### Uber's adverse impact on the civil rights of corporate stakeholders

Since its founding, Uber's ethos of "asking for forgiveness not permission" has shown the company time and again as a bully and a lawbreaker and an irresponsible corporate actor globally. In late 2021, Uber was assessed to be "the most hated brand in the U.S." Much of the company's recklessness is already well-known to the public, from its toxic "bro" culture to its unprecedented and nakedly self-interested and anti-worker political spending. Details have emerged over the years of the company's improper use of technology to evade regulators, harm competitors, and silence critics. Most recently, "The Uber Files" pulled back the curtain on the company's tolerance of violence to foster its business model.

Even so, the full breadth and depth of Uber's legal and reputational risk is not wholly understood. Uber policies and practices raise specific civil rights concerns requiring closer scrutiny, as the evidence thus far demonstrates both *disparate treatment of* and *disparate impact on* a range of protected groups. Moreover, the business model of the gig economy is built on and thrives from exploitation of low-wage, overwhelmingly Black, brown, and immigrant workers. Indeed, when the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) set its five-year strategic plan in 2016, it prioritized the "on-demand economy" as an "emerging and developing issue" for strategic civil rights enforcement.<sup>5</sup>

With roughly three-quarters of all U.S. rideshare business (plus additional delivery operations), Uber is the dominant player in the gig economy, setting the industry standard.\*,6 Uber's choices affect many, and have in turn spurred significant pushback— from consumers #DeletingUber; from drivers engaging in escalating protests and strikes; from a steady stream of government lawsuits; from ongoing journalistic investigations. Recently, in the wake of increased federal attention to driver misclassification, one analyst firm noted it expects "continued headline risk" for app corporations. Another expects "greater headline risk and more legal filings" (emphasis added).8

What follows is a partial list of Uber's negative impact on civil rights.

Uber's business model is predicated on — and further entrenches — the economic exploitation of immigrants and workers of color.

- Academic and nonprofit studies find the Uber driver population to be disproportionately composed of immigrants and people of color. According to Pew Research, nearly one in three Hispanic Americans has done platform work; for Black or Asian Americans the figure is one in five, for white Americans, only one in nine.<sup>9</sup> While L.A.'s overall workforce is 8 percent Black, a UCLA study found L.A.'s rideshare drivers are 23 percent Black.<sup>10</sup> A UC Santa Cruz study found 78 percent of Bay Area drivers are people of color, and 56 percent are immigrants.<sup>11</sup> (On the other hand, people of color are underrepresented among Uber's leadership, which, in 2022, is three percent Black and five percent Latino.<sup>12</sup>)
- Economic precarity has long yielded racialized work in the U.S. to the benefit of key industries
  and employers. In "The New Racial Wage Code," scholar Veena Dubal describes the "racial
  politics of this tiered system of worker protection" over the past century, dating at least to the

<sup>\*</sup> Where possible we use company-specific data; when company-specific data are not available we may sometimes rely on broader industry data.

New Deal's exclusion of domestic and agricultural workers. <sup>13</sup> As Dubal also writes, it is notable that Uber was founded "under the shadow of the Great Recession, in a period of high unemployment and slow job growth." <sup>14</sup> Uber reportedly recruits "low-income, often immigrant drivers with false promises of the American dream." <sup>15</sup>

