

Inequality and the Gig Economy in Baltimore

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ABSTRACT: This research paper examines the intersection of inequality and the gig economy in Baltimore, a city shaped by segregation, deindustrialization, and systemic barriers to mobility. Through interviews with Uber drivers and secondary data analysis, the study explores the dual nature of gig work: providing quick income, scheduling autonomy, and entry points to entrepreneurship while also perpetuating precarity through low pay, earnings volatility, and limited protections. Baltimore's stark disparities offer a critical lens for understanding these dynamics. Findings indicate most drivers use gig work as a transitional tool rather than a permanent career, showcasing the need for policies that preserve flexibility while also adding security through upward mobility programs, universal protections, and digital equity initiatives.

KEYWORDS: Behavioral and Social Sciences, Sociology and Social Psychology, Gig Economy, Baltimore, Uber.

■ Introduction

Baltimore has long struggled with persistent inequality, which continues to limit economic mobility and create sharp racial and economic disparities. These entrenched divides have shaped livelihoods for generations.¹⁻³ These conditions set the stage for examining how new forms of work interact with long-standing disparities.

At the same time, the gig economy has emerged as a new force in the labor market, defined by short-term, flexible work facilitated by platforms such as Uber and DoorDash.⁴⁻⁶ Its rapid growth is particularly relevant for urban areas like Baltimore, where traditional labor markets have failed to provide sufficient opportunities.^{7,8} By offering income, autonomy, and entrepreneurial entry points, gig work appears to offer a new pathway for addressing entrenched inequality.⁹

This paper examines the intersection of inequality and the gig economy in Baltimore. Drawing on interviews with Uber drivers and secondary data, it analyzes the opportunities and risks of platform work. The paper highlights drivers' use of gig work as a temporary bridge rather than a permanent career, and it proposes policy measures to preserve flexibility while strengthening protections. The next sections provide context on Baltimore's structural inequalities, review the literature on gig work, outline the research methods, present the findings, and discuss their policy implications.

■ Context

Baltimore's inequality is rooted in historical segregation, discriminatory policies, deindustrialization, and cycles of poverty. Practices such as redlining in the 1930s created lasting residential and resource divides. Today, these structural barriers continue to shape the city's economic and racial landscape.

Black residents, who make up 63% of Baltimore's population, fare worse than the national African American average in nearly every socioeconomic category, while White residents, at 28% of the population, perform better than national averages.³ Unemployment among Black residents is three times high-

er than among Whites, and the percentage of Whites with a bachelor's degree is 3.2 times higher. These figures underscore the sharp disparities that reflect limited economic mobility.

This background makes Baltimore a critical case for examining how new forms of work intersect with inequality. The city's combination of entrenched racial disparities and economic precarity provides a revealing lens for analyzing the opportunities and risks of gig work. These broader dynamics are the focus of the following literature review.

■ Literature Review

The gig economy, represented by platform businesses such as Uber and DoorDash, reflects the contradictions of inclusion and exclusion central to Baltimore's socioeconomic landscape. Scholars have long debated whether gig work mitigates or worsens inequality, and this study adds to that conversation. Platform-based work offers quick income, autonomy, and entrepreneurial entry points, making it a low-barrier pathway to employment, especially in places where systemic barriers block access to traditional jobs.⁷ Research on Uber's staggered entry into U.S. metropolitan areas found that the platform increased labor participation among groups excluded from competitive markets due to a lack of skills.¹⁰ Uber's arrival also contributed to local business activity, with ~5% growth in new business registrations and similar increases in small business lending.¹¹

Gig platforms also stimulate entrepreneurship. As Wol-la⁷ notes, flexible scheduling and supplemental income allow individuals to pursue ventures with reduced financial risk. Nationally, gig platforms are associated with a ~7% rise in internet searches for entrepreneurship-related terms, especially in constrained regions.¹¹ In Baltimore, programs such as Innovation Works and the Techstars Equitech Accelerator have sought to leverage this potential by supporting underserved entrepreneurs and fostering an inclusive innovation economy.

