ARC Gig Cities Research Team, submission to Select Committee on Job Security

Committee Secretary
Select Committee on Job Security
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Canberra ACT 2600

29 March 2021

Dear Inquiry Secretary,

Please find enclosed our submission to the Senate Inquiry into the impact of insecure or precarious employment on the economy, wages, social cohesion and workplace rights and conditions.

We would be happy to supply additional material and make ourselves available to the committee in person.

Yours faithfully,

ARC Gig Cities Research Team

Associate Professor David Bissell, The University of Melbourne
Dr Elizabeth Straughan, The University of Melbourne

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Submission to Select Committee on Job Security: Inquiry on the Impact of insecure or precarious employment on the economy, wages, social cohesion and workplace rights and conditions.

ARC Gig Cities Research Team

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The inquiry terms of reference that our submission responds to are:
    a. The extent and nature of insecure or precarious employment in Australia.
    b. The risks of insecure or precarious work exposed or exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis.
    c. Workplace and consumer trends and the associated impact on employment arrangements in sectors of the economy including the 'gig' and 'on-demand' economy.

Summary of submission
Our research on gig workers' experiences of employment insecurity shows that employment insecurity can be understood from four perspectives: financial insecurity; temporal insecurity; skill insecurity; and bodily insecurity.

1. Financial insecurity
- Poor rates of pay by gig work platforms are uniformly regarded as a significant source of financial insecurity.
- The experience of financial insecurity is heightened by the difficulties of medium- and long-term financial planning.
- The variability of experiences of financial insecurity is largely dependent on how gig work factors into workers' life circumstances.
- COVID-19 has increased financial insecurity for some owing to an increase in people turning to gig work.

2. Temporal insecurity
- Temporal insecurity is experienced through diverse experiences of waiting.
- Though the flexibility of gig work is often touted as a positive, for many, this flexibility has significant negative dimensions.
- Most gig workers describe feeling the negative experience of their life being put on hold.
- COVID-19 has exacerbated temporal insecurity by reconfiguring the amount of work available on different platforms.

3. Skill insecurity
- Easy recruitment contributes to the perception by some gig workers that they are undertaking unskilled work.
- Yet workers describe a range of skill development for financial and time management and emotional intelligence as a result of how their work exposes them to social differences.
- Many gig workers, however, describe their work as fundamentally unsatisfying.

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4. Bodily insecurity
- For gig workers undertaking work involving interpersonal interaction, many describe sustaining abusive behaviour from other people.
- A specific set of heightened bodily insecurities are experienced by transport gig workers.
- Even for those working in teams with other people, isolation is a prevalent experience for task-based gig workers.
- COVID-19 has changed the experiences of bodily insecurity for some workers, especially because of increased exposure to the virus

Project overview and background

Gig Cities is a project supported by the Australian Research Council (FT170100059) and the University of Melbourne investigating how the rapid rise of the gig economy for moving people, goods and services is transforming Australian cities by exploring its diverse impacts on consumers, workers and industries. By focusing on Melbourne as a case study, through research with consumers, workers, and industries, our project provides in-depth qualitative data on the impacts of gig work in cities. It seeks to understand how the positive and negative, geographically uneven impacts of gig work platforms are affecting consumers, workers and industry.

Recent quantitative research indicates that 13.8% of people living in Victoria have undertaken gig work using digital platforms and 7.4% are currently doing so, with the majority living in Melbourne (McDonald et al., 2019). This uptake of platform work can be attributed to the growing under-employment, precarity and increasing availability of temporary migrant labour that characterises Australia's labour market (Barrett et al., 2020).

Though some of the quantitative dimensions of gig work are known, much less is known about the experience of gig work for workers. Absence of this experiential perspective results in narrow understandings of workers' lives that does not sufficiently appreciate the multiple dimensions of employment insecurity. Our project provides new knowledge about these experiential dimensions.

Methods

In-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with a sample of 30 workers (the focus of this submission), 30 consumers, and 20 industry stakeholders in Melbourne during 2018 and 2019. The workers and consumers were sampled from two online surveys. The 30 workers were involved in the movement of people (transport-based gigs through platforms such as Uber and Didi: 10 workers), goods (delivery-based gigs through platforms such as Uber Eats and Deliveroo: 10 workers) and services (task- and care-based gigs through platforms such as Airtasker: 10 workers) and were quota sampled according to city location; duration of this work; household composition; demographic, socio-economic and socio-cultural identifiers. A further 10 interviews with workers recruited through a third survey was undertaken in early 2021 to ascertain experiences of gig work during COVID-19. Our qualitative approach supplements the dominant quantitative approach by allowing exploration of the broader impacts of gig work on people's lives.

Key findings related to employment insecurity

Our research reveals that employment insecurity is a multidimensional experience and needs to be considered from different perspectives. Based on our fieldwork, we draw attention to

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four kinds of insecurity that must be considered to better understand the impact of insecure employment on workers. Though financial insecurity is one of the most acknowledged dimensions, our research emphasises that there are other significant forms of insecurity that must also be accounted for.

