

Why the gig economy is a scam



By **W. Kamau Bell**

🕒 Updated 7:46 AM ET, Sun August 9, 2020

Editor's Note: *W. Kamau Bell is a sociopolitical comedian and author who hosts and executive produces the CNN Original Series "United Shades of America," airing Sundays at 10 p.m. ET. The views expressed here are his. Read more [opinion](#) on CNN.*

(CNN) — If you are like me, right now you're relying heavily on the people who work for app-based delivery companies to keep you safer from the coronavirus.

From groceries to package delivery; to the cheesesteak I just ate; to whatever *I-just-didn't-want-to-get-it-myself* thing you had dropped off, items are brought to our doors by [those who are making it possible for the rest of us to not fill the streets](#).

And when I look out my window and see who's hustling our groceries home, I am seeing [mostly Black folks and people of color](#), which to me is a warning sign of "That job may not pay that well."

Last fall, way before we knew just how much more the economy would rely on the labor of gig workers, "United Shades of America" went to Austin, Texas, to learn about the fastest-growing category of new jobs in the country. Oops -- I didn't mean to say "jobs." These are called gigs, so companies can get away with not offering the kind of worker protections and benefits that you expect from a job.



Lots of us think the gig economy is a new idea, because tech bros told us it is. It's like how [that WeWork guy](#) convinced us he invented office space. But gig work is as old as this country.

America was built on people — literally *on people*, who moved from job to job with low pay (or no pay at all). The technology in this industry may be new, and we may call them gigs instead of jobs, but the work and the way those workers are treated? That's as old as the railroad, the cotton fields and [the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire](#).

Gig workers [can't reliably predict how much they'll make](#), and they can't rely on the hard-fought victories of the labor movement [for benefits like health care](#), sick leave or paid vacation. And possibly worst of all, many of these workers are [expected to count on tips](#) as a part of their pay.

That may work out for some gig workers, but more and more people are feeling like this is a scam. The whole idea of the gig economy is that it is solving problems, but really, most of the problems that it solves are for the people who use the app, not for the people being used by it.

While we often think of gig workers as people who just want to earn extra cash, or to supplement another main source of income, these "gigs" are more vital to American households than the app commercials would lead you to believe. When we filmed this episode on the gig economy, nearly one-third of app workers said this was their main gig, and

Related Article: [Instacart went on a hiring spree. These workers got squeezed](#)

most of those people are Black folks and people of color.

He has a full-time job -- plus three gigs 00:35

Meanwhile, wealthy employers like Jeff Bezos are watching their net worth grow. In early June, the Amazon co-founder and CEO was worth [\\$36.2 billion more](#) than he was on March 18, according to the Institute for Policy Studies.

Bezos is [far from the only billionaire who has made money](#) during — and more importantly *from* — the Covid-19 pandemic. But he is the billionaire who has billionaire-d the most. And this is noteworthy because Bezos' Amazon is [one company that has continued hiring](#) while [more than 1 million Americans have filed for unemployment](#) every week for the past 20 weeks.

You might think that a man who has done so well would pass some of his mind-boggling profits down to the people who are literally running around to make it happen. But he, like many others in his position, [has not really done that](#). That might be understandable if, like an NBA lottery pick, this was the first time he hit it big. But nope: Bezos [was already worth](#) hundreds of billions of dollars, and he still was [after finalizing his divorce](#) from MacKenzie Bezos ([who has pledged to donate half of her Amazon wealth](#)).

Amazon isn't the only company benefiting right now. Just three years ago, Instacart [looked like it could get crushed](#) by Amazon, but now it is raising new investment money and it is [worth almost \\$14 billion](#). (Chump change, as Jeff Bezos might call it.) And, just like Amazon, Instacart is not raining that net worth down on the heads of [the people who work hard to make those carts instant](#).

