Road collisions more likely for takeaway delivery riders working in the gig economy

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Motorcyclists delivering hot food who pick up jobs through digital platforms are more likely to be in a collision where their bike is damaged or someone is injured than those directly employed by restaurants, finds research by UCL.

Freelance delivery riders are also more likely to report that time pressure from their employer means they are more likely to speed (56% versus 39%) or ride through red lights (21% versus 12%). They are also more likely to report being distracted by their phone, through which they accept jobs (57% versus 21%).

Food delivery is surging in popularity in the UK, with many takeaway services using motorcyclists or cyclists, both of whom are amongst the most vulnerable road users. Motorbike riders account for 20% of UK road deaths and are 50 times more likely than car occupants to die in a road collision.

Gig riders are three times as likely to report damage to their vehicle in a collision, at 25% versus 7% for employed riders. They are nearly twice as likely to report an injury, either to themselves or someone else involved in the collision, at 11% versus 6%.

In the paper, published in Safety Science, researchers found that the increased safety risks gig workers face and the additional risks they take are down to several factors. These include companies paying less attention to the safety and well-being of riders and paying them per delivery rather than for time worked, placing them under pressure to carry out more deliveries. Riders also report being incentivized to accept deliveries and ride in wet and icy conditions.

The academics conducted interviews with 20 riders and ran an online survey of 319 riders, both gig workers and those employed directly by restaurants or food chains, all of whom used motorbikes for deliveries. The academics built on research conducted in 2018 which found that self-employed drivers and riders in general were more likely to be involved in a road collision.

Report lead Professor Nicola Christie (UCL Centre for Transport Studies) said, “This research shows that despite previous work that highlighted the pressures gig economy drivers and riders face, nothing has changed in the sector. When managed properly, hot food delivery work can be flexible and beneficial for riders, but those in the gig economy need better protection and more attention paid to their safety.”

Gig riders report having to accept new jobs quickly to ensure they continue to receive work. This is done through an app on their phone, often whilst riding. Many sign up to multiple work provider apps, leading to several notifications coming in and needing to be accepted quickly.

Both groups of riders (72% and 75% for gig and employed riders respectively) say their employer
monitors how long deliveries take. However, companies are more likely to question employed riders if deliveries are too quick (52% versus 33%), indicating speeding or other violations. Around 90% of employed riders report having a good working relationship with their employer, compared to 62% of gig riders.

The riders themselves offered several recommendations to improve safety, including using sophisticated tracking technology—telematics—that monitors speed, sudden braking (indicating an emergency stop or collision) and could be used to reward safer riders instead of incentivizing risky behavior.

Other recommendations included free safety equipment for riders, regular safety training, monitoring and regulating hours worked, regular breaks and increasing pay without encouraging riders to take more risks by riding in bad weather.

Co-lead author Heather Ward said, "Gig riders often have to choose between earning enough from their work and riding safely, which is a choice no one should have to make. The gig economy is growing and hot food delivery, which is already popular, is becoming more so, as more people who would eat out at restaurants regularly are staying in to save money."

"We need to see a significant change to the sector to ensure rider safety, as well as that of other road users."

David Davies, Executive Director, Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS) said, "PACTS welcomes this important report from UCL. It confirms what many people have suspected. Companies are exploiting their delivery gig-workers, risking their safety and the safety of other road users for profit. The use of delivery gig-workers in the hot food sector has expanded enormously. It is high time that the government and HSE stepped in to prevent these dangerous practices."

More information: Nicola Christie et al, Delivering hot food on motorcycles: A mixed method study of the impact of business model on...