



THE GIG GAP

THE REALITY OF DENVER GIG WORKERS 2022 REPORT

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October 2022



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the so-called gig economy has exploded onto the economic scene in Colorado and across the country, expanding into a variety of new services and sectors. Far beyond ride-share apps or food delivery, consumers can now hire someone to mow their lawn, walk their dog, or even change a lightbulb. As this economic sector has grown, so have app company valuations and revenues. In fact, app companies Lyft, DoorDash, and Uber posted 2021 revenues of \$3.2 billion, \$4.8 billion, and \$17.5 billion, respectively.¹

More than 16% of U.S. adults have earned money on an online platform, including 30% of Latinx adults and 20% of Black adults.² As app-based companies continue to disrupt traditional business models across different industries, all of these companies have one thing in common; they classify their workers as independent contractors. This means that workers are not covered by employment standards and protections, including minimum wage, overtime, health and safety, or protections from workplace harassment and discrimination.

The way these apps classify the people who work for them is central to their business model. App-based workers are responsible for paying for the cost of business expenses—from gas to car maintenance—and are not provided with standard benefits like workers' compensation or health care. In spite of this, gig companies advertise competitive wages and flexible hours to entice workers into this nontraditional working arrangement, but are these false promises?

We can all agree that workers deserve fair compensation for work and should be treated with dignity and respect in the workplace. While there has been significant discussion around policies and protections for app-based gig workers, there needs to be more transparency into who the workers are, their working conditions, what the work they do entails, how their wages are calculated, and how much workers are genuinely earning.



Uber CEO Dara Khosowshahi earned **\$19,937,818** in total compensation in 2021.

The average Denver Uber driver earned **\$18,465** after expenses.

If the Uber CEO's earnings were an entire car, an individual driver's would be a **single tire bolt**.

This survey and study of Denver app-based workers was conducted to provide additional transparency and data to understand the landscape of how the gig economy operates in Colorado. This information collected from a random selection of app-based workers will help us understand who these workers are, what they are experiencing in the workplace, what their actual take-home pay is, and how they are (or aren't) able to make ends meet.

What our survey and study ultimately found is that Denver's gig economy is similar to those around the rest of the country: Drivers are majority workers of color who earn low wages with significant expenses, lack access to important benefits, and face severe safety and workplace concerns that other workers do not regularly face. These workers deserve fair wages, basic protections, transparency about what their job will entail, a safe working environment, and the ability to conduct their work with dignity and respect. Our report highlights the reality of app-based work and provides transparency on the different factors these workers face that make it harder for them to find opportunities and thrive in the workplace.



Driver Perspective

"I love being able to choose my hours so I can take care of my young children when my wife is at work. I also feel that it is important work, driving passengers to and from the airport is very important to Colorado's economy."

After investing in my vehicle to become a fulltime driver, I discovered that I would need to drive whenever my family isn't in direct need of me in order for us to survive. This means I am driving all the time, between 13-16 hours a day. This is a very, very common problem with other drivers working this many hours or even up to 18 a day. I only stop when my children need me to get them from school and then go back on the road."

Gig Driver Michael

KEY FINDINGS

The following are findings from a representative survey of 362 ride-hailing and food delivery drivers in Denver. Data was also collected on 6,079 trips on several ride-hailing and food delivery apps through the Driver's Seat Collective app.

\$5.49
per hour

Across all three gig platforms studied; Uber, Lyft, and Doordash, drivers reported wages that amount to \$5.49/hr after expenses, well below Denver's minimum wage.

This net hourly income incorporated drivers' reported mileage, income, hours and unpaid time, and expenses and was calculated using the current IRS mileage rate. This rate is roughly 35% of Denver's 2022 minimum wage of \$15.87.

An app-based collection of trip data found that deadhead or unpaid work time totals about **one-third** of the total time that drivers are working, so the net hourly wage is likely lower than drivers estimated.

31 %
of drivers reported having no health insurance.

The majority of gig drivers are workers of color.

