

WORK AND HEALTH RISKS FACED BY DIGITAL PLATFORM DRIVERS DURING COVID-19

February 18, 2022

Occupational and
Environmental Health
Seminar, University of Toronto

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Public Health Sciences



Overview of presentation



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- I. Intro to digital platform economy
- II. Our study
 - Methods
 - Five key COVID-19 related risks
- III. Interventions to protect platform workers
- IV. Wrap up

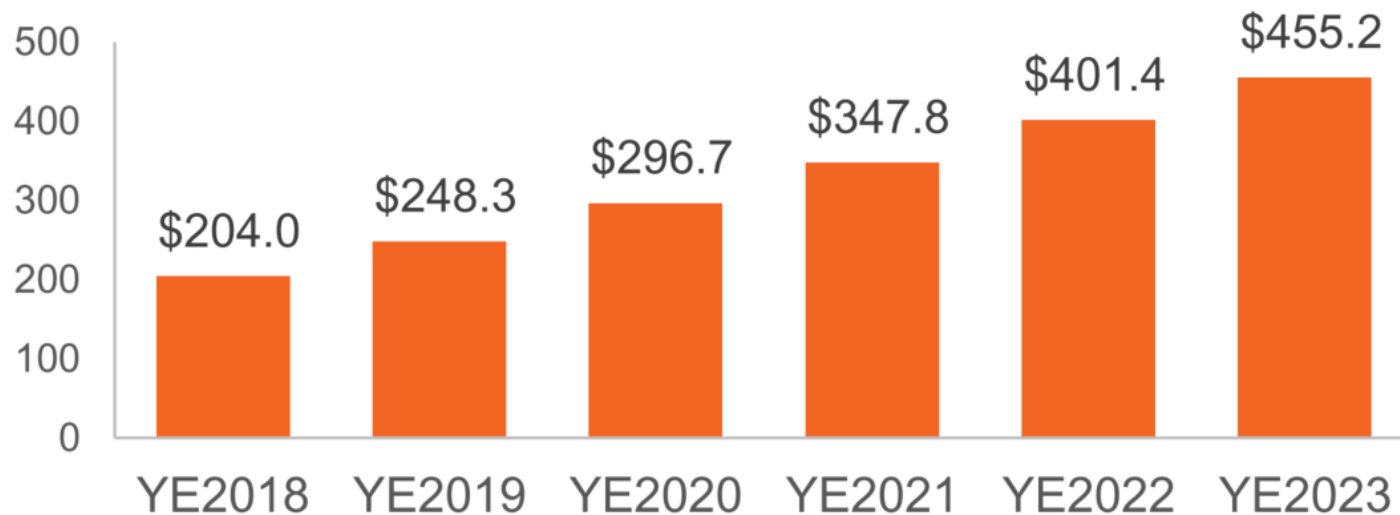


The Digital Platform Landscape

- A new economy, growing rapidly¹

Projected Gross Volume of the Gig Economy (*Billions USD*)

The Gig Economy is projected to grow to \$455B by year-end 2023 in Gross Volume transactions.



Mastercard, Kaiser Associates. The Global Gig Economy: Capitalizing on a ~\$500B Opportunity. 2019. Mastercard Gig Economy Industry Outlook and Needs Assessment. May. <https://newsroom.mastercard.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Gig-Economy-White-Paper-May-2019.pdf>

I. What is the Digital Platform Economy (“Gig Economy”)¹?

Transportation-based services account for 58% of gig economy income

Sector	Description	Included	Example Platforms
Asset-Sharing Services	Digital platforms that require a freelance driver to complete the requested transport service	Ride-sharing, carpooling, restaurant delivery, and goods delivery	HomeAway, Airbnb, TURO
Transportation-Based Services	Digital platforms that connect freelancers directly with businesses to complete projects	Business work, microwork, design, tech/coding, writing/translation, administrative	BlaBlaCar, Careem, DOORDASH, Uber
Professional Services	Digital platforms for freelancers to sell homemade crafts or offer on-demand services for household-related tasks	Home-services, babysitting, handmade crafts, tutoring, pet services, and misc. (DJ, events, etc.)	Care.com, Airtasker, Etsy
Handmade Goods, Household & Miscellaneous Services (HGHM)			Upwork™, CATALANT, guru™

