

# Driving Away Our Health

## The Economic Insecurity of Working for Lyft and Uber

*Martha Ockenfels-Martinez, MPH and Lili Farhang, MPH*

All across the country, people are using ride-hail services, like Lyft or Uber, to get to a baseball game, run errands, and commute to work. With the touch of a button, a driver arrives quickly, picks up a passenger, and drops them off at their desired destination. More than 1 out of 3 people in the US have used ride-hail services, which are most prominent in urban areas.<sup>1</sup> In San Francisco alone, there are over 1 million ride-hail trips *per week*.<sup>2</sup>

Riders experience a straightforward benefit from the arrangement. So do company executives of the largest ride-hail organizations, with Lyft CEO Logan Green making \$41 million in 2017,<sup>3</sup> and Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi making \$45 million in 2018.<sup>4</sup>

The benefit to the millions of drivers across the country, on the other hand, is much more elusive. As Uber and Lyft take larger cuts from each fare and constantly adjust their algorithms to control driver behavior,<sup>5,6</sup> drivers must work an ever-increasing number of hours just to make ends meet. And as workers classified as independent contractors in the “gig economy,” they lack the benefits of occupational health and safety laws to protect them. The economic instability ride-hail drivers are experiencing is emblematic of work in the gig economy, and is wreaking havoc on the health of those who interface with an app for work.

This report shines a light on the ride-hail driver experience in California and the ways that driving for a ride-hail company impacts someone’s health and well-being. Our analysis is based on the data we gathered from conversations with ride-hail drivers, interviews with experts, and existing literature on economic security and the ride-hail and taxi industries.

## The Ride-hail Landscape in California

*You meet a lot of good people from all walks of life... That's what makes this thing fun.*  
— Juan

The people who drive for ride-hail companies include mothers, fathers, veterans, students, immigrants, and caretakers. Some drive full-time, while others drive to supplement their income from other jobs. We refer to people who drive for a ride-hail company as *drivers*, *ride-hail drivers*, and occasionally as *workers* throughout the report.

In the focus group discussions we held with drivers from across the Bay Area, about half the drivers we spoke with were people of color, and a quarter of the drivers we spoke with were women.\* Participant demographics in our focus groups reflect larger trends in California, where the majority of drivers are men, with women making up less than a quarter of drivers.<sup>7</sup> Women are more likely to drive for Lyft than Uber, as 24% of California Lyft drivers are women, compared to 14% of Uber drivers nationally.<sup>†, 7, 8</sup>

The drivers who participated in our focus groups work for either Uber or Lyft, with many working for both companies. Uber and Lyft are the biggest ride-hail companies by far—Uber controls 65% of the US and Canada ride-hail markets,<sup>9</sup> and Lyft controls 39% of the US ride-hail market.<sup>‡, 10</sup> Ride-hail expert Harry Campbell, also known as The Rideshare Guy, estimates that between 200,000 and 500,000 people drive for a ride-hail company in California. Nationally, millions of people drive for Uber and Lyft. In 2017, Uber announced that the company had 2 million drivers,<sup>11</sup> and Lyft announced this same 2 million driver population milestone in 2018.<sup>12</sup>

---

\* For more information on focus groups, see Appendix A, available at [HumanImpact.org/DrivingAwayHealth](https://HumanImpact.org/DrivingAwayHealth).

† Uber does not have state-by-state demographics.

‡ These market shares are from the companies' S-1 filings, and when added together, equal more than 100%. It's unknown which of the companies has misrepresented or miscalculated their market share.

## Ride-hail Drivers Broadly Reflect Our Racial Demographics

Lyft breaks down the racial identity of their drivers only within big cities and regions in California. The percentage of drivers who are people of color often mirrors the demographics of the region. For example, in Los Angeles, 71% of Lyft drivers are “minorities,”<sup>5</sup> compared to 74% of the city’s population.<sup>13</sup> And in San Francisco, 66% of Lyft drivers are “minorities” compared to 60% of the city’s population.<sup>14</sup> In both of these large metropolitan areas, the majority of drivers are people of color.

In Napa and Sonoma counties, 34% of Lyft drivers are “minorities,” compared to 47% of the region’s population.<sup>15</sup> Uber doesn’t have comparable published demographics of California drivers, but based on a national sample of Uber drivers, the majority of Uber drivers nationally are people of color (55%).<sup>8</sup> In this sample of Uber drivers, 18% identified as Black/African American, 16% identified as Hispanic/Latino, 15% identified as Asian or Pacific Islander, 6% identified as “other” ethnic background, 37% identified as White, and 7% preferred not to answer.<sup>8</sup>

The age of drivers ranges. A report by Lyft found that 25% of California drivers are over the age of 50,<sup>7</sup> and national surveys of Uber drivers have found that between 24%-58.3% of drivers are over 50 years old.<sup>8,16</sup> Veterans of the armed forces also make up a sizable population of ride-hail drivers, with 8% of all California Lyft drivers identifying as veterans.<sup>7</sup>

### Driver Workforce Data Lacking Due to High Turnover and Data Secrecy

Uber and Lyft don’t publicly disclose much of their data on drivers, making it difficult to truly understand ride-hail drivers as a workforce, including average earnings, current driver demographics, and other important information.

---

<sup>5</sup> In their economic-impact reports, Lyft refers to non-White drivers as “minorities.” At Human Impact Partners, we would normally refer to this population grouping as people of color. Our analysis of the data Lyft cite leads us to believe that Lyft refers to all non-White and non-Hispanic populations as “minorities” given that, for example, the percentage of people that Lyft identified as “minorities” reflects the percentage of San Franciscans who are non-White and non-Hispanic. But without data on how Lyft assessed the census data cited, we do not know what specific populations they are referring to and so are leaving the word “minorities” in this report.