Only about 43% of drivers were White, compared to 64% of the Denver metro's population. Almost one in five surveyed drivers was Black (19%), compared to just 6% of the Denver metro population.

59%

support someone

Most drivers support another person with their gig income.

The majority of drivers (59%) reported that they supported someone else with their income, and almost one-quarter of drivers (23%) support two or more children with their income.

38

median hours per week

Most gig drivers in Denver are working full-time, and gig work is their primary source of income.

Drivers reported a median of 38 hours worked per week on the app they were surveyed using. The typical driver earned 79% of their income from app-based driving, and over six in ten drivers (61%) were completely reliant on gig work to pay their bills.

1/5

faced violence

Gig workers often experience violence, threats, and discrimination.

Over one-fifth of drivers (22%) reported facing violence or threatened violence while on the job; a similar number (20%) reported being discriminated against on the basis of their identity.

1/4
tip income

Almost one-quarter of gig worker income comes from optional tipping.

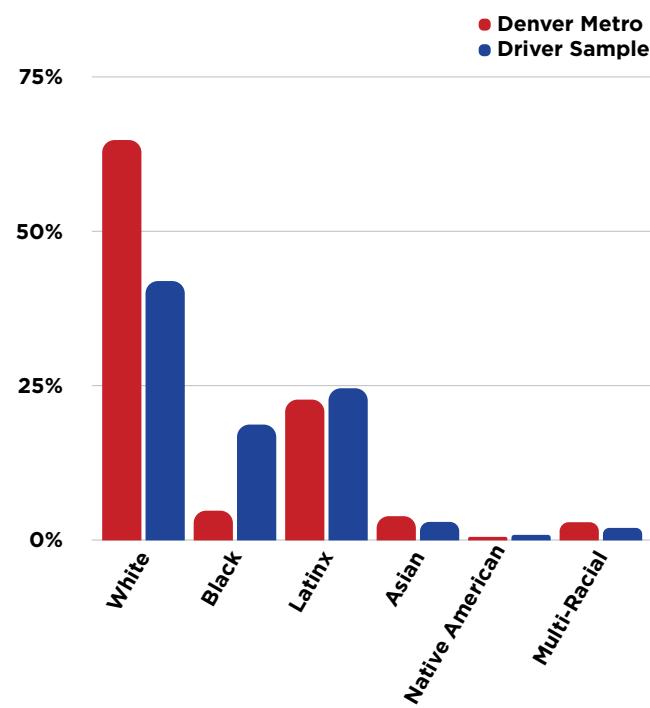
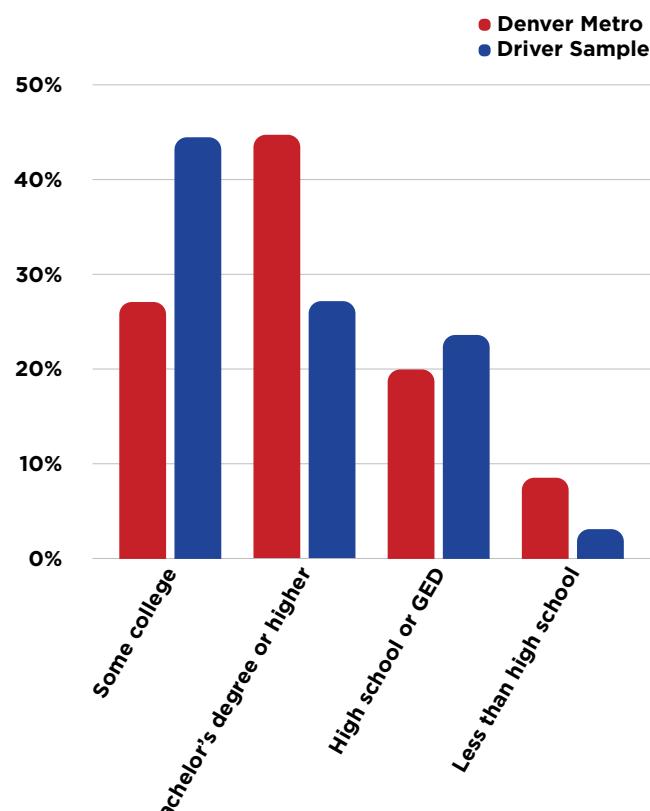
Overall, drivers reported 22% of their app-based driving income coming from optional tipping. This rate was particularly high for DoorDash drivers (41%).