Mastercard, Kaiser Associates. The Global Gig Economy: Capitalizing on a ~\$500B Opportunity. 2019. Mastercard Gig Economy Industry Outlook and Needs Assessment. May. <https://newsroom.mastercard.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Gig-Economy-White-Paper-May-2019.pdf>

The New York Times

May 5, 2020

California Sues Uber and Lyft, Claiming Workers Are Misclassified

The ride-hailing companies are accused of defying a new state law that says gig workers should be treated as employees.

AARIAN MARSHALL

BUSINESS MAR 17, 2021 4:08 PM

Uber Says Its UK Drivers Are ‘Workers,’ but Not Employees

The ride-hail giant shifts its stand following a court ruling, part of a global push for a “third category” of workers.

March 2021



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

CANADA WORLD BUSINESS INVESTING OPINION POLITICS SPORTS LIFE ARTS DRIVE REAL EST

Foodora to exit Canada just months after workers won the right to unionize

JOSH O'KANE > TECHNOLOGY REPORTER
PUBLISHED APRIL 27, 2020

This screenshot shows the top portion of a news article from The Globe and Mail. The header includes the newspaper's logo and a navigation menu with categories like CANADA, WORLD, BUSINESS, INVESTING, OPINION, POLITICS, SPORTS, LIFE, ARTS, DRIVE, and REAL EST. The main headline reads "Foodora to exit Canada just months after workers won the right to unionize". Below the headline, the author is identified as Josh O'Kane, a Technology Reporter, and the publication date is April 27, 2020.

April 2020

SKIP TO MAIN CONTENT + ADD SHORTCUT

Global NEWS World Canada Local Politics Money Health Entertainment Lifestyle

PARTNER

What the Uber class-action decision means for independent contractors

By Samara Belitzky - Special Partner Feature
Posted September 20, 2021 4:00 am · Updated September 16, 2021 2:42 pm

In late August, the Ontario Superior Court of Justice **certified a class action lawsuit against Uber** on behalf of its drivers in Ontario.

Through its decision to certify the class action, the Ontario Superior Court of Justice has **confirmed that there is some basis to the contention that Uber has been miscategorizing drivers as contractors when they are truly employees.**

This screenshot shows a news article from Global News. At the top, there are links for "SKIP TO MAIN CONTENT" and "ADD SHORTCUT". The navigation menu includes "Global NEWS" and various news categories. The article is marked as a "PARTNER" piece. The headline is "What the Uber class-action decision means for independent contractors". The author is Samara Belitzky, a Special Partner Feature writer. The article was posted on September 20, 2021, at 4:00 am and updated on September 16, 2021, at 2:42 pm. The text discusses a court decision in Ontario regarding Uber drivers and their classification as independent contractors or employees.

September 2021

European Commission - Press release



Commission proposals to improve the working conditions of people working through digital labour platforms

Brussels, 9 December 2021

The proposed Directive seeks to ensure that people working through digital labour platforms are **granted the legal employment status that corresponds to their actual work arrangements**. It provides a list of control criteria to determine whether the platform is an “employer”. If the platform meets at least two of those criteria, it is legally presumed to be an employer.

The Directive **increases transparency in the use of algorithms by digital labour platforms**, ensures human monitoring on their respect of working conditions and gives the right to contest automated decisions. These new rights will be granted to both workers and genuine self-employed.

What does “classification” have to do with worker health?