Additionally, the ride-hail industry has high turnover, with new drivers constantly signing up and other drivers leaving for various reasons. In one study of Uber drivers in the Bay Area, drivers reported that they had to stop driving after only four months “because of the physical and mental difficulties of the work, the unstable income, and the wear and tear on their cars.”<sup>17</sup> (p.128) In a 2018 survey of Uber drivers, 53.5% had driven for over a year, nearly 20% had driven for six months to one year, and 27.4% had only driven zero to six months.<sup>16</sup>

## Ride-hail Companies Reduce Protections for Workers

Uber and Lyft are considered *Transportation Network Companies* (TNCs), a category created by the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) in 2013 to regulate the peer-to-peer driving service that is the hallmark of ride-hail companies.<sup>18</sup> TNCs are defined as “prearranged transportation services for compensation using an online-enabled application (app) or platform to connect passengers with drivers using their personal vehicles.”<sup>18</sup> There are 16 other ride-hail companies registered in the state of California, including SilverRide, HopSkipDrive, and Kiddie Commute.<sup>19</sup>

Some researchers and advocates take issue with the TNC classification because TNCs like Uber and Lyft have fewer safety rules and regulations than taxi companies. Ride-hail companies operate on the same premise as taxi companies—customers pay someone to drive them to a specified destination—but with newer technology.<sup>17</sup> Uber and Lyft both maintain that they are not transportation companies but technology platforms,<sup>20</sup> and have worked to rewrite both state and local labor laws across the country in support of their business plans.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, both companies have rolled back protections for drivers that were previously won for and by workers—specifically, workers of color and immigrants.<sup>17,21</sup>

## Dwindling and Unpredictable Incomes for Drivers

*The typical airport ride from Oakland Airport just to [go] back up to Oakland or Berkeley used to be \$30. Now it's \$12.*

— Lauren

### Income Is a Key Predictor of Health

Income and health are intricately entwined. We need economic security to thrive, successfully manage stress, and prevent disease. A family's income directly impacts their ability to meet their basic needs. Jobs that don't offer livable wages force families to choose between paying rent, buying healthy foods, and seeking health care.<sup>22</sup> Family income also affects kids' school readiness and achievement. Children are more likely to do well in school and stay in school longer when their family has a higher—more livable—income.<sup>23-25</sup>

Higher income is associated with living longer,<sup>26-28</sup> as well as protection against chronic diseases like diabetes, kidney disease, liver disease, heart disease, hypertension, and stroke.<sup>29</sup> And as incomes rise, birth outcomes also improve.<sup>30</sup> Some researchers have promoted the idea that low wages should be considered an occupational health hazard<sup>31</sup> due to the impact that low wages play in total worker health.<sup>32</sup>

### Ride-hail Driving Is a Crucial Source of Income

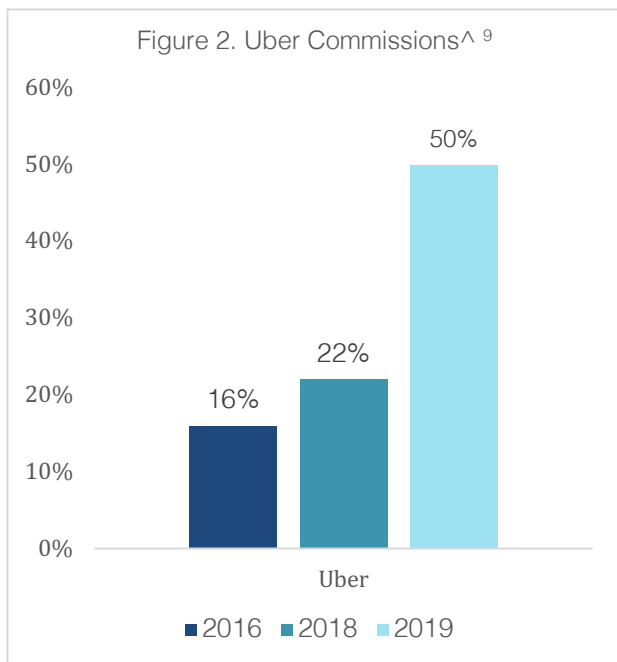
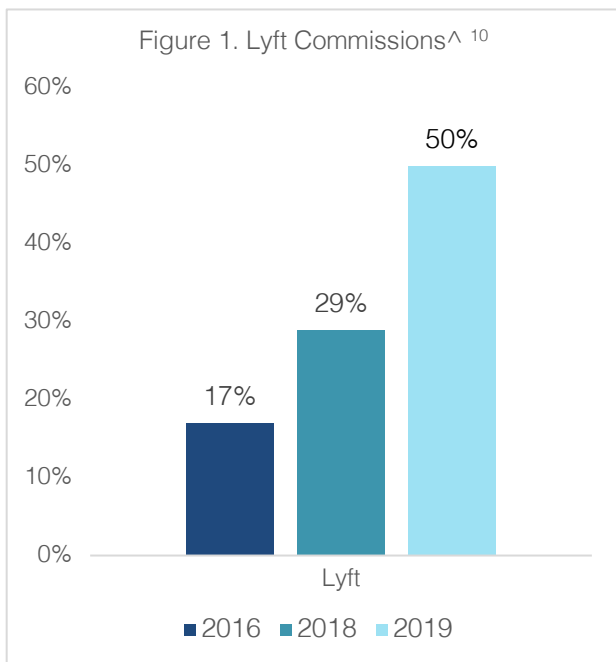
Many drivers work full-time for Uber and Lyft, or are reliant on driving as a second or third income in order to make ends meet. As other researchers have found, driving is a crucial source of income for many workers.<sup>33</sup> A national survey of 2,625 drivers found that half of the drivers worked for a ride-hail company as their only job.<sup>16</sup> A study of drivers in Los Angeles also found that half of the drivers were driving full-time as a living,<sup>33</sup> and that close to half of those full-time drivers were supporting at least one child.<sup>33</sup>

Ride-hail companies often describe driving for their companies as a “side hustle,” suggesting that many who drive for Uber or Lyft are just trying to earn extra spending money. According to Uber, 39% of their California drivers worked fewer than 10 hours a week in 2017,<sup>34</sup> and 89% of Lyft drivers worked fewer than 20 hours a week.<sup>7</sup> Yet this narrative conflicts with what other research has found: that many drivers are reliant on driving to make a living.

## Uber and Lyft Reduce Driver Earnings

Since their founding, Uber and Lyft have increased the commission they take from every ride, effectively lowering the income of drivers. Focus group participants reported that Uber and Lyft are paying drivers much less than in years past, and both companies acknowledge as much in their recent public offering statements.

As the graphs in Figures 1 and 2 show below, the amount of money Uber and Lyft take from drivers has increased, based on their own reported data in 2016 and 2018.<sup>9, 10</sup> <sup>\*\*</sup> In our focus groups, drivers reported that Lyft and Uber sometimes take up to a 50% commission from their ride earnings.<sup>^</sup> These figures don't paint the full picture of how deeply Lyft and Uber driver earnings are diminishing: the cost of gas, vehicle maintenance, tolls, and insurance further reduce driver income.