1. Financial insecurity
Financial insecurity is one of the most well documented forms of insecurity experienced by gig workers and is a key theme in the majority of interviews.

1.1 **Poor rates of pay by gig work platforms are uniformly regarded as a significant source of financial insecurity.** Earning the equivalent of the Australian minimum wage requires unsustainably long work hours. The fluctuating pay rates of the platforms together with increased workers using these platforms results in unreliable rates of income. Furthermore, given workers' lack of employment status by the major gig work platforms in Australia and the insistence by these platforms that workers are self-employed, this financial insecurity is increased by the need for workers themselves to purchase the necessary equipment to undertake work. Those workers who rely solely on gig work for income often live week to week on the income they receive. Unlike other employment, platforms do not provide holiday pay, sick pay or make superannuation contributions. Many workers do not have savings and some cannot afford housing and so must rely on the generosity of others.

1.2 **The experience of financial insecurity is heightened by the difficulties of medium- and long-term financial planning.** Owing to the variability in earnings, it is not possible to guarantee a fixed rate of pay for a given period. Furthermore, and in part because of this, some workers have to juggle multiple forms of work on different platforms. Some platforms have changed their pay and conditions over time resulting in different workers receiving different rates of payment which exacerbates perceptions of inequitable treatment between workers.

1.3 **The variability of experiences of financial insecurity is largely dependent on how gig work factors into workers' life circumstances.** Some people are undertaking gig work to top up their income derived from other work. Others are undertaking gig work in response to experiences of boredom. People in both situations are ultimately less financially insecure than those who undertake gig work on a full-time basis as their major source of income.

1.4 **COVID-19 has increased financial insecurity for some owing to an increase in people turning to gig work.** This financial insecurity experienced by both new and existing gig workers has been exacerbated by some delivery platforms changing their pay structure to account for the changing balance of supply and demand, resulting in decreased earnings for workers. Owing to reduced pay, some student gig workers stopped working at the height of the second COVID-19 wave in Victoria and relied on financial support from their parents.

2. Temporal insecurity
Temporal insecurity is an endemic dimension of the experience of work in the gig economy and is felt through a range of different scales.

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2.1 **Temporal insecurity is experienced through diverse experiences of waiting.** Gig workers on transport and delivery platforms refer to the recurrent anxiety of waiting for the next gig. For task-based gigs, workers describe waiting for a response to whether their bid for work has been accepted. Many task-based gig workers explain how much of their time is spent trying to source work, rather than actually doing it. Some have developed addictions for checking work on their mobile. This element is exacerbated by the increase in new entrants which has increased competition. For those undertaking mobile forms of gig work such as delivery, waiting is a significant negative part of the job, such as being in traffic, or waiting to pick up food from restaurants. Furthermore, while waiting is a requirement of such work, current infrastructures often impede the ability to wait. These involve kerbside restrictions which are a particular concern for delivery riders in CBD locations, and restaurant spaces that do not have waiting areas for delivery riders.

2.2 **Though the flexibility of gig work is often touted as a positive, for many, this flexibility has significant negative dimensions.** Being on hold means that workers cannot enjoy proper downtime away from work as they are always effectively 'on call'. This means that, for some, leisure activities are impeded as there is little opportunity for separation between free time and work time. However, waiting is not dead time (Bissell, 2007) and many workers describe the activities that waiting time is filled with, such as mental planning and working through dilemmas. Yet waiting only permits a restricted range of activities. The prevalence of waiting has changed how home spaces are experienced. For some gig workers, home has become a place to wait for jobs, rather than a place of respite, changing the meaning of home in the process.

2.3 **At a broader temporal scale, most gig workers describe feeling the negative experience of their life being put on hold,** contributing to a condition of 'ontological insecurity'—a person's fundamental sense of safety in the world being threatened. This ontological insecurity is exacerbated by the feeling by some that the gig work itself is being compromised by increased automation and the futility of increased competition owing to a large increase in entrants. However, workers in certain situations see gig work as a way of maintaining their life in a difficult situation. For instance, following experiences of redundancy, business collapse, burnout or trauma, gig work for some is viewed as a positive interim form of work. Yet, ultimately, most view gig work as a temporary situation to fill a gap while they apply for more permanent work, which itself is an exercise in waiting. Though some find a way out through further study, taking up internships, or even an intercontinental move, others feel trapped in what they describe as a 'zig zag' or 'circular' life.

2.4 **COVID-19 has exacerbated temporal insecurity by reconfiguring the amount of work available on different platforms.** Task-based gigs were reduced during lockdowns, especially those that required workers to enter people's homes. Care-based gigs were also reduced since most people remained at home. As a result, delivery work increased leading to oversupply which increased waiting times between gigs leading to a reduction of earnings. Some delivery platforms stopped taking on new drivers in some parts of the city, putting people on 'waiting lists' for work, adding to a sense of temporal insecurity.

3. Skill insecurity

Insecurity around the nature and quality of skills developed through gig work significantly contributes to the experience of employment insecurity.