Independent contractors

- No OHS rights (right to refuse unsafe work, right to know occupational hazards)
- No access to minimum wage, overtime, parental leave
- US studies find ride-hail workers earn below minimum wage^{2,3}
- When unable to work, no access to Employment Insurance

Digital platforms

- No minimum wage etc. costs
- No social program contributions: Employment Insurance, CPP
- When their workers are sick or disabled, *taxpayers* foot the bill through state healthcare and disability welfare programs.
- = Huge competitive earnings advantage vis a vis other employers

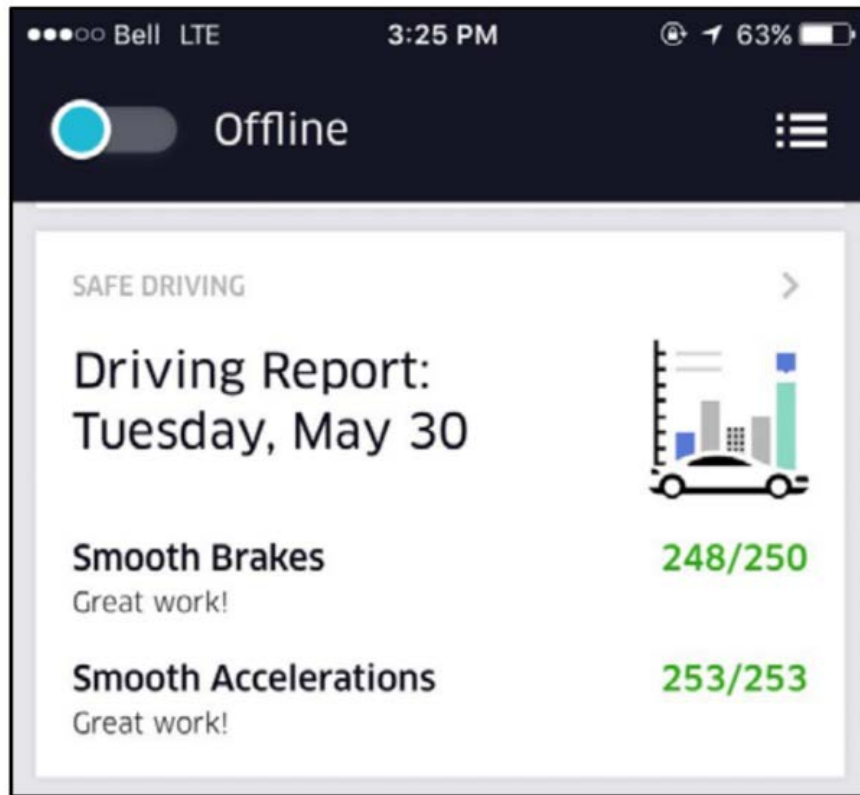
Basics: how platforms work

- **Ratings**
- Overall driver score based on customer ratings, # rides accepted, # rides cancelled
- Deactivation of app if score falls below a certain threshold

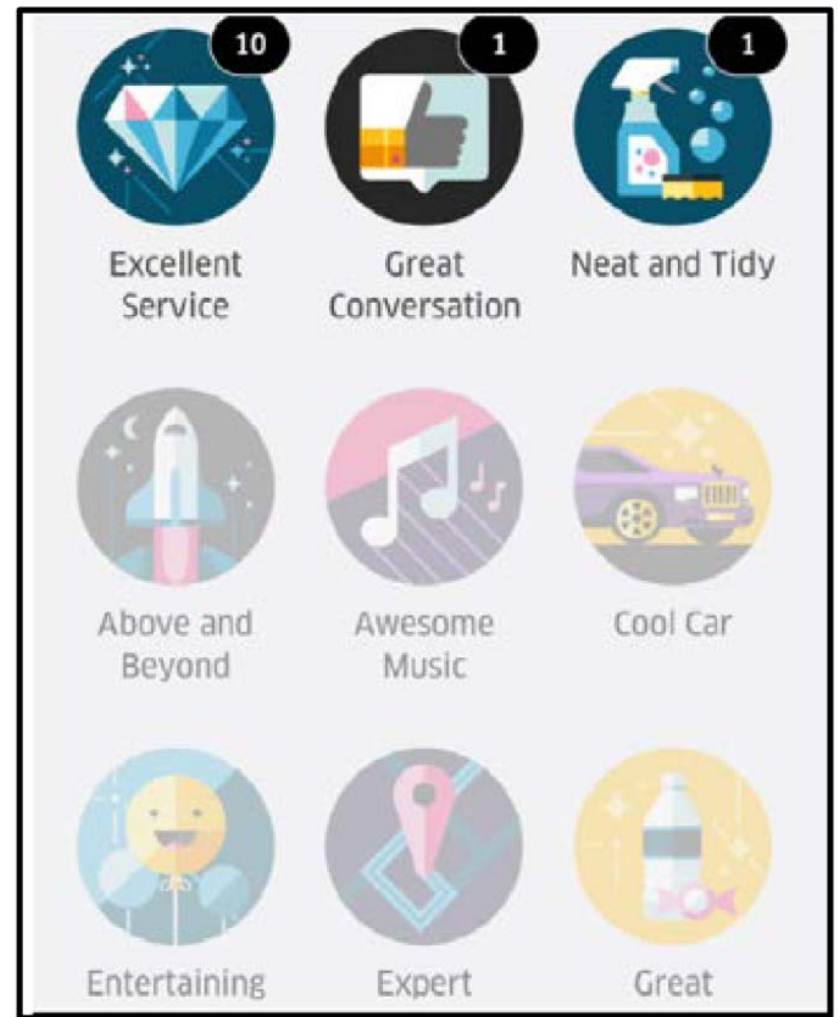
Screen shot: Uber driver “dashboard”