Some research has found that an even bigger commission is actually withheld than what is reported in the S-1 filings. Recent research on driver earnings in Seattle found that Uber

<sup>\*\*</sup> Lyft commission includes Lyft company bikes/scooters.

<sup>^</sup> 2019 bar graphs reflect qualitative data from our focus groups.

takes a median of 31% of each fare, up from 20% in 2013.<sup>35</sup> An analysis of 37 UberX trips in San Francisco found that Uber took 43% of a commission from minimum-fare rides in the city when the TNC “booking fees” are taken into account.<sup>36</sup>

*I started driving almost four years ago. Back then, Uber used to be way better than what it is right now. Most people did Uber back then because it was real good money... When I started, if you drove...between 25 up to 35 hours a week, you could easily make...between \$2000 up to...\$2500 a week. Right now, to make that same amount of money, you have to drive at least...70 hours.*

— Mostafa

Drivers in our focus group reported that the companies have taken upwards of 50% of their ride fares. Taking such a large cut means that drivers—especially those who rely on their ride-hail income—must drive longer and longer hours to reach the same income targets. For example, a survey of Uber trips in San Francisco found that in 2013, drivers could make \$10 by driving 2.36 miles.<sup>36</sup> By 2016, drivers had to travel almost twice as far to earn that same \$10, by driving 4.71 miles.<sup>36</sup>

## Drivers Earn Less Than the Minimum Wage

A national study on driver incomes found that the majority of drivers earn less than \$10 per hour after the cost of insurance, gas, and car depreciation are taken into account.<sup>16</sup> Drivers on average get \$14.73 an hour after tips—yet once all the costs that are on the driver to pay for are accounted for, the average hourly pay is less than \$10 an hour.<sup>16</sup> In cities like San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego, Uber drivers earn less than the locally mandated minimum wage once driving expenses, Uber fees, self-employment taxes, and the cost of health insurance and other similar employee benefits are taken into account.<sup>37</sup>

Minimum-wage laws are built to protect low-wage workers, and increases to the minimum wage have been associated with a wide range of positive outcomes for health. Yet Lyft and Uber drivers that make below the minimum wage are unable to benefit from these income protections.

## Women Earn Less Than Men Who Drive for Ride-hail Apps

Female drivers earn even less than their male counterparts, increasing their susceptibility to negative health consequences from income inequities. In a national study of nearly 2 million Uber drivers, researchers found a 7% gender earnings gap.<sup>38</sup> The pay gap was in part due to differences in where men and women drive, in the number of hours of experience they have driving, and how fast they drive.<sup>38</sup> Men are more likely to drive near more “lucrative locations” and are more willing to drive in areas with “higher crime and more drinking establishments.”<sup>38</sup> Additionally, men are more likely to drive more hours a week and are more likely to drive longer term with the ride-hail companies, increasing their driving experience, which increases their ability to earn money.<sup>38</sup>

## Unpredictable Income from Driving Creates Economic Insecurity

As Uber and Lyft continue to decrease driver earnings per ride, drivers are increasing their driving hours to survive. Additionally, ride-hail companies continuously add new drivers to their platforms, and there is no regulation for how many vehicles can be on the road at one time—creating more competition for riders, and decreasing drivers’ ability to make money.

Uber and Lyft also charge riders different fares depending on the time of day, the amount of traffic, distance of the ride, and the number of drivers on the road. It’s a constantly shifting dynamic that makes it virtually impossible for drivers to predict their income, creating enormous economic instability in ways that increase stress and produce a host of harms for driver health.



## Driver Control Is a Myth

*How is it flexible when I'm working 60+ hours a week? Where's the flexibility? I don't have the flexibility to spend time with my children, let alone have a life... I drive six days, and I spend one day with my kids. I spend like four hours a week with my children.*

— Steve

For drivers in our focus groups, there were many reasons that they started working for ride-hail companies—foremost was the flexibility it allowed. Driving for the ride-hail apps initially provided flexibility for parents and students to make a living and attend to their responsibilities. Ride-hail driving is marketed as an opportunity to have a flexible work schedule that can adjust to every driver's lifestyle and needs.

Yet the offer of flexibility has become a false promise for drivers who rely on driving income to support themselves and their families. In order to make anything resembling a decent wage, drivers are forced to work at specific times and in specific locations. Since there isn't a set wage for hours worked, and the rate for a ride changes daily, drivers feel compelled to work even when driving is in conflict with life and family needs. And the apps often redirect drivers to high-traffic areas, taking away a driver's ability to decide where they want to drive. We heard from Bay Area drivers in our focus groups that the apps and Lyft and Uber representatives will often urge them to go into the city of San Francisco to offer rides—even when they live 1 to 3 hours away.

## Control Over Work Environment Is Important for Health

Research shows that decision latitude and control are important health determinants: workers with less control over their work environment have worse health than those with more agency.<sup>39, 40</sup> Studies have found that workers who had stressful jobs and low control over their work had higher rates of depression, anxiety, insomnia, and exhaustion,<sup>39, 41</sup> as well as physical health problems including headaches, stomach problems, sleep disorders, and high blood pressure.<sup>42</sup> Giving workers more agency on how they do their job could prove to be a useful workplace intervention for promoting health. In one study, the physiological stress of workers was reduced as workers gained more agency on the job.<sup>43</sup>

## The Threat of “Deactivation” Is Constant

While a driver can refuse rides that don't fit their schedule or geographic range, drivers are hesitant to reject any ride for fear of losing money, or worse, being deactivated. Deactivation is when a ride-hail company permanently shuts down a driver's driving account.

If a driver declines too many rides, drivers face a “time-out” on the app, or a complete deactivation of their account. This often happens without much warning, and without much recourse on the driver's part. Drivers feel compelled to accept all rides sent to them by the app, and they have to accept rides without knowledge of where the rider is going, or how far they will have to drive to pick up and drop off a ride—taking away driver control and agency.

*I was deactivated for a week, with no explanation why... They didn't respond to 10 messages from me—asking, begging for any information. And a week later, I was reactivated. No explanation.*

— Lauren

Drivers described the experience of getting deactivation threats and being deactivated as highly destabilizing. For drivers dependent on the income, being unilaterally deactivated posed a very real risk to their ability to pay their bills and created significant stress. Importantly, drivers don't have access to unemployment if they are deactivated from one of the ride-hail companies.

