

Platforming precarity: Data narratives of workers sustaining urban platform services

Centre for Internet and Society

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[Centre for Internet and Society](#) conducted quantitative surveys with over 800 workers employed in the app-based taxi and delivery sectors across four cities in India (Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Guwahati, Lucknow). The surveys covered key employment indicators, including earnings and working hours, work-related cost burdens, income and social security, and platform policies and management. Findings from these surveys are presented as data visualisation briefs centring workers' everyday experiences. These data briefs form a foundational evidence base for policy and action around labour rights, social protection, and urban inclusion in platform work.

Key findings

Across the four survey cities, the data briefs reveal the ways in which precarity materialised in platform work. Workers grappled with numerous socioeconomic vulnerabilities that influenced their entry and continued employment in platform work. They faced low-wage outcomes, worsened by a reduction in bonuses, and high operational work-related expenses. Earnings remained low and uncertain despite workers putting in immensely long hours working for platforms. Worsening these burdens was widespread income insecurity that workers faced in both app-based taxi and delivery sectors.

Economic necessity and a lack of alternative employment pushing workers into precarious platform work

- The pathway to precarious platform work was distress-driven, borne out of low wages in previous salaried work, or a lack of alternative employment. A large proportion of workers were previously engaged in salaried employment, who then shifted to platform work, marking increased informality and precarity in their employment status. In Mumbai, over 64% of workers were in salaried employment previously, and this also the case for over 50% of workers in Guwahati, and over 42% of workers in Delhi-NCR. In Lucknow and Delhi-NCR, pandemic-driven unemployment was a key driver for a staggering proportion of workers who joined platform work as a distress employment source. Over 30% of workers in Lucknow and Delhi-NCR were previously unemployed.
 - These socioeconomic vulnerabilities influenced workers entry and continued employment in platform work. Key factors for workers entering were the lack of alternative employment sources and the hope for better pay and potential job flexibility. The lack of alternative jobs was a major push into platform work for workers in Delhi-NCR and Lucknow—over 60% of workers in Delhi-NCR and over 50% of workers in Lucknow. At least 40% of workers across cities mentioned the expectation of better pay as a major reason to start platform work, while potential job flexibility was also a key reason for workers in Mumbai and Guwahati. However, as the findings below show, workers' expectations were unmet.
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Externalised joining, statutory, and operational costs

- High joining, statutory, and operational costs were offloaded onto workers to access and continue platform work. This was especially the case for taxi workers who owned their vehicles, and had to incur vehicle investment costs and downpayment, as well as statutory costs that included operating permits, road tax, vehicle insurance, and fitness fee. Across all cities, average monthly expenses for taxi workers were above INR 30,000. For delivery workers, average monthly expenses mostly comprised fuel costs, and were around INR 5,500 in Guwahati and Lucknow, and around INR 6,700 in Delhi-NCR and Mumbai. These high externalised costs reveal the economic vulnerabilities inherent within platform work.
- Compounding these costs, platforms in the taxi services sectors also charged commissions unevenly and in varying fee structures—ranging from 20% to 30% of the fare in Mumbai and Lucknow, and going as high as 35% in Delhi-NCR and Guwahati. It is important to note that high commissions persist despite the mandate under the Motor Vehicle Aggregator Guidelines, 2020 to cap commissions and other platform charges at 20% of the fare.
- Platforms' offloading of costs to workers have resulted in workers' having to rely on informal leasing, debt, and subcontracting arrangements. These arrangements were seen across all cities, where workers in the city were either renting the vehicle they were driving, paying a commission to a vehicle owner, paying off vehicle EMIs on someone else's behalf, or were paid a fixed salary by a vehicle owner. Notably, in Lucknow, around 35% of taxi workers were engaged under these informal arrangements.