WHO ARE DENVER'S GIG WORKERS?

Respondents were primarily workers of color. While metro Denver's population is 64% white, survey respondents were only 43% white and Black drivers made up 19% of respondents, while the population of Denver metro is only 6% Black.³ 19% of surveyed drivers were immigrants, which is nearly the metro-wide population of immigrants.⁴

Survey respondents overwhelmingly identified as male (79%). Drivers were high school graduates at a slightly higher rate than the Denver metro generally (97% vs 92%) but lower in higher educational attainment (Bachelor's degree or higher) than the metro Denver area average (28% vs 48%).⁵

Multiple studies have shown that gig workers are disproportionately workers of color and immigrants, and gig companies rely on these workers to fill sub-minimum wage jobs with no benefits.⁶ By misclassifying drivers as independent contractors, app companies deny them the rights and protections of employees. It's no surprise that these are similar tactics used to deny basic rights and benefits to workers of color just as the diverse population of agricultural and domestic workers.⁷ These workers also have no protections against discrimination and harassment, which is particularly concerning given the number of workers who report experiencing such issues.



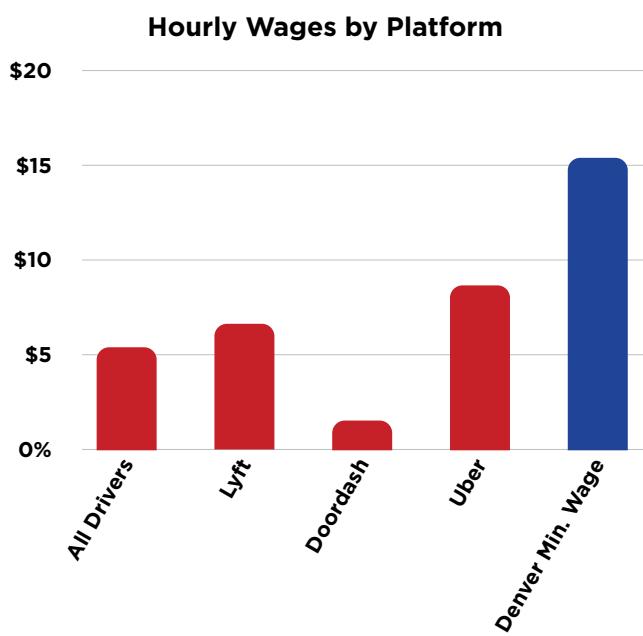
GIG WORKER EARNINGS

Nearly all drivers reported wages significantly below the minimum wage: the overall hourly rate was only **\$5.49**, about 35% of Denver's 2022 minimum wage of \$15.87.⁸ None of the platforms surpassed an hourly rate of \$9.00; DoorDash drivers only made **\$1.23 an hour**.

It's important to note that all app workers are required to pay for mileage and fuel out-of-pocket. The above rate was calculated after accounting for unpaid time working and required expenses like fuel and wear and tear. Drivers in our sample reported a weekly mileage of 700 miles. Ride-hail drivers, in particular, logged a tremendous amount of miles, with 800 miles (Lyft) and 1000 miles (Uber) per week, respectively.

For gig workers to make more in earnings, they need to drive more miles, which has an impact on driver pay. The simple cost of owning a car for work purposes was the most significant cost cited by drivers in our sample, and almost half of the drivers surveyed (48%) reported that they had purchased or leased their car for the purpose of driving on an app platform. The IRS mileage reimbursement rate of 58.5 cents per mile was used in calculating mileage costs.⁹

In addition, gig workers are required to cover all of their expenses, which traditional employers cover for their employees. Our surveyors asked drivers about typical monthly costs for a number of different expenses, including things like car payments and maintenance, insurance, cleaning costs, and more. The results were striking: the average total reported cost of annual expenses was over **\$4,000**. This significantly impacts drivers' take-home income before taxes.