## Companies Control the Terms of Work

*If I'm self-employed, I need to have the right to choose or to take or not take a ride, based on the information that exists on that ride.*

— Edan

In addition to the threat of deactivation, drivers described constant changes to their contract with Lyft and Uber that they have no ability to negotiate. Drivers periodically receive contract updates that required them to “agree” before gaining access to the ride-hail app. If they do not agree, drivers can no longer access the app, drive, and earn income.

Drivers in our focus groups stressed how important it was for them to be able to have more control over which rides they accepted, and to know where each fare was headed. They described high job demands, yet low job control.

*In this transaction, you are the person who has the least control over anything because when you get a ride [request], you don't know where [the passenger] is going... You might end up—pretty frequently—driving 10 miles [to pick up], [and] taking a person half a block. And that's it, you got your four dollars for the 20 minutes that you just worked.*

— Edan

The constant contract changes, the threat of deactivation, and the lack of information over where they drive means drivers have very little job control or personal agency over their work. While they may have become ride-hail drivers for the perceived flexibility the arrangement would bring, over time, the idea of “driver control” isn't a reality for many drivers.

## Paying a Toll with Their Bodies

*I've developed arthritis in my back... My doctor told me, "You need to get out and walk. You need to exercise. You need to stretch. You're doing this to yourself."... It's not because we don't know better, it's just that we don't have that opportunity.*

— Juan

### Driving Conditions Directly Harm People's Well-Being

Pain, lack of exercise, and poor eating habits were the most direct and obvious ways that drivers described their physical health as impacted. Drivers in our focus groups named stress, fatigue, and muscle and skeletal pain as the top health issues they had experienced as a result of driving for Uber and Lyft. More than half the drivers had also experienced headaches, sleep deprivation, and depression from driving—and a few drivers had named dehydration and kidney issues, diabetes, hypertension, heart problems, and violence and injury.

### Stress Hurts Drivers Over the Long Term

Most adults are able to manage the stress caused by sporadic crises or episodes. But when stressors become chronic and long-term—like the stress of unpredictable earnings and driving long hours for low pay—the body can no longer regulate stress hormones properly. This leads to a host of health issues, including immune-system damage, anxiety and depression, heart disease, digestive issues, headaches, sleep issues, weight gain and obesity, and issues with memory and concentration.<sup>44</sup> Drivers are in a state of chronic stress because of the physical demands of their jobs, as well as the stress of driving long hours for low pay, with unpredictable earnings and a lack of control while driving.

### Dehumanizing and Psychological Toll of Working for an Algorithm

Drivers in our focus groups also shared the psychological toll of working for an app. Their work is transmitted and tracked by a phone application. If something arises in their workplace, they have no human recourse, no ability to talk with a co-worker or a human supervisor. One driver described the psychologically damaging aspect of driving long hours in isolation, away from co-workers and basic amenities like restrooms. This lack of social connection for drivers could have long-term health effects.

Research has found that strong social ties, networks, and support are important to good health.<sup>45, 46</sup> A key study on the importance of social support found that individuals who are more isolated had an increased risk of dying early from cancer, ischemic heart disease, cerebrovascular and circulatory diseases, as well as some respiratory and gastrointestinal diseases.<sup>46</sup>

## Working in Isolation Is Bad for Health

In a study on precarious employment or gig work in Canada, workers in precarious job situations experienced feelings of isolation both at work and outside of work—and that some workers became withdrawn from friends and family because of their work-related stress and anxiety.<sup>42</sup> This same study also found that workers in precarious work situations have a difficult time balancing work and home-life obligations<sup>42</sup>—further evidence that the promise of flexibility in gig work is a false promise.

Social support in the workplace—which includes support from coworkers, supervisors, and the company in general—is associated with lower rates of depression and higher job performance.<sup>47</sup> Work environments that have higher rates of social support have better worker well-being, as well as better productivity within the workplace.<sup>47</sup> A study in Canada found that workers with more coworker support are less likely to be depressed.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, when workers didn't have sufficient support from their supervisors, they were more likely to experience depression.<sup>41</sup> Also, feeling socially isolated at work is associated with cardiovascular disease, compromised immunity, depression, and a shorter lifespan.<sup>48</sup>

Drivers also discussed how their eating habits had changed since they starting driving for ride-hail companies:

*My weight got to a point where it was like a real health risk. And part of that, a lot of that, is the diet, you know... They say "freedom and flexibility," but you're really kind of restricted to working particular times if you want to make money... You're up late so you're eating late, you're eating stuff...on the road, stopping at a gas station and grabbing some garbage and eating it, and...a ton of caffeine, sodas, and all that stuff to keep that awareness.*

— Jeff

Drivers described themselves as being caught in a bind: they knew that driving wasn't healthy for them and what they needed to do to reduce these health risks—but they felt utterly hamstrung in being able to limit their exposure. It was the nature of the work itself, along with the absence of “workplace” regulations to protect and promote their well-being, which continued to place their health at risk.

## Sitting Too Much in the Driver's Seat

Drivers in our focus groups discussed how the sedentary nature of the job—sitting for many hours in a day while driving or waiting for rides—was causing pain in their lower extremities, their back, and throughout their whole bodies. Others brought up that they had a daily conflict of choosing between taking doctor-recommended driving breaks, or plowing through and driving hours on end. Studies of taxi drivers have found that the prolonged sitting while driving limits overall physical activity<sup>49</sup> and creates musculoskeletal disorders and chronic pain, including lower back<sup>50</sup> and knee pain.<sup>51</sup>

*Because you don't have the time to stop and do what you know you're supposed to do... So do I be healthy and take care of me? And stop and take a lunch break and eat a healthy meal? Do I take my breaks?... Or do I chase that dollar? A lot of times, one gets pitted against another.*

— Juan

Extended sitting is associated with an increase in death from cardiovascular disease<sup>52, 53</sup> and is associated with an increased risk of obesity, high blood sugar, and increased blood pressure.<sup>54</sup> Studies have also found that prolonged sitting is related to an increased risk of diabetes, heart disease, cancer, anxiety and depression, as well as physical effects like shoulder, lower back, and neck pain.<sup>55</sup>

*Last year, I had this really weird, extreme sharp pain that popped up in my back. And my doctor knew enough to tell me that it's posture-related ... I couldn't sleep at night. It kept hurting...throughout the night... I encountered one more driver who experienced exactly the same type of pain...it took something like six or seven months where I reduced my driving to nearly nothing for [it to subside].*

— Edan

Drivers in our focus group shared that it wasn't always like this: when Lyft and Uber first started, drivers could make a living driving only 30 or 40 hours a week. Now that the ride-hail companies have decreased their income, drivers are sitting in the car for 60 or 70 hours a week—greatly increasing the risks to health from being overly sedentary.

