Greed is putting food couriers at risk, researchers warn

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Food delivery companies are willing to let vulnerable drivers die and are resisting safety regulations to maintain profits, researchers warn in a major new study from The Australian National University (ANU).

The recent deaths of several food delivery couriers in Australia have highlighted a lack of regulation in the industry where companies are putting profits ahead of people, according to the researchers.

The researchers assessed responses to the deaths of couriers. They interviewed 40 Australia-based participants on their experiences during the pandemic, including non-residents who did not have much support and needed to work. The interviews highlighted why migrants were more likely to experience the risks and insecurities of delivery driver work.

Professor Kate Henne, from the ANU School of Regulation and Global Governance, said the industry in Australia reflects a case where a worker’s life is expendable for the sake of economic gain—an issue that is rife in the gig economy.

"We drew on widespread reporting that shows many food delivery companies denied responsibility and resisted calls to implement reforms aimed at preventing future tragedies," Professor Henne said.

"Our research shows the value of these workers' labor is inextricably linked to their capacity to be injured and neglected, because they do not have basic work protections."

The paper, published in Antipode, draws on analysis showing one-in-three couriers sustained injuries on the job, while more than two-thirds reported the fear of being seriously hurt or killed while working.

"Average customer spending on Uber Eats more than tripled from pre-pandemic levels and without financial compensation or sick leave, many couriers continued to work while injured to financially sustain themselves," co-author Will Orr said.

"Couriers come to bear the economic brunt of their injuries while platforms' bottom line remains largely unscathed."

The authors also say the Commonwealth and NSW governments have framed safety as a problem that can be managed through self-regulation.

"These policies are ineffective at securing the health and livelihoods of couriers," Orr said. "They contribute to the couriers' precarity and social subordination while upholding the power of platform corporations in Australia."