Close surveillance



Screen shots from Uber drivers



Pay rate is set unilaterally



30% - 50%
pay cut

- Platforms unilaterally:
 - set pay rates
 - set rules of conduct
 - Appraise worker performance

II. Our study

- Digital platform drivers, such as Uber Eats, Amazon Flex, and Lyft drivers were ***busier than ever*** during the COVID-19 pandemic as the public attempted to avoid illness by ordering take-away food, shopping online and taking ride-hails rather than public transportation.
- This placed these drivers in a ***unique position to become infected with COVID-19 and also transmit it to others*** as they moved people, food and packages from one location to another.

What are COVID-19 related health risk experiences of digital platform drivers and what are health interventions for this sector?

The Research Group

Research Team (University of Waterloo)	Advisory Committee Members
Ellen MacEachen – Primary Investigator,	Steve Mantis – Chair, Research Action Committee, <i>Ontario Network of Injured Worker Groups (ONIWG)</i>
Shannon Majowicz – Co-investigator	Jessica Hopkins – Deputy Chief, Health Protection, Medical and System Support, <i>Public Health Ontario</i>
Samantha Meyer – Co-investigator	Liisa Schofield – Union Organizer, <i>Canadian Union of Postal Workers</i>
Steve Durant – Post-doctoral fellow and Project Coordinator	Jules Arntz-Gray – Director - Occupational Health and Safety Branch at <i>Ontario Ministry of Labour</i>
Meghan Crouch – Graduate Research Assistant	Loretta Ryan – Executive Director, <i>Association of Local Public Health Agencies (ALPHA)</i>
Yamin Jahangir – Graduate Research Assistant	Deena Ladd – Executive Director, <i>Workers Action Centre</i>
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Antonela Ilic – Research Assistant	Caroline Jimenez – Coordinator, <i>Decent Work and Health Network</i>
Meera Parthipan – Research Assistant	

Methods

- Qualitative study: to examine experience in context, access explanations of how processes work, why decisions made
- Focused on digital platforms that delivered **food, packages and people**.



Image source: Kindel Media, Pexels.com



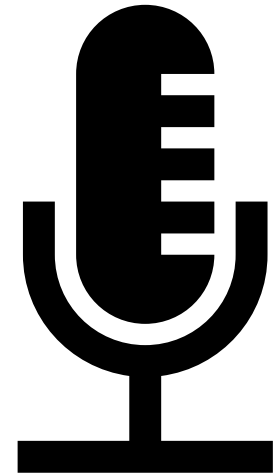
Image source: Norma Mortenson, Pexels.com