Another strand of research highlights skill development. The 2023 Baltimore Digital Equity Report shows that digital literacy directly influences economic outcomes. By requiring

drivers to use apps and GPS, Uber can help build competencies in technology, time management, and customer service. For residents affected by digital redlining, gig work can be a gateway to bridging divides.^{12,13}

At the same time, scholars warn that gig work may exacerbate inequality without safeguards. Workers face unstable earnings, limited protections, and risks tied to independent contractor classification.^{6,8,14} Such structures deprive workers of healthcare, paid leave, and retirement security, leaving them exposed to financial shocks. Critics argue that socioeconomic stratification pushes low-income populations into precarious gig jobs, perpetuating rather than alleviating inequality.¹⁵

Proposed reforms aim to balance flexibility with protection. These include creating a third category of “dependent contractors,” granting partial benefits and bargaining rights,¹⁶ or designing universal benefit schemes decoupled from traditional employment, ensuring baseline protections such as health coverage and retirement contributions.⁵ These reforms seek to preserve the accessibility of gig work while mitigating its vulnerabilities. To examine these issues in practice, this study focuses on Uber drivers in Baltimore.

■ Methods

This study relies on semi-structured interviews with ten Uber drivers in Baltimore to capture how gig work intersects with inequality. Baltimore was chosen as a case study due to its suitability for examining how platform work interacts with entrenched inequality. Participants were recruited through personal outreach and informal referrals. Each interview lasted about ten to twenty minutes and included questions on drivers’ backgrounds, income reliance, motivations, benefits, challenges, and future goals. Inequality was measured through drivers’ accounts of economic precarity, including reliance on Uber to meet basic expenses, lack of stable employment alternatives, variability in weekly earnings, and limited access to career advancement. Interviews were transcribed with consent and systematically reviewed, with drivers organized into four categories using a two-by-two framework distinguishing between primary versus supplementary income reliance and temporary versus long-term orientation.

Secondary sources, including census data, policy reports, and prior studies on gig work and digital equity, were used to contextualize the interview findings. These materials provided a backdrop against which drivers’ experiences could be interpreted, helping to situate interview findings within wider patterns identified in prior research. The results below show how drivers themselves described these experiences.

■ Result and Discussion

Results:

Table 1: Key interview findings. This table presents responses from ten Uber drivers to questions covering their backgrounds, driving habits, motivations, challenges, and future goals. The answers show wide variation in how drivers use Uber, from full-time dependence to part-time flexibility, shaped by differing financial needs and career aspirations.

Questions	Driver 1	Driver 2	Driver 3	Driver 4	Driver 5	Driver 6	Driver 7	Driver 8	Driver 9	Driver 10
Where do you live?	Baltimore	Rosedale, MD	Baltimore	Baltimore	Baltimore	Millersville, MD	Baltimore	NE Baltimore	Patterson Park, Baltimore	Virginia
How long have you been driving for Uber?	Two years	A year and three months	Five months	One year	One year	On and off for a few years	Not specified	Since 2016	13 months	Almost two years
How much do you drive?	Four to five hours a day	Depends on time available	Four to five hours a day	Seven to eight hours a day	Around 20 hours a week	8-12 hours, with breaks	2-3 hours on weekdays; 5-6 on weekends	About 35 hours/week	About 70 hours a week	Five hours after Whole Foods; more on day off
Do you have any other jobs?	Yes, has another job	Yes, works at Hertz	Yes	Previously worked in a hospital; now full time Uber	No, Uber is only time job	Yes, full-time IT engineer	Yes, works for the city	Retired from City; Uber to fill income gap before SS	No	Yes, works at Whole Foods
Do you think gig jobs like Uber are good for society?	Yes	Yes	Partly	Yes	Yes	Yes, builds skills and bridges careers	Yes, but pay has become unfair	Yes, especially where public transit is poor	Yes	Yes, helps those without cars
How has Uber positively impacted your life?	Provides extra money and offer scheduling flexibility	Provides financial freedom and flexibility	Positive, more money	Helps balance work and family; covers daily expenses	Funds business ventures; supports family	Financial and social benefits	Pay taxes on income	Drivers earn less despite higher rider charges	Flexible to do other stuff	Extra cash; enjoy exploring while driving
What do you miss about Uber?	GPS issues; grateful not to have had bad customers	Disrespectful passengers	Some people don't care	Long driving hours affect health	3-4% Customers are hard	Some stressful passenger situations	Pay taxes on income	Drivers earn less despite higher rider charges	Rates could be better	Can't control ride destinations
Has Uber improved your professional skills?	No	Yes, learned digital platforms & future of apps	Yes		Yes	Yes, social and digital skills	Yes, both social and professional skills	Yes, previous job made him better at Uber	No	Yes, driving-wise
Do you feel Uber limits your chances of full-time work?	No; flexible scheduling makes it manageable	No				No; it's optional time use	Sometimes pays better than full-time job	No; did both when employed	This "is" my full-time job	No, it's flexible and optional
What are your long-term career plans?	Maybe another business; has other plans	Start a business; entrepreneurial spirit		Wants to start a business	Possibly return to previous trade (electrician)	Continue engineering and previous trade (commerce ventures)	Wants to get into real estate	Wants to travel more; retirement	Building rental property portfolio	Not specified