## Drivers Are Denied Basic Workplace Protections

Uber and Lyft classify drivers as independent contractors, not employees. This means wage and hour laws and occupational health and safety laws don't apply to them—and they aren't eligible for health insurance, paid time off, or workers' compensation. Additionally, drivers don't have access to government-based safety-net benefits like unemployment insurance, even if they drive full-time.

### Drivers Are On Their Own for Health Insurance

*There is a good portion, myself included, that are actually forced onto Medi-Cal to have medical insurance. And it's the state subsidizing Uber's responsibility—essentially because they are not paying at a level where I can afford to...buy that coverage on my own. And I qualify with two kids, and I have to also take their health into account. I'm ashamed to be on it, but that's reality, right?... We don't even make a livable wage to be able to provide for ourselves and our family. Even just the very basic. **There's no way I should be qualified for assistance if I'm working full-time, plus. I work minimum 60 hours a week.***

— Jeff

Uber and Lyft don't provide access to health insurance, and this plays a big role in drivers' health. Many drivers are unable to pay for health insurance because it is too expensive to purchase as an individual. Employer-provided health insurance is more cost-effective than when individuals purchase private insurance directly on their own, because employers get tax breaks and have larger purchasing power.<sup>56</sup> Buying individual health care is expensive; one driver said he pays \$350 a month for insurance, not including medications.

Having health insurance is key for good health—people who are uninsured are less healthy and more likely to die early than people who have health insurance. Uninsured people get less preventative care and screenings. One study found that 1 in 4 adults in the US with individual health insurance went without needed health care because they couldn't afford the cost of the test, treatment, prescription, or visit to their specialists or general practitioner.<sup>57</sup> In another study, uninsured people had a 35% higher chance of dying at the



hospital for the same diagnoses as someone with health insurance.<sup>58</sup> The researchers behind this study theorized that this stark difference in mortality could be due to people without health insurance receiving lower-quality health care than people with insurance.<sup>58</sup>

## Ride-hail Drivers Live and Work in Pain Without Affordable Medical Care

We heard from drivers that they delay going to the doctor, suffer with pain, and avoid needed medical attention because they can't afford the medical bill on their wages. One driver shared that they will drive, in pain, for months at a time, avoiding the \$40 fee needed to see a chiropractor because they need the money to support their children.

On top of that, drivers don't have paid sick time in order to seek medical care. A recent study found that even among workers who had health insurance and access to free preventative care, without paid sick leave, the workers were less likely to get preventative health-care screenings—even when they have been advised to seek care because of their medical history.<sup>59</sup> Preventative health care is important for preventing heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.<sup>59</sup>

A few of our focus group participants shared that if it wasn't for outside safety nets—like having health care through their veterans benefits, or adult children who were able to offer occasional economic support—they don't know how they would survive.

## The Debt Burden Is High for Drivers

*I'll leave this job in debt... That's how much of a nightmare this job has become for me.*

— Steve

Ride-hail drivers are responsible for vehicle maintenance costs, gas, and repairs—in addition to the costs of citations they receive from police and transit authorities while working for a ride-hail company.

Drivers in our focus group also reported taking on debt in order to work for a ride-hail company, which is supported by other research conducted with ride-hail drivers in Los Angeles and Washington DC.<sup>33, 60</sup> Debt is associated with increases in stress, depression, high blood pressure, and overall poorer self-reported health.<sup>61</sup> Indebtedness can also increase suicide ideation and anxiety, and adversely impact other health behaviors.<sup>62</sup> One of the

drivers in our focus groups described how she felt forced to go into debt in order to keep her job with Lyft and her income afloat:

*Lyft, in 2016, made it so that the car I did drive—which was paid off...wouldn't be getting any bonuses... So I went and bought a new car, and now I have payments of \$300 a month, and my insurance because of this is \$300 a month. I pay in one year, \$10,000 for my car—gas, you know, oil changes, all that stuff.*

— Ann

In a study of drivers in Washington, DC, researchers found that 1 in 3 Uber drivers “took on debt as a result of their work on the ride-hailing platform.”<sup>60</sup> In another survey of Uber drivers, over half of the drivers (57%) bought, “leased, or made substantial investments in vehicles to drive for Uber.”<sup>63</sup> Another study found that 1 in 3 drivers had bought or leased their vehicle in order to be able to drive for a ride-hail company, and then had to continue driving in order to make loan payments.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusions and Recommendations

*Pay us better.* — Steve

Our research indicates that drivers are at risk of significant harms as a result of the economic instability and stress associated with driving for ride-hail companies. To protect driver health and well-being, policymakers and decision-makers in the ride-hail industry must enact policies and practices that will ensure economic stability and better driving conditions for workers.

Drivers report being in a constant state of stress, and this is especially true for drivers who work full-time. The community of drivers is growing, and the companies are transparent about plans to continue to reduce driver pay<sup>64</sup>—making the stakes high for California workers.

The health impacts that drivers experience are mediated by how much they earn, how reliable their income is, and how much control they have over their work. Their health is also directly affected by occupational hazards and their workplace conditions—which for drivers, is their vehicle and the roads they drive on. **To that end, we propose the following to protect the health and well-being of ride-hail drivers:**

### Establish a livable wage

To protect California worker health and well-being, the state of California needs to establish a minimum-wage floor for ride-hail drivers. Drivers increasingly rely on this form of gig work as their sole income, or as an indispensable source of income. And focus group participants overwhelmingly agreed that their unreliable pay directly affected their health. New York City has already done this for their drivers—ride-hail drivers will now make at least \$27.86 per hour with the city's minimum wage-floor implementation.<sup>65</sup>

## Increase job control, fare transparency, and driver input at work

Drivers deserve agency in how and when they work, and they need clear channels of communication with the ride-hail companies. We recommend that Lyft and Uber meaningfully include drivers in decision making on how the app functions, including around: ride destination disclosure, surge pricing, establishing a wage floor for drivers, and a process to appeal deactivations. At this point in time, it is next to impossible for drivers to contact the companies they drive for, never mind have a say in their working conditions. Drivers need a real voice at work about the decisions that impact their lives.