Image source: Norma Mortenson, Pexels.com

Sample & analysis

- In 2020-21, we conducted in-depth interviews with **30 drivers and 3 managers** who worked across **9 different platforms** in Ontario, Canada
- During Waves 1 & 2 (up to Feb 2021)
- **Purposive sampling approach:**
 - Worked for a digital platform during the COVID-19 pandemic
 - Min. 10 hours per week; one month
- We also collected documentary data: platform screenshots from drivers and examined COVID-19 info on platform websites



Sample summary

Ride-Hail

- *Lyft*
- *Uber*

Food Delivery

- *DoorDash*
- *Foodora**
- *SkipTheDishes*
- *UberEats*

Package Delivery

- *Amazon Flex*
- *Cornershop by Uber*
- *InstaCart*

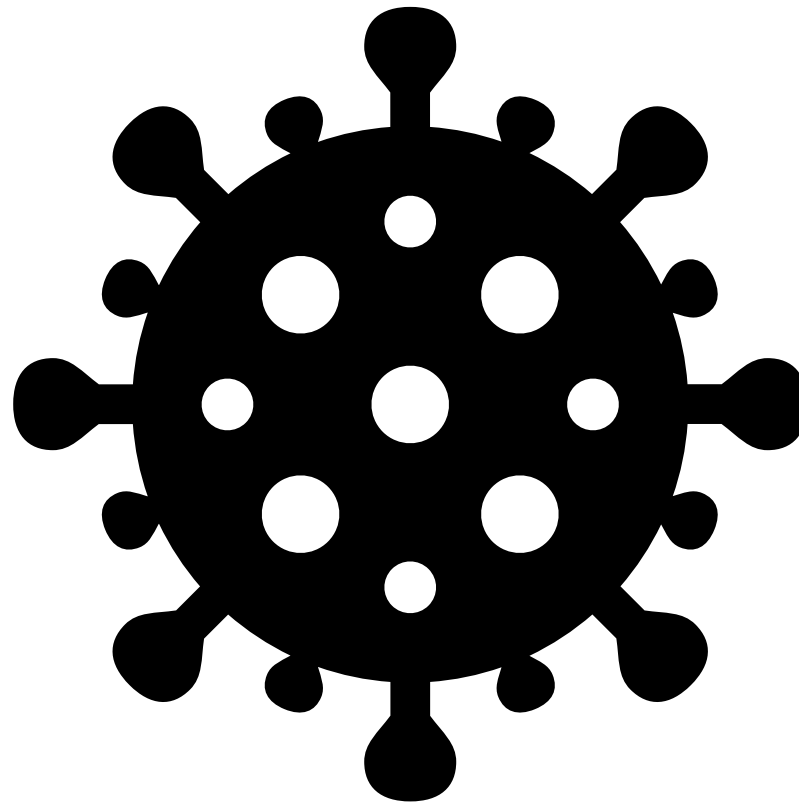
- 80% male
- 52% racial minority groups
- Average age 31 (range 21-54)
- Primary income source for 57% of drivers
- Average driving time: 23 hrs/week
- Most worked across multiple platforms

* Experiences before Foodora ceased Canadian operations in May 2020

- **Situational analysis**⁴: Coded interviews, constant comparison of data across cases, focus on meanings in context.
- **Ethics**: Informed consent; all participant names used are pseudonyms

142
143 I Okay, so, can you – (name), can you tell me about your gig work? If I say tell
144 me about it, you can describe your typical day at work, the app you use, what
145 time you go to work and all of that.
146
147 Lily I go at around 4 pm. [okay] I go on both apps, and just kinda see what's
148 around my area – what pick ups – what deliveries are around my area, and
149 then I just – I grab those ones. So, usually, between 4 and 7 or 8, sometimes
150 9 [okay]. On the weekends I try to do later times, so between 5 and 10 [um
151 hmm, okay], yeah.
152
153 I So, any reason why you start later on in the day?
154

Results: Five COVID-19 exposure and transmission risks faced by digital platform drivers



1. Risk of constant customer encounters

- Public health was advising people to stay in “social bubbles”, but drivers were in close quarters with many new people every day
- Inevitable that some deliveries will be to individuals in isolation for COVID-19.