Insufficient incomes and economic vulnerabilities

- Workers' experiences, across cities, highlight how a majority contended with low-wage outcomes. Earnings remained low and uncertain for workers despite the fact that they were putting in long work hours. Several factors contributed to this insufficiency and uncertainty in workers' earnings: stringent platform requirements around high acceptance rates and ratings, which were important determinants, decreased flexibility, and high offloaded work-related expenses.
 - Across cities, earnings for delivery workers were considerably lower than those for taxi workers. When earnings were adjusted for standard weekly work hours (48 hours/week), over 50% of delivery workers in Mumbai, Guwahati, and Lucknow were earning less than the corresponding state-wise minimum wages. Further, over 75% of delivery workers in these cities were earning below estimated state-wise living wages. Platform work was also insufficient in meeting essential living needs for taxi workers in Mumbai, Guwahati, and Lucknow. Around 30% of taxi workers (23% in Guwahati) were earning less than minimum wages, and around 50% (80% in Mumbai) were earning less than estimated living wages. Earnings for both delivery and taxi workers in Delhi-NCR were substantially lower than minimum wage and living wage standards. 69% of workers in the taxi services sector and 87% of workers in the delivery services sector earned less than the minimum wage in Delhi. Moreover, 92% of workers in the taxi sector and 97% of workers in the delivery sector earned lower than the estimated living wage.
 - These insufficient incomes were particularly damaging to workers' lives and livelihoods, considering their high dependence on income from platform work. An overwhelming proportion of workers (over 94% across all cities) were engaged in platform work as their main source of income, as opposed to part-time employment. They also faced significant economic burdens such as being sole earners in their household, having multiple financial dependents, having financial commitments to provide remittances back home, and so on. Worsening these burdens was widespread income insecurity that workers faced across all cities—for over 43% of workers (up to 65% in Guwahati), earnings from platform work were insufficient for covering basic household expenses.
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Workplace risks and ineffective redressal mechanisms

- Workers in both sectors were working immensely long hours in order to try and make adequate earnings while working for platforms, working several hours above standard weekly work hours (48 hours/week) typically prescribed by occupational health standards. Across all cities, delivery workers spent a median of over 60 weekly hours working for platforms, and taxi workers spent a median of around 84 weekly hours.
- Alongside the adverse health impacts of long work hours, workers faced grievous workplace risks, including risks of physical assault, theft, poor road safety, and harsh weather conditions. Around 75% of delivery and taxi workers faced these issues in Mumbai and Lucknow. An even greater proportion of workers were exposed to these risks in Delhi-NCR (84%) and Guwahati (90%).
- Despite several workplace risks, platforms remained unaccountable for their failure to guarantee safe working conditions. Across all cities, less than 10% of workers found that their platform took steps to improve working conditions. Workers' overall experience with platform grievance redressal mechanisms was mixed. For instance, in Lucknow, only around 25% of workers who raised grievances did not receive a resolution. In contrast, 50% of taxi workers in Delhi-NCR did not receive a resolution, as was the case for 76% of taxi workers in Mumbai. Workers have limited recourse when their grievances go unanswered. Platforms, however, wield significant control over terms of work, making it difficult for workers to challenge unfair decisions.

Low coverage and accessibility of social protection mechanisms

- Social security covered by platforms typically included health insurance and accident insurance. Workers faced significant gaps in insurance coverage, and these gaps were particularly glaring in the taxi services sector. Across cities, health and accident insurance coverage for taxi workers was below 10% (an exception was 11% of workers covered by accident insurance in Delhi-NCR). It is important to note that this low coverage exists despite the Motor Vehicle Aggregator Guidelines, 2020 mandating provision of health insurance and term insurance from platforms.
- Delivery workers had a relatively higher percentage of insurance coverage from platforms, although coverage varied across cities. Health insurance coverage was low for delivery workers in Delhi-NCR (21%) and Guwahati (14%), but higher for workers in Lucknow (34%) and Mumbai (44%). In the case of accident insurance, insurance was covered by platforms for over 40% of delivery workers in Delhi-NCR and Lucknow, while a greater proportion of workers were covered in Mumbai (63%) and Guwahati (72%). Even though delivery workers were covered by platform-provisioned insurance, claiming benefits was an unreliable and time-consuming process. Workers who attempted to access benefits faced several obstacles, including poor awareness of available schemes, inadequate coverage, and little to no platform support in navigating complex claims procedures.
- The inadequacy of platform-provisioned insurance was exacerbated by the exclusion of workers from government social protection mechanisms. In Delhi-NCR, Guwahati, and Lucknow, over 35% of workers in both sectors were left outside of social protection from governments. In Mumbai, over 66% of workers were excluded.

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