## Provide health benefits

Given the particular risks that ride-hail drivers face as a result of their working conditions, ride-hail companies in California should provide health benefits and paid sick leave to drivers, who are key to the operation of their business. There is a precedent for this—in June 2018 Uber started offering said sick leave and other health-related benefits for drivers in the European Union—including support for driving injuries and pay for parental leave.<sup>66</sup>

### California's AB5

A California's State Assembly bill, AB5, is currently moving through California's legislature and could change the dynamics of work—and health—for drivers across the state. As of the writing of this report, the bill has passed the Assembly, and is awaiting a vote in the Senate. The bill would codify a new test for determining whether a worker is an independent contractor or employee and make possible the reclassification of an expanded set of independent contractor workers as employees. If the bill passes, and Uber and Lyft drivers are reclassified as employees, they would be eligible for unemployment insurance, health-care subsidies, paid parental leave, overtime pay, workers' compensation, and a minimum hourly wage. Additionally, the State of California stands to gain \$7 billion a year if all currently misclassified workers became employees.<sup>67</sup>

## About This Report

Human Impact Partners and Gig Workers Rising collaborated on this project in response to concerns about the health impacts of driving for a ride-hail company in California.

Our research methods included:

- Literature review on the social, health impacts of ride-hail driving and related industries
- Three focus groups with 13 people total who drive for Lyft and/or Uber
- In-depth qualitative analysis of focus group themes
- In-depth interviews with three occupational health and economics experts

Our approach was to assess how working in the gig economy—specifically as a Lyft or Uber driver—has become a matter for public health professionals to contend with as an economic insecurity issue. We employed a public health and health equity lens in our analysis of the issue. For more information, visit [HumanImpact.org/DrivingAwayHealth](https://HumanImpact.org/DrivingAwayHealth).

*Photo by Ariadna Morales*



## References

1. More Americans are using ride-hailing apps. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/04/more-americans-are-using-ride-hailing-apps/>. Published January 4, 2019. Accessed May 17, 2019.
2. TNCs Today. SFCTA. <https://www.sfcta.org/projects/tncs-today>. Published 2017. Accessed April 19, 2019.
3. Lekach S. Lyft executives earned \$300 as Lyft drivers, IPO filing reveals. Mashable. <https://mashable.com/article/lyft-driver-executives-driving-pay-ipo/>. Published March 1, 2019. Accessed June 27, 2019.
4. Wolverson T. Uber gave CEO Dara Khosrowshahi \$45 million in total pay last year, but it paid its COO even more. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/uber-ceo-dara-khosrowshahi-salary-total-compensation-45-million-in-2018-2019-4>. Published April 11, 2019. Accessed June 27, 2019.
5. Staff R. Uber Fees: How Much Does Uber Pay, Actually? (With Case Studies). Ridester. <https://www.ridester.com/uber-fees/>. Updated 2019. Accessed May 8, 2019.
6. Perea C. How Uber Uses Behavior Modification To Control Its Drivers. The Rideshare Guy. <https://therideshareguy.com/how-uber-uses-behavior-modification-to-control-its-drivers/>. Published October 17, 2016. Accessed August 1, 2019.
7. Lyft. Lyft 2019 Economic Impact Report, California. <https://www.lyftimpact.com/stats/states/california>. Published 2019. Accessed July 2, 2019.
8. Benenson Strategy Group. *The Driver Roadmap: Where Uber Driver-Partners Have Been And Where They're Going*. Uber; 2015. [https://ubernewsroomapi.10upcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/BSG\\_Uber\\_Report.pdf](https://ubernewsroomapi.10upcdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/BSG_Uber_Report.pdf). Accessed April 18, 2019.
9. Uber Technologies, Inc. Form S-1 Registration Statemnt. United States Securities and Exchange Commission; 2019. <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1543151/000119312519103850/d647752ds1.htm#toc>. Accessed May 27, 2019.

10. Lyft, Inc. Form S-1 Registration Statemnt. United States Securities and Exchange Commission; 2019.  
[https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1759509/000119312519059849/d633517ds1.htm#toc633517\\_4](https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1759509/000119312519059849/d633517ds1.htm#toc633517_4). Accessed May 27, 2019.
11. Camp G. Uber's path forward. <https://medium.com/@gc/ubers-path-forward-b59ec9bd4ef6>. Published June 20, 2017. Accessed May 27, 2019.
12. McNeill J. Introducing Lyft Driver Services. <https://medium.com/@jmaclyft/introducing-lyft-driver-services-ac1ab9488ac6>. Published March 26, 2019. Accessed May 23, 2019.
13. Lyft. Lyft 2019 Economic Impact Report, Los Angeles. <https://www.lyftimpact.com/stats/cities/los-angeles>. Accessed July 2, 2019.
14. Lyft. Lyft 2019 Economic Impact Report, San Francisco. <https://www.lyftimpact.com/stats/cities/san-francisco>. Accessed July 2, 2019.
15. Lyft. Lyft 2019 Economic Impact Report, Napa and Sonoma County. <https://www.lyftimpact.com/stats/cities/napa-and-sonoma-county>. Accessed July 2, 2019.
16. JC. Ridester's 2018 Independent Driver Earnings Survey. Ridester. <https://www.ridester.com/2018-survey/>. Published August 28, 2018. Accessed May 8, 2019.
17. Dubal V. The Drive to Precarity: A Political History of Work, Regulation, & Labor Advocacy in San Francisco's Taxi & Uber Economies. *Berkeley Journal of Employment & Labor Law*. 2017;38(1):73-165. <https://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1501&context=bjell>. Accessed April 17, 2019.
18. California Public Utilities Commission. *CPUC Establishes Rules for Transportation Network Companies*. September 19, 2013.  
<http://docs.cpuc.ca.gov/PublishedDocs/Published/G000/M077/K132/77132276.PDF>. Accessed May 27, 2019.
19. Transportation Network Company (TNC) Permits Issued. <https://www.cpuc.ca.gov/tncpermitsissued/>. Accessed May 27, 2019.