Table 1 summarizes interviews with ten Uber drivers, showing the diverse ways workers engage with the platform. Some treated it as a full-time job, while others drove only occasionally. Several combined Uber with other employment, while others relied entirely on it for income.

Most drivers saw Uber as a temporary solution rather than a long-term career. Only one planned to keep driving indefinitely. Many described Uber as “a means to an end” that provided short-term financial stability while they pursued other goals, such as starting a business, saving for retirement, or investing in real estate. For some, Uber filled a gap during career transitions or supported entrepreneurial side projects.

Economic inclusion was a key theme. Several drivers highlighted Uber’s low entry barrier, noting it provided income when no other work was available. One recent immigrant said Uber helped him “meet daily expenses and spend time with [his] kids.”

Flexibility was another consistent theme. Drivers emphasized the value of being able to choose their own hours, balancing jobs, school, or recovery from injury. As one put it, “Uber lets me do it whenever you want, for as long as you want.”

Skill development also emerged. Some drivers reported building digital skills, especially comfort with apps and platforms. As one explained, “everything is done through an app these days.”

Concerns about precarity were widespread. Drivers frequently mentioned declining pay, unpredictable income, and lack of fairness. “They don’t pay as well as they used to,” one driver explained, noting that fares had risen but driver earnings had not kept pace. Others described long hours, difficult passengers, or a lack of control over ride destinations.

Taken together, the interviews show Uber’s dual role: as a flexible and accessible source of income, and at times a way to build skills or bridge to the future, but also as work that many felt paid less than it should, with the platform capturing more value over time. To better capture the different ways

Uber shaped drivers' lives, the study participants were grouped into categories using a two-by-two framework.

Driver Topology:

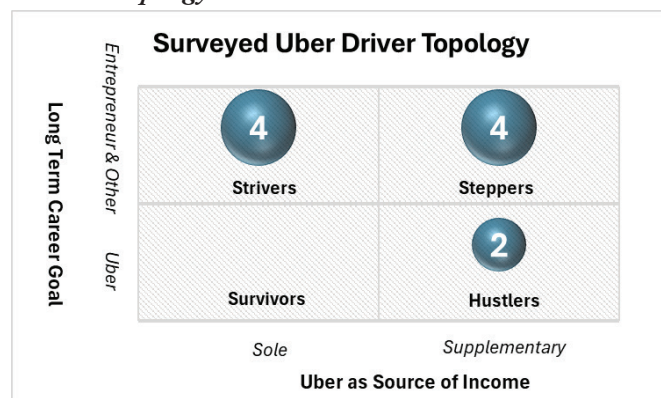


Figure 1: A 2x2 framework of job engagement of surveyed Uber drivers. The categorization illustrates that most surveyed drivers view Uber as a stepping stone rather than a destination, with the majority aiming for long-term goals outside the platform. This supports qualitative feedback from drivers who see Uber as a temporary means to fund entrepreneurial or career transitions.

