.6 times the base fare. The surge coefficient at the Gold and Platinum levels was

yet higher. A \$10 ride with a prized 2.2 platinum boost would become a \$22 fare. A driver would take home 75% of this amount after a booking fee was subtracted, which at the time was \$1.55. (This fee has since been raised to \$2). What this calculation meant was that a driver would take home \$15.34 instead of a non-platinum amount of \$6.34. Platinum, however, became a phoenix for the drivers in our study. Apart from Ben’s onetime encounter with it, no other driver reported a platinum bonus. Sixty-five percent of drivers in this study said that their average fare was \$10 or less. The stress of these games, be it chasing a surge or platinum, was a refrain in 50% of our interviews and surveys. Drivers spoke with us about falling asleep at the wheel, constant exhaustion, and the worry of finding a safe place to urinate. The work was draining, unsustainable, and, for many, a challenge to their well-being.

47 Interview with authors, 9 August 2016

Conclusion and Recommendations

Our conclusion is straightforward: The patterns identified in this study raise questions about the extent to which working conditions in the ride-hailing industry conform to contemporary labor standards. To address these concerns, local legislators should adopt the following set of recommendations:

1. Establish a publicly funded commission to study the impact of Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) on platform workers as well as on congestion, public transit usage, transportation equity, and public safety. Members of the commission should include: the Director of the D.C. Department of For Hire Vehicles (or their designee), a TNC driver, two representatives from D.C. TNC's, one appointment by the Mayor and one appointment by the Council with expertise in workforce issues, one appointment by the Mayor and one appointment by the Council with expertise in transportation equity, and one appointment by the Council with expertise in data science. The Commission shall make publicly available a study within 9 months, and every year afterwards, that evaluates and makes recommendations regarding the impact of the effects of TNCs on the District, including:
 - a. The impact on the District's workforce, including economic security and labor standards;
 - b. The impact on the District's disability community;
 - c. The impact on the District's public transit services, including ridership levels and racial equity;
 - d. The impact on the District's transit infrastructure, including congestion and road-use;
 - e. The impact on the District's environment and public health; and
 - f. The impact on the District's public safety, including the safety of passengers, pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers.
 - g. The applicability of policies regarding employee versus independent contractor status for TNC drivers. See decision in the 2018 California Supreme Court case *Dynamex Operations West, Inc. v. Superior Court of Los Angeles*.
2. Require TNCs to collect and submit to the Department of For Hire Vehicles and the Council the following information about TNC labor conditions in a format approved by the Council, for the period July 1, 2019 through December 31, 2019, and for each calendar quarter thereafter no later than 30 days after the end of that calendar quarter. Data shall be anonymized, made publicly available, and used only for the purposes of

worker safety and labor standards. TNCs shall pay the District a monetary penalty for each violation of the terms of this data sharing agreement.

- a. The total number of private vehicle-for-hire operators (“operators”) that utilized the digital dispatch services of the private vehicle-for-hire company in the District in each 24-hour period, including breakdowns by gender, ethnicity, and census tracts of residency;
 - b. The average operator earnings per hour for all trips that begin or end in the District, including breakdowns by gender, ethnicity, and census tracts of residency;
 - c. The average percentage of non-revenue hours to revenue hours for operators, including breakdowns by gender, ethnicity, and census tracts of residency;
 - d. The number of hours that operators spend logged into the app per 24-hour period, including the percentage and frequency of operators who spent more than 10 hours logged into the app per period; and
 - e. The total number of incidents referenced in a Metropolitan Police Department policy report pertaining to operators, including as complainants.
3. Consider the establishment of a prevailing wage for TNC drivers in D.C. New York City now guarantees TNC drivers minimum gross pay of \$27.86 an hour, so that driver pay after expenses will be at least \$17.22 an hour.⁴⁸ In 2018 Seattle, Washington established a wages and standards board for domestic workers that requires set-pay regardless of worker status as W2 employee or independent contractor.⁴⁹ In London, an employment tribunal ruled in 2018 ruled that drivers should be considered employees rather than independent contractors. This ruling grants drivers access to paid sick days, paid vacation days, and minimum wages.⁵⁰ Los Angeles drivers are working toward a similar goal.