- Worker misclassification is particularly racialized in the U.S. economy. A 2017 study in the
  Minnesota Law Review found that "women and/or people of color are overrepresented in seven
  of the eight occupations at highest risk for misclassification, suggesting that misclassification
  may be removing Title VII protection from workers who most need antidiscrimination rights."<sup>16</sup>
- The willful misclassification of drivers as independent contractors is at the heart of Uber's business model. While the practice invariably hurts any worker by removing key rights and protections, drivers of color are particularly harmed. According to an amicus brief filed with a California court by the National Employment Law Project and other nonprofits, race "underwrite[s] the practice of misclassification" by allowing "the whole unseemly business [to] be more easily ignored."17
- Many start driving for Uber in the absence of better (higher paying, more flexible) work but worker misclassification then serves to keep Uber drivers trapped in substandard conditions. Without employee protections, drivers lack minimum wage and workplace safety laws, unemployment and workers compensation insurance, and the rights to be free from discrimination and to engage in concerted activity.<sup>18</sup> Drivers are forced to waive their rights to sue and to form unions.
- Gathering data and establishing basic facts about the civil rights impacts on Uber's workforce is complicated by the company's misclassification of drivers. By calling drivers independent contractors, the company exempts itself from standard recordkeeping and reporting practices. (Uber's diversity report covers only employees.) Uber thus not only evades the responsibility of collecting basic demographic data on drivers, but it fails to track or report injury data on drivers, it fails to report driver pay data to the California Civil Rights Department, and its reporting practices around sexual assault continue to draw criticism.<sup>19</sup>
- Uber has relied, controversially, on forced arbitration provisions in its agreements, requiring
  drivers to waive their access to the courts. And although the company has ended the practice
  with regard to sexual misconduct, forced arbitration is still the norm otherwise. In a 2021 report,
  the American Association for Justice demonstrated that women and people of color are
  particularly harmed by the practice of forced arbitration.<sup>20</sup>

### Uber has been repeatedly shown to discriminate against protected groups of riders.

- In late 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice sued Uber for discriminating against disabled passengers, under the Americans with Disabilities Act.<sup>21</sup> (The case concerns Uber's "wait time fee," which falls on those requiring extra time to get seated—including those with wheelchairs.) In July 2022, Uber agreed to implement a wait time fee waiver program and pay over \$2.2 million in refunds to passengers with disabilities who were charged wait time fees.<sup>22</sup>
- In many markets, Uber provides no wheelchair accessible vehicles at all, and riders have filed suit against the company, alleging violations of the ADA.<sup>23</sup> A 2019 complaint out of Pittsburg currently pending in federal court, despite Uber's unsuccessful effort to compel arbitration —

- argues that "as Uber attempts to take market-share away from public transportation options, people with mobility who rely on public transportation and paratransit will suffer the most."<sup>24</sup>
- A 2016 study published in the National Bureau of Economic Research found evidence of racial and gender discrimination in Seattle and Boston rideshare drivers.<sup>25</sup> In Boston, drivers took female riders on "longer, more expensive, rides." In Seattle, wait times were significantly longer for African American riders. In both cities, drivers were more likely to cancel the trips of passengers who "used African American-sounding names."
- A different 2016 analysis from academics at the University of Maryland focused on Uber data from Washington, DC, and sought to answer the question of which neighborhoods benefit from the company's surge pricing. The authors found that "the neighborhoods with better service defined as those places with consistently lower wait times, the pickup ETA as projected by Uber — are more white."<sup>26</sup>
- A 2021 paper out of George Washington University takes advantage of the data made available
  by a regulatory change in Chicago requiring greater transparency. Based on an analysis of "100
  million ride hailing samples" in the city, where Uber has about a 72% market share, the authors
  found "a significant disparate impact in fare pricing" based on the demographic profiles of the
  neighborhoods" and that fares tended to be high for drop-offs in neighborhoods with high
  concentrations of people of color.<sup>27</sup>

### Uber's rating system has been repeatedly shown to discriminate against drivers of color.

- A 2016 report from researchers at Data & Society looks at "Uber as a case study" for how rating systems transform the customer into a supervisor, and how the rating system "redesigns the distribution of potential liability for prospective workplace discrimination."<sup>28</sup> In other words, Uber's rating system, while facially neutral, results in a disparate impact, and redounds to the detriment of drivers of color. (This accords with findings elsewhere that "Black, brown and immigrant taxi drivers get lower tips."<sup>29</sup>)
- A 2022 survey of 20,000 Uber drivers found drivers of color were deactivated (read: fired) at higher rates than white drivers: "17.4% of White respondents indicated they had been deactivated by Uber, compared with 24.6% of Asian workers, 24.1% of Black, 24.9% who identified as other, and 16% who responded as Latinx."<sup>30</sup>
- In response to a proposed class action lawsuit filed against Uber in 2000, a federal judge concluded "the inference that Uber's practice is racially discriminatory is... strong." The suit is currently pending at the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. 32

# Uber's systems of identification have been repeatedly shown to discriminate against drivers of color and transgender drivers.