\$3.77
per gallon
in Colorado
(Sept. 2022)

↑
Energy prices up
30.3%
in the last 12 months

\$4,000
annual expenses
for car payments,
insurance,
maintenance etc.

HOURLY EARNINGS

Another unseen cost of gig work is so-called “deadhead” time. This refers to when gig workers are only eligible to be paid in narrow windows, despite being required to drive to a passenger’s location or wait to pick up an order or a passenger. While gig workers would not be able to do their job without these activities, the apps do not pay them for this time. This significantly impacts the amount of time drivers must invest to earn their living, akin to if cashiers only were paid while they are actively ringing someone up or a firefighter only getting paid when actively fighting a fire. This unpaid time is significant because it goes unaccounted for, making it difficult for workers to determine their earnings, and is required for a worker to be able to do their job. Deadhead time is also significant because it goes unaccounted for in policies like Prop 22 and the ballot initiative in Massachusetts that was struck down by a court,¹⁰ leading to sub-minimum wage guarantees for gig drivers.

Drivers reported a typical deadhead rate of 20% of their working time, with fairly consistent percentages across the platforms. When accounting for deadhead time in calculating the hourly rate, the typical driver actually made an average wage of \$5.94 per hour.

	Gross Weekly Pay	Weekly Pay After Non-Mileage Expenses	Weekly Pay After Mileage and Expenses	Net Hourly Rate
Lyft	\$832.69	\$694.81	\$239.79	\$6.72
DoorDash	\$501.46	\$370.62	\$70.56	\$1.23
Uber	\$1,135.71	\$971.49	\$355.09	\$8.77
All	\$821.50	\$677.06	\$219.76	\$5.49

Drivers’ hourly wages are far below the Denver minimum wage and are by no means enough to make a living in the Denver metro area. The median hourly wage in the Denver metro area is \$23.66,¹¹ over four times higher than drivers’ overall hourly rates, and almost twenty times higher than DoorDash drivers’ hourly rate.

On average, someone would need to make **\$25.08/hr** to afford a 1-BR apartment in Denver