48 New York City Taxi and Limousine Commission. 2018, December 4. Driver Income Rules. Available: https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/tlc/downloads/pdf/driver_income_rules_12_04_2018.pdf

49 Domestic Workers Ordinance. 2018, July. Seattle’s Office of Labor Standards. Available: <https://www.seattle.gov/laborstandards/ordinances/domestic-workers-ordinance>

50 *The Guardian*. 2018, December 19. Uber loses appeal over driver employment rights. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/dec/19/uber-loses-appeal-over-driver-employment-rights>

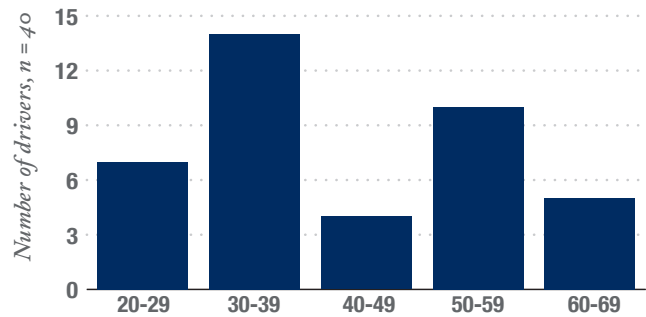
Appendix A: Participant Summary

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Highest level of education	Race(s)/ethnicities	Current jobs in addition to Uber
Aiden	Male	29	Less than 12 years of school	White or Caucasian	None
Ajay	Male	48	Completed graduate school	White or Caucasian	Urban planning consultant
Aman	Male	35	*	Black or African American	None
Anh	Female	33	Completed graduate school	Asian or Pacific Islander	Human resources manager; freelance catering assistant
Anthony	Male	38	Completed graduate school	White or Caucasian	High school teacher
Arthur	Male	29	Completed graduate school	White or Caucasian	Retail store employee
Beatrice	Female	44	High School	Black or African American	Asbestos removal contractor
Ben	Male	41	Some college	Black or African American	Information technology associate
Bert	Male	61	Graduated from college	White or Caucasian	Courier
Carol	Female	59	Some college	Black or African American	None
Curtis	Male	56	Completed graduate school	Black or African American	US Postal Service employee
Diana	Female	27	Graduated from college	Black or African American	Security officer at a fast food restaurant
Dominic	Male	26	Graduated from college	Black or African American	Security officer
Dwayne	Male	54	Completed graduate school	White or Caucasian	Information technology associate
Gary	Male	52	Graduated from college	White or Caucasian	Catering contractor
Hakim	Male	55	*	Black or African American	Taxi driver
Hank	Male	39	Some college	White or Caucasian	Stay at home parent
Ivori	Female	37	Some college	Black or African American	Customer service call center representative
Jabari	Male	29	Graduated from college	Black or African American	Information technology associate
Jasper	Male	34	Completed graduate school	White or Caucasian	Middle school teacher; high school track and field coach
Jerry	Male	58	Some graduate school	White or Caucasian	Self-employed entrepreneur
Joan	Female	51	Graduated from college	Black or African American	Bus driver
Joe	Male	28	Completed graduate school	White or Caucasian	Security officer
Jordan	Male	37	Graduated from college	Black or African American	Information technology associate
Kristen	Female	38	Graduated from college	White or Caucasian	Graphic designer
Larry	Male	51	Completed graduate school	White or Caucasian	Self-employed entrepreneur; university employee
Marco	Male	34	Graduated from college	White or Caucasian	Religious institution staff
Mark	Male	63	Completed graduate school	White or Caucasian	Manager
Mateo	Male	34	Graduated from college	Hispanic	Information technology associate
Noam	Male	27	Graduated from college	White or Caucasian	None
Otolun	Male	30	Some college	Black or African American	Security officer part-time
Patrick	Male	46	Graduated from college	White or Caucasian	Real estate associate
Rick	Male	30	Graduated from college	White or Caucasian	Sales associate
Samuel	Male	50	Graduated from college	White or Caucasian	Hotel management staff
Sung-ho	Male	48	Graduated from college	Asian or Pacific Islander	Self-employed blog writer; freelance stock market analyst
Suzanna	Female	58	Completed graduate school	White or Caucasian	Field inspector; freelance writer
Trent	Male	33	Completed graduate school	Black or African American	None
Trevor	Male	52	Some college	White or Caucasian	Sales associate
Yoni	Male	52	*	Black or African American	None
Zaki	Male	32	Completed graduate school	Black or African American	Information technology associate