20. Burns J. Uber And Lyft Won't Admit What They Are. *Forbes*.  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/janetwburns/2019/03/20/uber-and-lyft-dont-know-what-they-are-courts-have-some-ideas/#5838cd0bc13f>. Published March 20, 2019. Accessed July 2, 2019.
21. Borkholder J, Montgomery M, Chen MS, Smith R. Uber State Interference: How Transportation Network Companies Buy, Bully, and Bamboozle Their Way To Deregulation.  
<https://www.forworkingfamilies.org/sites/default/files/publications/Uber%20State%20Interference%20Jan%202018.pdf>. Published January 2018. Accessed June 27, 2019.
22. United Way of Northern New Jersey. United for ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). United for ALICE. <https://www.unitedforalice.org>. Accessed July 31, 2019.
23. Isaacs JB. Starting School at a Disadvantage: The School Readiness of Poor Children. 2012. Center on Children and Families at Brookings Institution. March 2012. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0319\\_school\\_disadvantage\\_isaacs.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/0319_school_disadvantage_isaacs.pdf). Accessed July 31, 2019.
24. Duncan GJ, Morris PA, Rodrigues C. Does Money Really Matter? Estimating Impacts of Family Income on Young Children's Achievement With Data From Random-Assignment Experiments. *Dev Psychol*. 2011;47(5):1263-1279. doi:10.1037/a0023875
25. Reardon, SF. The Widening Income Achievement Gap. *Educ Leadersh*. 2013;70(8):10-16.  
<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may13/vol70/num08/The-Widening-Income-Achievement-Gap.aspx>. Accessed July 31, 2019.
26. Chetty R, Stepner M, Abraham S, et al. The Association Between Income and Life Expectancy in the United States, 2001-2014. *JAMA*. 2016;315(16):1750-1766. doi:10.1001/jama.2016.4226
27. Braveman PA, Cubbin C, Egerter S, Williams DR, Pamuk E. Socioeconomic disparities in health in the United States: What the patterns tell us. *Am J Public Health*. 2010;100(S1).  
<http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2009.166082>. Accessed April 11, 2013.
28. Glymour MM, Avendano M, Kawachi I. Socioeconomic Status and Health. In: Berkman LF, Kawachi I, Glymour MM, eds. *Social Epidemiology*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press; 2014:17-62.
29. Pleis JR, Lethbridge-Cejku M. Summary Health Statistics for U.S. Adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2006. (403882008-001). 2007. doi:10.1037/e403882008-001



30. Glinianaia SV, Ghosh R, Rankin J, Pearce MS, Parker L, Pless-Mulloli T. No improvement in socioeconomic inequalities in birthweight and preterm birth over four decades: A population-based cohort study. *BMC Public Health*. 2013;13(1):1-9. doi:10.1186/1471-2458-13-345
31. Leigh JP, De Vogli R. Low Wages as Occupational Health Hazards. *J Occup Environ Med*. 2016;58(5):444-447. doi:10.1097/JOM.0000000000000717
32. Howard J. Occupational health issues in the USA. *Occup Med*. 2017;67(1):2-4. doi:10.1093/occmed/kqw162
33. Waheed S, Herrera L, Gonzalez-Vasquez AL, Shaddock-Hernández J, Koonse T, Leynov D. More Than a Gig: A Survey of Ride-Hailing Drivers in Los Angeles. UCLA Labor Center; 2018. <https://www.labor.ucla.edu/publication/more-than-a-gig/>. Accessed April 19, 2019.
34. Said C. Uber says drivers in Bay Area made \$1.07 billion last year. *San Francisco Chronicle*. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/business/article/Uber-drivers-in-Bay-Area-made-1-07-billion-last-13105699.php>. Published July 26, 2018. Accessed April 18, 2019.
35. Groover H. Uber, Lyft drivers in Seattle see pay cuts as companies go public. *StarTribune.com*. <http://www.startribune.com/uber-lyft-drivers-in-seattle-see-pay-cuts-as-companies-go-public/510026392/>. Published May 16, 2019. Accessed July 25, 2019.
36. Perea C. What's The Real Commission That Uber Takes From Its Drivers? [Infographic]. *Rideshare Guy Blog Podcast*. July 2016. <https://therideshareguy.com/whats-the-real-commission-that-uber-takes-from-its-drivers-infographic/>. Accessed May 24, 2019.
37. Mishel L. Uber and the Labor Market. Economic Policy Institute; 2018. <https://www.epi.org/files/pdf/145552.pdf>. Accessed April 19, 2019.
38. Cook C, Diamond R, Hall J, List J, Oyer P. *The Gender Earnings Gap in the Gig Economy: Evidence from over a Million Rideshare Drivers*. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research; 2018:w24732. doi:10.3386/w24732
39. Karasek RA. Job Demands, Job Decision Latitude, and Mental Strain: Implications for Job Redesign. *Adm Sci Q*. 1979;24(2):285-308. doi:10.2307/2392498
40. Marmot MG, Bosma H, Hemingway H, Brunner E, Stansfeld S. Contribution of job control and other risk factors to social variations in coronary heart disease incidence. *The Lancet*. 1997;350(9073):235-239. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(97)04244-X

41. Shields M. Stress and depression in the employed population. *Health Rep.* 2006;17(4):11-29.
42. Clarke M, Lewchuk W, de Wolff A, King A. "This just isn't sustainable": Precarious employment, stress and workers' health. *Int J Law Psychiatry.* 2007;30(4-5):311-326.  
doi:10.1016/j.ijlp.2007.06.005
43. Berkman LF, Kawachi I, Theorell T. Working Conditions and Health. In: Berkman LF, Kawachi I, Glymour MM, eds. *Social Epidemiology.* 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, USA; 2014:153-180.
44. Chronic stress puts your health at risk. Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20046037>. Accessed June 7, 2019.
45. Berkman L, Syme S. Social networks, host resistance, and mortality: A nine-year follow-up study of Alameda County residents. *Am J Epidemiol.* 1979;109(2):186-204.
46. Berkman LF, Krishna, A. Social Network Epidemiology. In: Berkman LF, Kawachi I, Glymour MM, eds. *Social Epidemiology.* 2nd ed. Oxford University Press; 2014:234-289.
47. Park KO, Wilson MC, Lee MS. Effects of Social Support at Work on Depression and Organizational Productivity. *Am J Health Behav.* 2004;28(5):444.
48. Loneliness in the Workplace Can Be a High Cost For Employers. Center for Workplace Mental Health; 2018. <http://workplacementalhealth.org/News-Events/Blog/January-2018/Loneliness-in-the-Workplace-Can-Be-a-High-Cost>. Accessed July 29, 2019.
49. Apantaku-Onayemi F, Baldyga W, Amuwo S, et al. Driving to Better Health: Cancer and Cardiovascular Risk Assessment among Taxi Cab Operators in Chicago. *J Health Care Poor Underserved.* 2012;23(2):768-780. doi:10.1353/hpu.2012.0066
50. Chen JC, Chang WR, Chang W, Christiani D. Occupational factors associated with low back pain in urban taxi drivers. *Occup Med Oxf Engl.* 2005;55(7):535-540. doi:10.1093/occmed/kqi125
51. Chen JC, Dennerlein JT, Shih TS, et al. Knee Pain and Driving Duration: A Secondary Analysis of the Taxi Drivers' Health Study. *Am J Public Health.* 2004;94(4):575-581.  
<https://tmu.pure.elsevier.com/en/publications/knee-pain-and-driving-duration-a-secondary-analysis-of-the-taxi-d>. Accessed May 15, 2019.