Annual Income Needed for a Denver 1-BR **\$54,160**



Driver Overall Mean Income: **\$5.49/hr**

Average Driver Annual Income **\$11,428**

Source: National Low Income Housing Coalition¹²

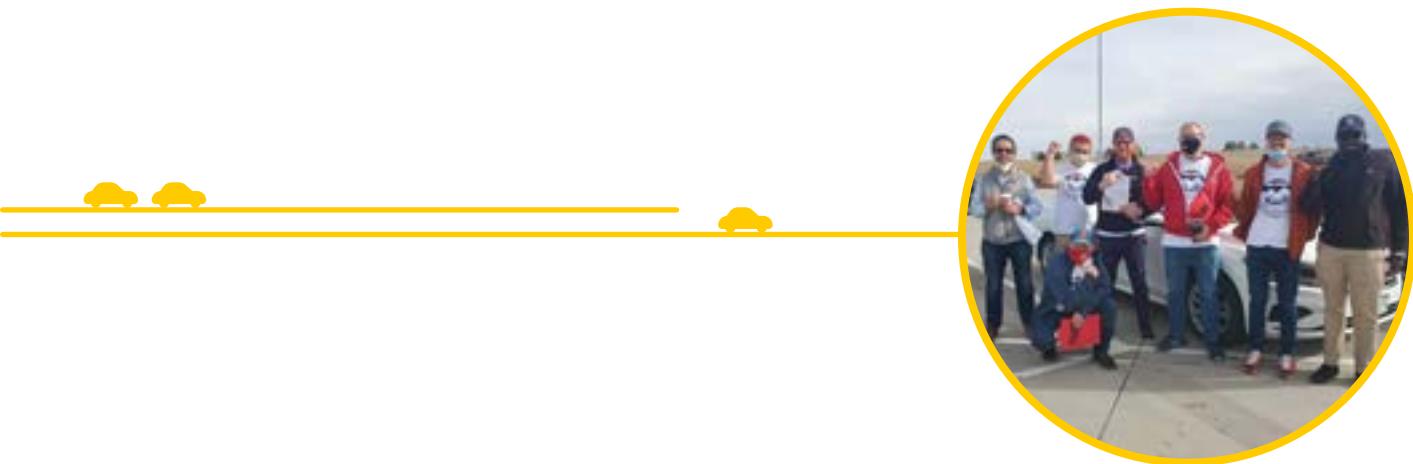
APP-BASED WAGE AND DEADHEAD DATA

Between November 01, 2021 and January 31, 2022, 29 driver volunteers downloaded the Driver's Seat Cooperative (DSC) app in order to provide us with data from 6,079 trips they took on several ride-hailing and food delivery apps. The DSC app collects geolocation data and data on deadhead or unpaid work time versus paid work time. Data capturing paid versus unpaid time was available for Uber, Uber Eats, and Lyft.¹³

DSC Unpaid Work Time

	Total Trips in DSC Survey	% Avg Deadhead Time
Uber	1438	39%
Uber Eats	700	37%
Lyft	2406	36%

Compared to the survey, where drivers estimated they averaged 20% unpaid or 'deadhead' time, the DSC trip data reveals the percentage of this uncompensated work time is much higher, ranging from 36-39%. This range is closer to the 51% of unpaid driving time that the Parrott Reich study calculated from Seattle driver data provided by Uber and Lyft. Given the accuracy of these sources of deadhead time, it's likely that net hourly wages are even lower than the \$5.49/hour calculated from the survey of drivers.¹⁴



RELIANCE ON TIPS

Drivers reported being very reliant on customers to make ends meet. Over one-fifth of the typical driver's income came from tips (22%), though there were important differences among the platforms. DoorDash drivers are startlingly dependent on optional customer generosity: 41% of their income comes from tips. Tipped income rates were lower on the ride-hail platforms (13% for Lyft, 14% for Uber) but still high enough to have an impact on drivers' economic security. These numbers are concerning because multiple studies have found that customers generally tip gig workers less than traditional workers and that a significant number of trips end without a tip at all.¹⁵



Driver Perspective

"Uber offers little support for drivers if there is a disagreement with a customer. Uber will notify me that I am violating our 'community standards' but never provides me with details on how to improve or ask for feedback from me. This is always so confusing because it is counter to the independence I seek to have as a driver. I feel like my rights in my own car are obliterated!"

Gig Driver Michael

GIG WORK IS FULL-TIME WORK

The general public often thinks of gig work as something that most workers are doing on the side to earn extra money. However, our results tell a different story: app-based drivers reported an average of 38 hours worked per week on the app they were surveyed using. Half of the app-based drivers surveyed had been doing gig work for over 2 years, the other half had joined at different points during the pandemic. Over one in five drivers (23%) had begun driving within the last six months.

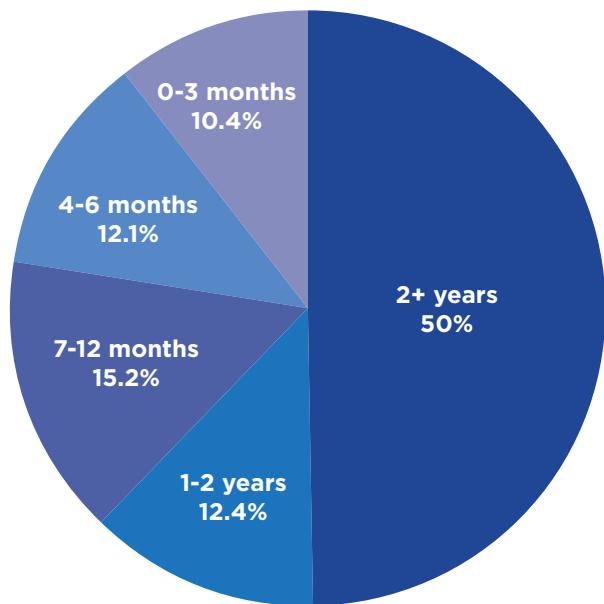
For a typical app worker in Denver, their gig work is the vast majority of their income. Drivers reported an average of 79% of their weekly income being from gig work during the last month, with the average of each individual gig platform topping 75%.