Drivers were grouped into four categories using a two-by-two framework (Figure 1) that distinguishes between whether Uber is a primary or supplementary income source and whether it is seen as long-term or temporary.

Strivers (Drivers 4, 5, 8, 9): rely solely on Uber but view it as temporary. They are in career transition, waiting for other income sources, or preparing to launch new ventures.

Steppers (Drivers 1, 2, 6, 7): have full-time jobs and use Uber as supplementary income while working toward other goals. For them, Uber provides flexibility to build savings or invest in side projects.

Side Hustlers (Drivers 3, 10): have other jobs and drive casually for extra money, without strong long-term career ambitions.

Survivors: drivers who rely exclusively on Uber and plan to stay long-term. None appeared in this sample, a notable finding suggesting that Uber is rarely seen as a permanent solution.

This typology highlights that most drivers use Uber strategically and temporarily, reinforcing that flexibility—not permanence—is its main value. These categories set up the discussion of broader implications.

Interpretations and Policy Implications:

Taken together, the findings reveal how gig work in Baltimore combines opportunities for inclusion and skill-building with tensions around compensation fairness shaped by the controlling power of the platforms. The low entry barrier allows individuals excluded from traditional labor markets to earn quickly. App-based work helps some drivers build digital literacy and entrepreneurial skills. These themes emerged directly from the driver interviews. At the same time, secondary sources point to broader vulnerabilities that go beyond what this small sample reported, particularly the precarity associated with fluctuating earnings and the absence of employment-based benefits. Situating the drivers' accounts within

this wider literature underscores that while gig work can serve as a transitional tool, it often does so under fragile conditions.

The absence of "Survivors" in the driver typology underscores that gig work is rarely viewed as a long-term path and is instead used as a transitional tool. This strategic temporariness highlights both the promise and the limits of the gig economy: it provides flexibility and income in critical moments, but, as secondary sources remind us, it also operates under conditions of precarity and a lack of employment-based benefits. These combined insights point to the need for targeted policy measures, outlined below.

Upward Mobility.

For Strivers and Steppers, targeted support can help turn temporary earnings into long-term opportunities. This includes microloans or grants, digital upskilling, and mentorship networks that connect drivers to professionals and entrepreneurs. Bundling gig work with opportunity-building programs would enable motivated drivers to advance beyond short-term reliance.

Universal Protections.

All drivers, regardless of category, would benefit from portable benefits, minimum earnings guarantee, transparent pay structures, and stronger safety measures. Light-touch regulation should ensure protections without undermining platform viability.

Digital Equity.

Access to affordable internet, smartphones, and digital training is critical in Baltimore, where digital divides remain sharp. Public investment, potentially co-funded by platforms, could expand inclusion and ensure that drivers gain skills that extend beyond gig work. Together, these recommendations frame the broader implications of Baltimore's case, which the conclusion summarizes.

■ Conclusion

This study introduces a simple driver typology—Strivers, Steppers, and Side Hustlers, with no Survivors—that shows how gig workers in Baltimore use Uber as a transitional tool linked to long-term goals like entrepreneurship, savings, or retirement. By connecting these different forms of driver engagement to Baltimore's structural inequalities, including racial unemployment gaps and digital redlining, the analysis demonstrates that platform work is shaped as much by local context as by the platforms themselves. Future research should test this typology in other cities and with larger samples to see how inequality structures gig work differently. For policy, the findings suggest moving beyond one-size-fits-all reforms toward tiered approaches that foster upward mobility, strengthen universal protections, and expand digital equity. Taken together, Baltimore's case illustrates both the limits of gig work as a permanent solution and its potential to support inclusion when paired with context-sensitive support.

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