Based on how many people per thousand people in the population have [COVID-19] and how many deliveries we do, it's ... highly unlikely that you could do this work for six months and not deliver to somebody that has [COVID-19] ... It's just people don't – they're not gonna say that they have it. Nobody would deliver to them, probably, if they said that. (James, UberEats, SkipTheDishes)



2. Risk of weak COVID-19 platform safety measures

A. Passenger (and driver) **health screening by the platform**

- Passenger's health statement provide to the platform could be out of date

I think [ride hail drivers are] more vulnerable because they're dealing with anyone and everyone. It's not really a place where your temperature is getting checked for every person entering the vehicle. Or there's no question of, like, 'Do you have a cough?' It's all through the app that's automated. But you know ... these kind of verification questions of their health, in the app ... are not always ... current because it's not asked everyday ... So that's concerning because the driver can catch [COVID-19] very easily. (Sonali, manager, Lyft)



B. Contactless delivery

- Some platforms mandated it (e.g., SkiptheDishes); but with most platforms (e.g., Uber Eats), customers had to choose it and they not make this choice
- Even if it's mandated, for alcohol purchases need closeness to customer to get ID and customer signature.
- Customer contact due to pressure of customer ratings and tips

The person will come out without a mask and, you know, and they're checking to see if everything's [all of the food items] there... I mean, I don't want to get a bad review, so I do wait and they check that everything's there. But, you know, that also defeats the purpose of saying, like, no-contact delivery. (Salma, Instacart)



- Multiple contact points from pick-up to delivery. E.g., crowded restaurant, then crowded elevator in condo.
- Final contact with the customer is a negligible part of a larger contact event.

When we are ...delivering the food, a lot of the time it's at condo buildings ... Sometimes there's not enough room in the elevator to keep the distance. ... It's impossible to avoid being exposed. (James, UberEats, SkipTheDishes)