- Systems of facial recognition do not perform as well on non-white faces, and they perform
  particularly badly on people with darker skin tones, resulting in Uber drivers being locked out of
  their accounts and even terminated.<sup>33</sup> In 2021, Uber drivers and supporters rallied in London
  demanding the company "Scrap the racist algorithm."<sup>34</sup>
- In the UK, the App Drivers and Couriers Union brought a legal administrative action in late 2021 against Uber over this discriminatory technology, on behalf of a terminated driver. The claim is proceeding, despite Uber's (unsuccessful) effort to have it dismissed.<sup>35</sup>

- In the U.S., a deactivated driver filed suit against Uber in 2019, blaming racially discriminatory facial recognition software and seeking reinstatement.<sup>36</sup> The driver was forced into arbitration
   — which he lost.<sup>37</sup> The case is currently pending before the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals.<sup>38</sup>
- California city attorneys are investigating Uber discrimination against transgender drivers after
  the company's systems labeled driver photos and documents as fraudulent, either deactivating
  drivers or preventing them from signing up. Officials from L.A., San Francisco, and San Diego
  allege "Uber's conduct may violate several anti-discrimination and workplace safety laws."<sup>39</sup>

## Uber's policies and practices have deleterious effects on driver health and safety, disproportionately affecting drivers of color.

- A 2022 report by Gig Workers Rising called *Death and Corporate Irresponsibility in the Gig Economy* concluded that "fatal assaults on drivers persist *despite evidence of gig corporation awareness of the safety crisis.*" Of the 50 gig workers killed since 2017, 63 percent were drivers of color.
- In a 2021 report, Pew Research found drivers of color are much more likely to report feeling unsafe on the job. While only 28 percent of white drivers report feeling sometimes or often unsafe, 41 percent of Black, Asian, Hispanic and other drivers of color report feeling unsafe.<sup>41</sup>
- A 2022 analysis from *The Markup* identified 361 gig drivers who were "victims of carjackings or attempted carjackings since 2017," and finding that "many of the drivers were immigrants, women, or elderly."<sup>42</sup> Uber drivers were more likely to have been victimized than drivers for any other platform.
- An analysis by University of Texas public health experts was recently published in Social Science & Medicine and linked gig work to poor health outcomes.<sup>43</sup> Among the study findings was that "Black and Hispanic workers earning insecure income were more likely to report poor health than their white counterparts."<sup>44</sup>

### Uber harms poor communities of color by hastening urban gentrification.

- Concerns about how "apps like Uber... help spur gentrification" date back years. 45 More recently, data have become available and support the claim. A 2020 paper out of The Wharton School of Business examines "how local economic activity responds to" the entry of rideshare into a market, and finds significant effects in home values, rents, and new restaurant openings. 46
- Although neighborhood gentrification is commonly understood to harm low-income residents, recent academic research demonstrates particular harm to communities of color. The author of a 2020 Stanford study noted that displaced Black residents experienced "additional constraints" over and above their white counterparts.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, residents of color who remain through a neighborhood's gentrification express concerns about the increased presence of law enforcement.<sup>48</sup>

Uber's collaborations with law enforcement and the military disproportionately harm communities of color.