As I filmed this episode, I talked to gig workers of all kinds — including those we don't usually think about when we talk about this industry, like construction workers and domestic workers. One independent contractor who made the biggest impact on me is Vanessa Minton, a mom of three in Austin who is a trained private chef but needs the flexibility of gig work to better take care of her kids.

What it's like to be a grocery delivery gig worker 00:36

It should work perfectly, but even before the pandemic it was hard to make ends meet. And despite the fact that she, like a lot of gig workers, is busier than ever, the app companies make it hard for all that business to translate into her paycheck — a reminder to all of us using these services that we need to tip better, and give more people five stars.

I checked back in with Vanessa earlier this summer to see how the pandemic has impacted her, and she hadn't lost her dark sense of humor.

Below are excerpts of what she told me about her experience.

Kamau: What was it like to be a person who was doing grocery delivery at (the start of the pandemic)?

Vanessa: I needed food just for my family. So the first thing I had to do was drain my bank account to go get food for the family. And then hope that I could make it up by going straight back into that mess (for work).

It was probably a couple of weeks before we actually got a little bit of cushion from the corporation itself to say, 'All right, late orders? Not as big of a deal now.' You had (shoppers') ratings tank so far that they weren't getting offered anything while people were desperately trying to get shoppers to shop for them.

Kamau: People wanted shoppers, but the app was like, 'We can't give you this person. They haven't learned how to navigate a once-in-a-generation pandemic effectively and deliver on time.'

Vanessa: That became really bad, because then by the time the huge deluge of orders came in, the company had opened up a ton of positions. So they were hiring literally anybody off the street. That became really nerve-wracking, because you had people just breaking the rules and probably stealing from the customers at that point.

And there's just so much up in the air (for) [the people who need to rely on this income after things calm down](#), and you've got all these new shoppers that had maybe lost their jobs or been laid off. So it was great that they had the opportunity to work, but the customer service level wasn't exactly there. And there were no ramifications. It was just like, 'all hands on deck' kind of thing.

more than the average person does, not because I hoard, it's just something that I use. And so yeast became a hot commodity and I started trading that for personal protective equipment so that I could go grocery shopping.

Gig worker: These jobs aren't for extra money. They're essential 00:42

Kamau: Oh my God.

Vanessa: Yeah. So I ended up with a few N95 masks. I donated some to a sister-in-law who's a nurse. And then I was able to have my brother sew mask coverings for me. I bartered a lot.

They really did not address the PPE thing at all for a while. Then, they said if anybody comes down with coronavirus, they actually can get paid for their last 14-day rolling cycle. And that was really cool, but I did not get coronavirus. And I don't know anyone who was able to utilize that service. At the time there was absolutely no way to get a test.

Kamau: But even if you think you have the coronavirus, because of how capitalism works it's not in your best interest to tell.

Vanessa: Do you really want to admit that it might be the 'rona? As morally corrupt (as) that might sound, it's different when you are the one bringing an income. Like half my friends are small business owners and they're like, 'Oh, (if coronavirus is a) conspiracy theory, that supports my ability to go back to work. So, I'm going to go with that.' When in the beginning, they were like, 'Oh, this is really scary.' And it's just kind of like, what lines up with what they want and what they need.

Kamau: Well, Vanessa, I'm happy you still managed to keep that 'don't f**k with me' wit while dealing with all the challenges of the world. So, I'm glad you're still the same. And I'm glad to see you're still fighting.

Vanessa: I definitely cry in my car, in the (supermarket) parking lot, a lot. I put my visor up first and I have sunglasses on. So like, everything's fine. *[laughs]*

Kamau: We're all doing cries in our own little cry location. So, if you stop crying, then something's gone wrong, actually. Keep shining, keep crying.

Search CNN... 

- US
- World
- Politics
- Business
- Opinion
- Health
- Entertainment
- Tech
- Style
- Travel
- Sports
- Videos
- Coupons
- More
- Weather



FOLLOW CNN