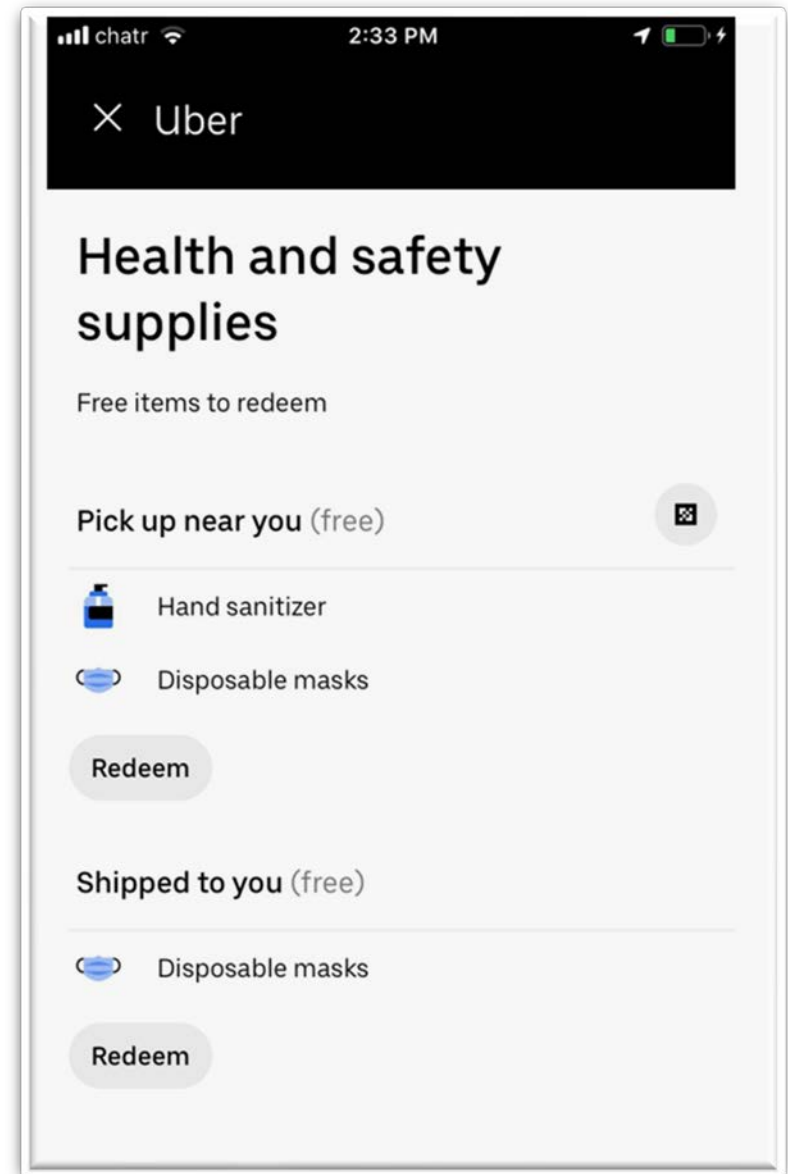


Photo by Norma Mortenson
from Pexels



- **C. Provision of PPE**
- Some platforms provided hand sanitizer and masks
- Door Dash: Free delivery to home, if requested
- Uber Eats: Occasional “promotions” of PPE
- Amazon Flex: mask and individual hand sanitizer at depot

“Pick up near you” = remote warehouses



3. Risk of mask-less customers

- Regularly faced non-mask-wearing customers
- Some “reminded” customers and/or refused to serve them
- Others feared unhappy customers, felt unable to risk low ratings & no tip

When I notice someone is not wearing a mask, it's basically a factor that's uncontrollable. You can't really tell people what to do At the end of the day, I was protecting myself [by not requiring masking] because you never really know what a passenger is capable of. Some of them are more aggressive. (Sergio, Uber)



4. Risk of time-related digital platform pressures

- Food & parcel drivers had limited timeframes to deliver their goods
- Rushed deliveries, take COVID-19 safety shortcuts

The app basically tells me how long it should take and what time the delivery should be delivered by. So ... even without COVID, it was almost impossible to always hit that because... they don't really factor in traffic... Also...when you're in the store, it's like...if you can't find one item ...And you might have a really long line at the checkout ... So, you're kind of pressured to make that up by being really fast while you're in the grocery store. I would say that's been something that I've had to stop ... and just not care that I'm late with the orders you know, squeezing around them [other shoppers] or ... being so close to them. ... but I can see where someone else might just might, to stay on time ... they would be exposing themselves more. (Michael, Instacart).



5. Risk of declaring COVID-19 symptoms

During COVID-19, digital platform companies offered financial support for workers if ill with COVID. But not taken up by drivers in our study.

- **less \$\$ than if working**
- **Leads to being locked out of platform for 14 days and having to submit negative test to return**
- **Preferred to make own decisions about working and sickness duration; hid symptoms or took brief time away**

So, whenever I used to feel sick, I used to take a day or two off just to try to recover, and then I go back to work directly. But I really can't stop working. I know, if you're sick you have to stay home and don't work. But my landlord wouldn't understand this, and she wants to get to her rent at the end of the month (Derrick, Instacart, SkipTheDishes, Doordash)