- Though academics and activists have long addressed the role of discrimination in law enforcement — in both the goals and methods of policing — the police murder of George Floyd yielded an inflection point in a broader national discussion.<sup>49</sup>
- Uber releases annual data regarding its cooperation with law enforcement in a "transparency report." The company claims that "Uber is different from other tech companies," and thus "we are committed to working with law enforcement officials." In 2021, Uber provided data to law enforcement 2,979 times, filling the majority of law enforcement requests, and disclosing information on 7,686 users.
- In 2020, Cnet reported that Uber had received not just the typical law enforcement requests, but broader, dragnet-like "geofence warrants" (sometimes called "reverse location searches").<sup>51</sup>
   These are especially concerning to advocates, with one declaiming "Imagine the scenario where you can use a single geofence warrant to identify every single person going to a mosque or reproductive health site or political rally."<sup>52</sup>
- A 2021 report from leading racial justice organization Color of Change examined police foundations — unaccountable private organizations that funnel money into policing and influence public policy — and their ties to corporate America.<sup>53</sup> The report found connections between Uber and the police foundations in Atlanta and Los Angeles and called on Uber (and other companies) to sever ties.
- In 2018, the U.S. Army Research Laboratory announced a partnership with Uber to further advance drone technology.<sup>54</sup> Civil libertarians and other advocates have bemoaned the government's use of drone technology against both U.S. civilians and non-Americans.<sup>55</sup>

#### Uber policies fail to protect female riders, passengers, or executives.

- In 2019, Uber paid \$4.4 million (and agreed to outside monitoring) to settle an EEOC investigation which "found reasonable cause to believe that Uber permitted a culture of sexual harassment and retaliation."
- Uber has come under repeated criticism for its handling of sexual assaults. In 2020, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) fined Uber \$59 million for its failure to properly report sexual assaults.<sup>57</sup> (Uber paid the fine after it was reduced to \$9 million on appeal.)
- Some local officials remain dissatisfied with Uber's ongoing failure to report sexual assault. The New York Times recently reported that Santa Clara County and the city of San Jose are exploring policy options to force Uber into greater disclosure.<sup>58</sup> A 2022 lawsuit claims that Uber fired a contractor who had raised concerns about the company's practices related to investigating sexual assault.<sup>59</sup>
- A 2021 report from Pew Research found that female rideshare drivers are more likely than male drivers to have felt unsafe on the job, and significantly more likely to have "experienced an unwanted sexual advance" on the job. 60 A 2022 report in *The Verge* concluded that Uber does not do enough to prevent sexual assault: "Passengers are not currently required to complete background checks or sexual misconduct training before making an account. Despite making it

- safer for drivers, enforcing these additional measures could slow down the sign-up process, which rideshare companies tout as a central, seamless feature of their service."<sup>61</sup>
- Bloomberg Law recently reported that Uber has engaged in federal lobbying to protect aspects
  of the controversial use of nondisclosure agreements in the context of settlements of sexual
  misconduct. Uber opposed the SPEAK Out Act (S. 4524) "that would nullify some nondisclosure
  agreements for workers alleging sexual harassment and assault."<sup>62</sup>
- The Project On Government Oversight recently noted that "laws criminalizing abortion access will permit police and prosecutors to dramatically expand their reach and to target those seeking a variety of reproductive health care, including but not limited to abortion." <sup>63</sup> Uber collects the location data of riders, including for travel to health care facilities; U.S. Senators noted that data brokers "are already selling, licensing and sharing" this sort of data. <sup>64</sup> While the company claims it does not sell rider data (Uber does monetize rider data through ad sales), a geofence warrant could result in the prosecution (and/or persecution) of women seeking health care. <sup>65</sup>

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**Action Center for Race and the Economy** The Action Center on Race and the Economy (ACRE) is a campaign hub for organizations working at the intersection of racial justice and corporate accountability.

**Gig Workers Rising** Gig Workers Rising is a campaign of Working Partnerships USA that supports and educates app-based workers who are organizing to win better wages, working conditions, and respect on the job.

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