Almost two-thirds of drivers (61%) were fully dependent on their gig income in the previous month, and the majority of drivers on each platform reported relying entirely on their gig income. Far from being a side hustle, these jobs are the primary source of income for the majority of drivers.

Did you know?

The Internal Revenue Service defines full-time employees as those working 30 hours per week or more.¹⁷ App Based Drivers reported working over 38 hours per week on average.

Driver Tenure



Percentage of Drivers Fully Reliant on Gig Income

ALL	LYFT	DOORDASH	UBER
61.44%	57.89%	59.56%	66.98%

IMPACT ON HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF GIG WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Drivers' extremely low wages impact their families and communities significantly. The majority of drivers (59%) support at least one adult or child with their income; almost one in four (23%) support 2+ children. These economic realities were reflected in survey responses as well. 11.5% of respondents relied on at least one form of public benefits. Roughly one in five drivers (20%) reported that they could not afford a \$400 emergency expense, and another 21% reported that they would have to borrow the money or put it on credit.¹⁶ Two in five drivers (42%) also reported that they could not afford to miss a week of wages. These numbers are particularly harrowing given the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers who are still facing the ongoing threat of exposure.



The yearly cost of infant care in Colorado was over **\$15,800 in 2019¹⁸**



58% drivers reported supporting at least one child or adult with their earnings

Moreover, a shockingly high percentage (31%) of drivers reported having no health insurance. For comparison, the 2021 uninsured rate in Denver County was 8%.¹⁹ For these drivers and their families, being uninsured means paying a higher proportion of their total health care costs out of pocket and being more likely to have significantly higher overall health care costs.

It is clear from our data that Denverites doing gig work are not merely doing it to pursue supplemental income on top of another full- or part-time job, which is often a stereotype that perpetuates a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of this work. This narrative is used to justify low wages and limited benefits for a workforce composed mostly of Black and Brown workers.



Denver metro rate of uninsured **8%**



Gig drivers reported having NO health insurance **31%**



The average hospital stay in Colorado is **4.53 days** with charges of **\$80,447**.



Meanwhile, **one in five drivers** (20%) reported that they could not afford a **\$400** emergency expense.

JOB SECURITY

Thus far, driver responses have painted a picture of workers in precarious economic circumstances who rely on gig work as the majority of their income. They need consistent and reliable access to the app(s) that provide them income. However, drivers face a unique challenge in this respect: deactivation. **15% of drivers reported being deactivated** at some point, denying them access to income that they rely on; two-thirds (66%) of deactivated drivers had at least 75% of their income come from platform work. Workers are unable to provide for their families for reasons completely out of their control, regardless of the validity of any issues that led to their deactivation in the first place.



Driver Perspective

"I have witnessed many of my friends be deactivated by the company and it seems to always be with a racist or discriminatory passenger who makes untrue complaints. Some of my fellow drivers don't speak or read fluent English, if they get a complaint, it is hard for them to respond and fight for themselves with Uber."

You never know what a rider may say about you or report you to Uber and if you will be able to defend yourself. Unfortunately, when you invest all of your money in doing this and then get deactivated, it takes away your livelihood. There is no recourse or investigation for when we are deactivated, it just happens and our lives can be ruined, I've seen it too many times. It feels like no one is out there to listen to our stories or hear our side of what happened."