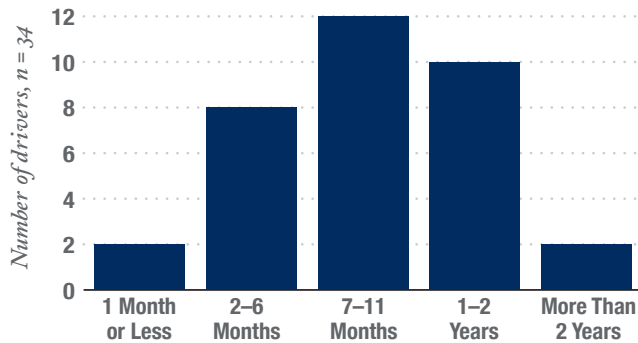
* = *Unknown*

Appendix B: Participant Demographics and Basic Work Patterns

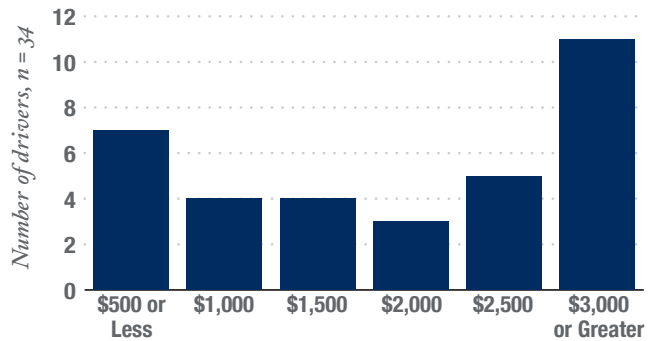
Driver Age



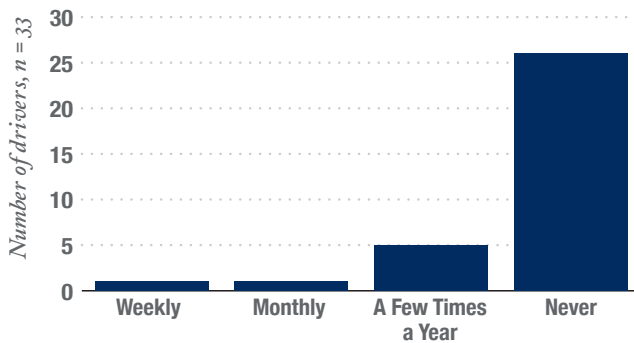
Length of Time as an Uber Driver



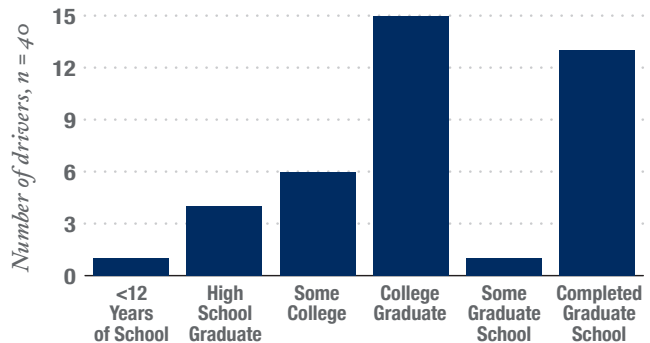
Net Average Monthly Household Income



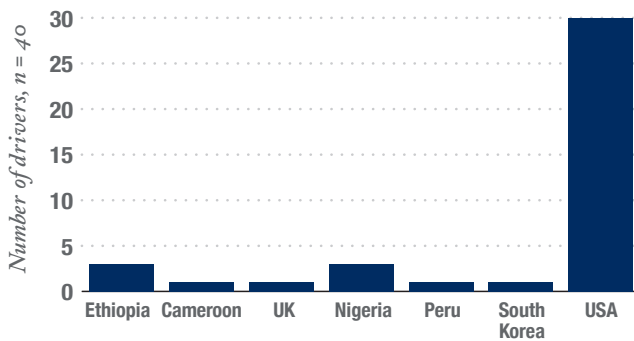
Frequency of In-Person Interactions – a meal or a drink – with Peer Drivers



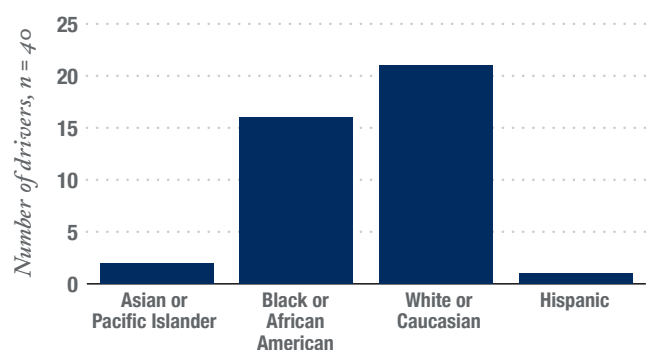
Education Level



Country of Origin



Race(s) & Ethnicities



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