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3.1 **Easy recruitment contributes to the perception by some gig workers that they are undertaking unskilled work.** Ease of entry is often touted as a primary motivation for some gig workers, given that specialist training is not required for most work and signing up is largely unconditional. However, the interviews reveal that there are many skills that gig workers develop. These include a range of digital skills associated with financial and time management. Mobile gig workers develop a range of contextual geographical skills including knowledge of the urban environment and spatio-temporal knowledge relating to the prevalence of gigs at different times of day. Some task-based workers describe the 'huge learning curve' in terms of learning which tasks to take on and which to not. Many gig workers profess to gradually learning how the platform's algorithms work and adjusting their practices accordingly.

3.2 **Workers describe a further range of skill development regarding their emotional intelligence as a result of how their work exposes them to social differences.** Especially for those undertaking passenger transport, gig workers describe how they become better listeners, enhancing their capacities to understand social cues. Some even describe how they feel like they are becoming counsellors through their requirement to listen and console riders. Further still, some describe the development of satisfying ongoing interpersonal relationships. Yet participants also draw attention to the emotional labour involved in the management of their gigs. Especially for task-based gig workers, this involves organising work and chasing up payments and figuring out the next gig, which are all crucial but receive no recompense. Staying afloat for these workers requires a range of emotion management skills which might include distancing and blocking out.

3.3 **Many gig workers, however, describe their work as fundamentally unsatisfying.** Where task-based workers bemoan the unfulfilling nature of menial jobs, mobile workers describe the repetition-inducing boredom of encountering the same restaurants on the same roads. Both sets of workers voice frustration about the lack of challenge in their work, they long for variety, and ultimately feel that this work does not allow them to develop their potential. This is not to say that gigs are devoid of pleasure. A few describe their enjoyment of driving and state that since leaving full time employment their life satisfaction had increased. Some are now able to prioritise social life and keep fit. Some even describe how 'menial tasks' give them pleasure. For others, especially those in retirement, doing gig work can be a response to boredom. It gives people in this situation a reason to leave their house, to fill time, and connect them to their community. Yet ultimately, the majority of gig workers perceive their jobs as skill-less, and this evaluation compromises their prospects for future employment. Most admit that they would not include gig work on their curriculum vitae and concede that to find other work they would be required to study or upskill.

4. Bodily insecurity
Insecurity related to interpersonal relationships and bodily incursions is a consistent theme voiced by gig workers.

4.1 **For gig workers undertaking work involving interpersonal interaction, many describe sustaining abusive behaviour from other people.** This is a particularly frequent theme for gig workers involved in transporting people. Such incidents are especially prevalent for recent migrants who described frequent experiences of racist abuse in the form of verbal and sometimes physical harassment, often fuelled by alcohol.

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Workers describe how the unequal power dynamics inherent in some platforms between worker and customer means that opportunities to rectify or intervene in situations are limited, owing to the risk of being suspended by the platform or receiving negative feedback. For delivery riders too, many workers lament being bullied by customers who feel entitled to demand that their food is brought to the front door of their apartment, often in tall buildings requiring lengthy unpaid transit times. Some comment on a lack of training on how to respond to such challenging interpersonal situations.

4.2 **A specific set of heightened bodily insecurities are experienced by transport gig workers.** Owing to the number of hours required to earn even a subsistence wage, experiences of fatigue are endemic. Many report experiences of microsleeping during long shifts on the road. Such long hours put significant strain on relationships with family and friends, and exacerbate feelings of isolation. Gig workers undertaking work on bikes describe the hazards of negotiating difficult and uncomfortable weather conditions. For some, the lack of available public toilets mean that they even refrain from drinking water during long shifts which risks dehydration.

4.3 **Even for those working in teams with other people, isolation is a prevalent experience for task-based gig workers.** Since each gig typically involves new groups of people, there are few opportunities to develop lasting and satisfying collegial relationships. Such isolation can manifest in experiences of awkwardness between gig workers and other staff. Though there are some online communities where gig workers share stores and console each other, much of this tends to be practical information sharing. Furthermore, such feelings of isolation can be a result of shame and stigma. This experience, heightened by social expectations, is voiced by many gig workers who admit to not talking about their gig work to others. Indeed, some prefer to say that they are unemployed. Further experiences of isolation emerge from experiences of guilt of letting people down that some task-based worker refer to. Such admittance indicates how responsibility for such feelings are outsourced to workers, rather than being the responsibility of platforms.

4.4 **COVID-19 has changed the experiences of bodily insecurity for some workers, especially because of increased exposure to the virus** (Bissell, 2021), which has heightened tensions. Some delivery workers report an increase in abusive customers. Experiences of being shouted at not only increase fear of viral contagion but can result in significant emotional trauma. However, other customers took extra efforts to communicate gratitude with delivery workers through the app or directly. Some workers have developed new routines when arriving back home involving clothes washing to remove virus risk. Physical distancing requirements have resulted in increased loneliness for some delivery workers owing to not being able to talk with other workers while waiting, or with consumers when dropping off deliveries. However, for some gig workers, being able to leave the house was a factor in helping maintain good mental health during lockdowns.

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Further information

http://www.gigcities.net