Gig Driver Michael



VIOLENCE, DISCRIMINATION, AND DRIVER SAFETY

Roughly one in five drivers (20%) reported that they had been discriminated against by a customer based on their identity. A similar number of drivers had experienced violence or the threat of violence while working (22%) or felt unsafe due to customers not wearing a face covering to prevent COVID-19 exposure (22%).

It is unacceptable that workers face such unsafe conditions at work and have little recourse through the app companies to keep themselves safe and secure at their workplace. Gig companies have a responsibility to protect their workers and ensure that they can perform their job with dignity and respect.

Real Hazards of Gig Work

These experiences can have devastating consequences for drivers and their families: a recent report found that over 50 gig workers have been killed on the job since 2017.¹⁸ Of those workers, 63% were people of color, even though workers of color comprise only 39% of the overall U.S. workforce. Platform companies often argue that workers can protect their safety by rejecting rides (including when they recently dropped their mask requirement for riders), but bonuses and algorithmic control over order assignments makes it less likely for workers who are so reliant on these apps for income to utilize this function. Gig platforms have created circumstances where **drivers have little actual control over their personal safety if they want to earn enough to survive.**

CONCLUSION

This survey has made clear that app companies are not living up to the promises they have made to workers. While these companies are generating millions, and even billions in revenue, it is at the expense of app-based workers who are, on average in Denver, earning about 35% below the minimum wage.

Discussions of the so-called gig economy are often framed in terms of “innovation,” still the primary innovation of this work arrangement is that it shifts many of the costs of doing business onto app-based workers and their customers.

App-based workers, 57% of whom are workers of color in Denver, reported hourly wages of \$5.49 after expenses. It is also striking how little of app-based gig workers’ wages come from the app companies themselves. While worker’s wages are extremely low, our study found that 22% of those wages come directly from customers, not the companies.

In addition to low wages, there are other barriers these nontraditional workers face that other workers do not. Many drivers (15%) are later denied access to their income through the platforms’ deactivation process and, perhaps most disturbingly of all, app-based gig drivers are not provided protections by gig companies for the significant number of workers who face discrimination (20%) or have been threatened with actual violence (22%).

Unfortunately, app-based workers and their families still rely on these jobs for most of their income. In our study, drivers earned 79% of their income from gig work, and 61% of drivers were completely reliant on gig work to pay their bills. Most drivers (59%) support another person with their income, with 23% supporting two or more children.

As wages have continued to stagnate across the country, workers have grown desperate for any type of alternative. This is particularly true for workers from marginalized groups, such as Black, Brown, and immigrant workers who gig companies overwhelmingly employ. In many ways, the gig economy promised to be that alternative. Workers have been drawn into these jobs with promises of autonomy and deceptively high wages, but as these survey results show, gig work does not live up to these promises.

All workers deserve to be valued and protected. No company should be permitted to use the guise of a “technological revolution” or “innovation” to exempt themselves from labor laws other companies have to follow while pushing people into jobs with low pay and little-to-no benefits. While the technology that gig companies are utilizing may be new, exploiting the labor of workers of color is nothing new. In fact, companies have fought to exempt marginalized workers like domestic workers, farmworkers, and restaurant workers from basic labor protections for decades.

App-based gig workers deserve fair pay, fundamental worker protections, transparency about their jobs and wages, and a secure work experience. Gig companies often present a false narrative—that gig workers must permanently give up the rights and protections other hardworking Coloradans have in order to have some flexibility. We must work as a community to rewrite this narrative and ensure all workers can support their families, have flexibility, and feel safe at work without giving up rights and benefits. Left unchecked and unregulated, gig companies will continue to shift the cost of doing business onto their workers and consumers—taking money out of our communities and putting it into corporate pockets.