52. Biddle SJH, Bennie JA, Bauman AE, et al. Too much sitting and all-cause mortality: Is there a causal link? *BMC Public Health*. 2016;16. doi:10.1186/s12889-016-3307-3
53. Katzmarzyk PT, Church TS, Craig CL, Bouchard C. Sitting time and mortality from all causes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. *Med Sci Sports Exerc*. 2009;41(5):998-1005. doi:10.1249/MSS.0b013e3181930355
54. Sitting risks: How harmful is too much sitting? Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/expert-answers/sitting/faq-20058005>. Accessed June 13, 2019.
55. 10 Things That Happen When You Sit Down All Day. Healthline. <https://www.healthline.com/health/workplace-health/things-that-happen-when-you-sit-down-all-day>. Accessed June 13, 2019.
56. Glied SA, Borzi PC. The Current State of Employment-Based Health Coverage Symposium Article — Part II: Devising Solutions. *J Law Med Ethics*. 2004;32:404-409. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/medeth32&i=404>. Accessed June 10, 2019.
57. Mitts L, Fish-Parcham C. Many Insured Consumers with Non-Group Coverage Go without Needed Health Care. Families USA. <https://familiesusa.org/product/many-insured-consumers-non-group-coverage-go-without-needed-health-care>. Published May 18, 2015. Accessed August 1, 2019.
58. Castaneda MA, Saygili M. The health conditions and the health care consumption of the uninsured. *Health Econ Rev*. 2016;6(1):55. doi:10.1186/s13561-016-0137-z
59. DeRigne L, Stoddard-Dare P, Collins C, Quinn L. Paid sick leave and preventive health care service use among U.S. working adults. *Prev Med*. 2017;99:58-62. doi:10.1016/j.ypmed.2017.01.020
60. Wells K. *The Uber Workplace in D.C.* Georgetown University. [http://lwp.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Uber-Workplace.pdf#\\_ga=2.119755912.1437132930.1555596211-1931215545.1555596211](http://lwp.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/Uber-Workplace.pdf#_ga=2.119755912.1437132930.1555596211-1931215545.1555596211). Accessed April 26, 2019.
61. Sweet E, Nandi A, Adam EK, McDade TW. The high price of debt: Household financial debt and its impact on mental and physical health. *Soc Sci Med* 1982. 2013;91:94-100. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.05.009
62. Turunen E, Hiilamo H. Health effects of indebtedness: A systematic review. *BMC Public Health*. 2014;14(1):489. doi:10.1186/1471-2458-14-489

63. In the Driver's Seat: An Uber Driver Survey. Coworker.org and Partnership for Working Families; 2016.  
<http://www.forworkingfamilies.org/sites/default/files/publications/In%20the%20Drivers%20Seat.pdf>. Accessed May 9, 2019.
64. Calfas J. Uber Just Admitted That Its Pay Policy Will Make Drivers Even More Unhappy. Here's How That Could Affect Your Future Rides. *Money*. <http://money.com/money/5641753/uber-pay-policy-drivers-unhappy-riders/>. Published April 15, 2019. Accessed May 23, 2019.
65. Valle GD. Uber prices in NYC are about to go up, because drivers are getting a wage hike. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2019/2/1/18207332/uber-nyc-price-increase-wage-law>. Published February 1, 2019. Accessed August 1, 2019.
66. Schechner S. Uber Bows to Pressure, Offers Some Health Benefits to European Drivers; Package will apply to roughly 150,000 independent workers across the EU starting in June. *The Wall Street Journal*. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/2042760936/citation/6C37CD55EB5A44C7PQ/1>. Published May 23, 2018. Accessed June 10, 2019.
67. Worker Misclassification. State of California Department of Industrial Relations. [https://www.dir.ca.gov/dlse/worker\\_misclassification.html](https://www.dir.ca.gov/dlse/worker_misclassification.html). Accessed July 24, 2019.

## Acknowledgments

We extend our deep gratitude and appreciation to the people who drive for ride-hail companies who shared their stories for this report. Thank you to Gig Workers Rising, especially Lauren Casey, for partnering with us on this project.

We also thank Veena Dubal, Marcy Goldstein-Gelb, and Kate Murray, for sharing their expertise. Thank you to Yeri Shon, Christine Mitchell, and Ana Tellez from Human Impact Partners for their research and editing support. Thank you to Nirmala Nataraj for copy editing and Cozette Lehman for graphic design support.

This report was made possible by the generous funding of The California Wellness Foundation.

## Suggested Citation

Human Impact Partners and Gig Workers Rising. Driving Away Our Health: The Economic Insecurity of Working for Lyft and Uber. Oakland, CA; August 2019.

## Contact Information

### **Lili Farhang, Co-Director**

Human Impact Partners

[lili@humanimpact.org](mailto:lili@humanimpact.org)

[www.humanimpact.org](http://www.humanimpact.org)

510-452-9442, ext. 101

## About Gig Workers Rising

Gig Workers Rising is a campaign supporting and educating app and platform workers who are organizing for better wages, working conditions, and jobs. We support and educate those who work in the gig economy as they come together to win better wages, benefits, and a voice at work.

## About Human Impact Partners

Human Impact Partners (HIP) brings the power of public health to campaigns and movements for a just society through research, advocacy, capacity building, and field building. Our mission is to transform the policies and places people need to live healthy lives by increasing the consideration of health and equity in decision making.