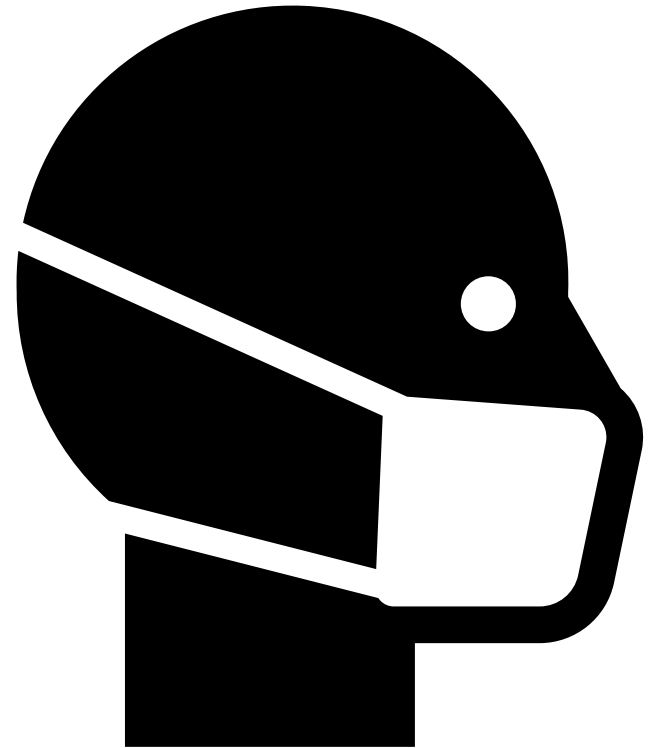


- Canadian Emergency Response Benefit was another option that platforms promoted to drivers
- Some drivers in our studies took up this support
- Most did not, because:
 - unsure about eligibility
 - not able/willing to have reduced income



III. Interventions to protect platform workers

- **Interventions to prevent COVID-19 risk**
- Occupational health management for digital platform workers occurs mostly at the *individual level* because workers are outside of the legal boundaries of the platform organisations.
- Self-employed workers, platform drivers are generally expected to educate themselves about occupational risk and to avoid dangerous situations.



Platform companies could do more for prevention

Loosen	Loosen time pressures on drivers to allow time for physical distancing
Waive	Waive cancellation penalties related to health risk
Provide	Provide very easily acceptable PPE
Provide	Provide minimum income standards

Governments could do more

- Legislate minimum number of **paid sick days**
- Be stronger advocate for **basic employment standard rights** for platform workers
- **Enforce “employee” status** for platform workers to a) bring platforms into the employer economy and b) provide platform workers with same rights as other workers





#8: “Appoint an expert to design and test a **portable benefits program**, where contributors could be employers, workers and the government.”

#15: “Create and recognize the **dependent contractor category** for gig or platform workers in the app-based space and give this category of workers basic employment rights.”
-termination pay, minimum wage, minimum benefits

TORONTO | News

Uber is calling on Doug Ford to raise the minimum wage for gig workers to \$18 an hour



Colin D'Mello CTV News Toronto Queen's Park Bureau Chief & Videojournalist

[@ColinDMello](#) | [Contact](#)

March 10, 2022

Ride-sharing giant Uber Technologies is calling on the Doug Ford government to boost minimum wages for gig workers in Ontario to **\$18 an hour and legislate a new portable benefits package for platform-based employees. ...up from the current \$15 per hour — to account for time spent waiting for jobs, as well as other expenses, such as gas and insurance.**

Uber is also calling for a "**benefits fund**" that would give gig workers who have an average of 20 hours of "engaged time" on an app access to money for health and dental benefits.

The company is also urging the government to legislate **termination pay, occupational accident coverage and the right to join a union.**

What's missing?

Platforms are still not employers

- No social program contributions: employment insurance, CPP
- The proposed “minimum wage” is *misleading*. Platform drivers do not work on an hourly basis. These benefits would kick in only with “engaged time”.

Workers are still not employees

- No vacation pay, parental and medical leave, EI benefits
- Unclear what OHS responsibilities platforms would have
- COVID-19: Platform time pressures, cancellation penalties remain

IV. Wrap up

- Digital platform driving work involved constant possible exposure to COVID-19
- Digital platform company protection measures these had limited impact on the COVID-19 exposure risks faced by digital platform drivers.
- As self-employed workers without the protection of employment and occupational health standards, **platform workers are absorbing most of the occupational risks related to COVID-19.**
- This arrangement also poses **societal risk** – spreads COVID-19 risk.
- We have suggested interventions to make this work safer.



Acknowledgements & Study publications



- Peer-reviewed publications are under way.
- 2021 report is currently available: MacEachen, E., Majowicz, S., Meyer, S., Durant, S., Hopwood, P., Crouch, M., . . . Parthipan, M. (2021). Covid-19 Risks Faced by Ontario Digital Platform Couriers and Recommendations for Enabling Safer Work. Available at: <https://workhealthresearch.ca/covid-19-risks-faced-by-digital-platform-workers/>
- Also see 2019 report about Uber driving and occupational health: <https://workhealthresearch.ca/driving-for-uber/>



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Thank you. Questions?