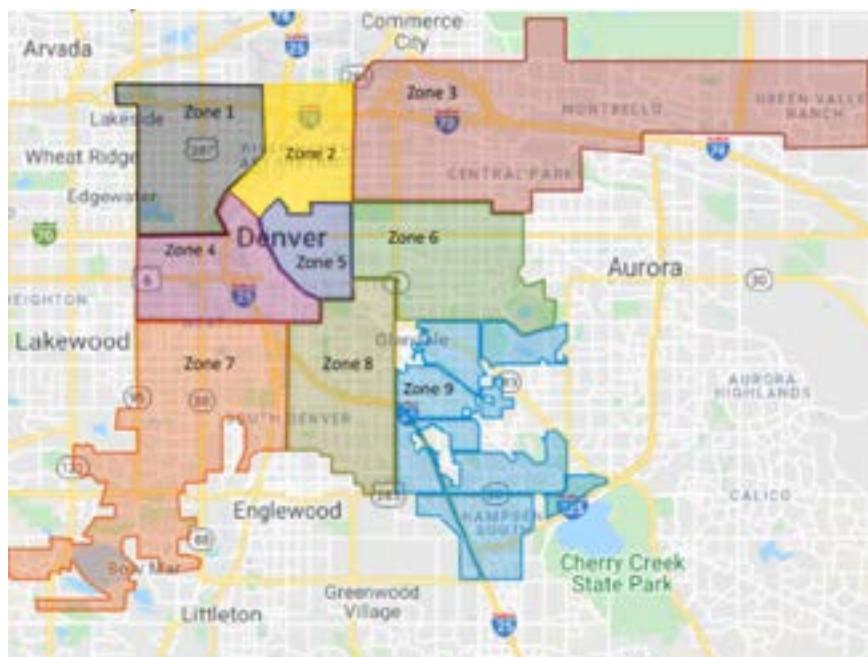
App-based gig workers deserve better, we deserve better, and policymakers must do better.

REPORT METHODOLOGY

This study focused on three gig platforms: Uber, Lyft, and DoorDash. We split the city of Denver into nine zones based on geography and distribution of restaurants. Survey collection was evenly distributed across each zone for each gig platform and took place in January and February 2022. Participants were identified when surveyors ordered rides and deliveries through the apps themselves. This methodology allowed us to collect a representative sample based on the one deployed by the UC Santa Cruz survey of San Francisco drivers.²⁰ Surveyors asked drivers a series of questions about demographics, economics, safety, and other workplace issues. A total of 362 surveys were collected.

Data was collected on 6,079 trips on several ride-hailing and food delivery apps between November 2021 and January 2022 through the Driver's Seat Collective app, which tracks location data and times drivers are working or waiting for rides or deliveries.

This report also contains quotes from gig drivers on their experiences. These drivers are volunteers with Colorado Independent Drivers United, a group of drivers organizing together and fighting collectively for their rights. Their stories are included to ensure readers get more context and understanding of drivers' experiences.



Map of Denver survey zones

ABOUT COLORADO JOBS WITH JUSTICE

Colorado Jobs with Justice (COJWJ) is a long-term, formal coalition of labor, community, faith, and student and youth organizations that come together to advance workers' rights and social justice through building sustained relationships and taking direct action to create concrete change in the lives of working families. We are one of the oldest of the more than forty local, autonomous chapters of the Jobs with Justice network, which has a twenty-five year history of fighting for working families and their communities. Across the network, Jobs with Justice works on a range of issues from labor law reform to healthcare, from organizing campaigns to immigrant rights. In Colorado, we focus on those places where other social justice issues overlap with economic, gender and racial justice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Colorado Jobs with Justice would like to thank all the support we have received from various national teams on this surveying project. We want to say a special thank you to Samantha Dalal, a CU Boulder PhD candidate, for her assistance in analyzing the data and reporting on the survey findings. Thank you to our canvassers Nathan Doll, Jakari Samuel, and Armando Manzanares, under the supervision of Andrea Prebys-Williams. Thank you to Colorado Independ Drivers United for their driver stories highlighted throughout the report and for providing the cover photo. For contributions to the production and release of this report, thanks go to Erin Johansson with Jobs with Justice Education Fund; and Jane Chung at The Worker Agency.

FOOTNOTES

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