

# Immigrant food couriers risk death on South African roads

By [Kimon de Greef](#)

3 Jul 2019

A Tanzanian driver came off his bike on the N1 below Woodstock and couldn't walk for two weeks. A driver from Zimbabwe slalomed down Geneva Drive towards Camps Bay, skidded in the rain and crashed into the pavement. A Tanzanian driver came off his bike on the N1 below Woodstock and couldn't walk for two weeks. A driver from Zimbabwe slalomed down Geneva Drive towards Camps Bay, skidded in the rain and crashed into the pavement.



Scooter drivers gather on Rondebosch Main Road. Nodes like these have sprung up across Cape Town.

A Rwandan man broke his hand in a collision in Gardens; it still hurts when he grips the handlebars of his scooter. A Congolese driver struck his head on the N2, spending nearly a month in a coma.

All four were scooter drivers for food delivery companies — a burgeoning sector of the gig economy that has absorbed thousands of African men, mostly immigrants, into casualised, poorly regulated and highly precarious work.

The human costs of this arrangement are almost entirely invisible to customers, whose experience of ordering meals has been rendered effortless by technology. At least six drivers have died on the job in Cape Town since 2017, with countless more injured.

Peer-to-peer apps have revolutionised the delivery business, linking together restaurants, couriers and customers. Slick campaigns have marketed takeaways as part of a productive lifestyle, driving up profits for companies offering the service. Last year, Uber Eats announced that [more than half a million people](#) had downloaded its app in South Africa, with 10,000 additional downloads every week, or one every minute. Mr. D Food, owned by Naspers, reported that its orders had [quadrupled](#) within a year, while local startup OrderIn has also rapidly expanded.



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On the back of this growth, streets in Cape Town and other cities have filled with scooter drivers, many of them using badly maintained vehicles and inadequate safety gear. It has become common to see bikes with broken lights or missing mirrors, or with bald tires, or parts held together with string and tape. There are drivers with ill-fitting helmets, with thin shoes and torn jackets. Some have no delivery boxes, balancing orders between their feet.

In the Western Cape, the situation worsens in winter, when bad weather rolls in and makes ordering takeouts more appealing. “When it rains, it’s trouble,” said an Uber Eats driver from Rwanda. “The guys are falling all the time.”

Drivers interviewed for this story requested to be identified only by pseudonym, fearing deactivation by the companies they work with. Like [taxi drivers with Uber](#), most food couriers are independent contractors, without recourse to employment benefits or labour laws.

“They’re afraid of speaking out about their experiences,” said Mike, a Zimbabwean driver who delivers for Mr. D Food and Uber Eats. “They have that mentality, like if I say something bad, I’m doomed.”

For many immigrants in South Africa, food delivery is an enticing prospect, offering flexible hours and lenient background checks. People who don’t meet the requirements for the job, including undocumented migrants, can easily obtain fake licences, vehicle registration papers and roadworthy certificates. Waiting for asylum or refugee status can take [years](#), with few interim opportunities for legal work. The hands-free approach of the gig economy has opened a new avenue for employment — but also for exploitation.

“The platform is favourable for us,” explained Mike, who has been delivering food for two years. “For some guys, it’s the best they can get.”



A scooter delivery driver heads down Main Road, Observatory, at night. At least six drivers have died on the job in Cape Town since 2017, and many more have been injured. A spokesperson for NetCare 911's ambulance service, Shawn Herbst, said that accidents involving food couriers had "exploded" across South African cities in the past 18 months.

Sam, also from Zimbabwe, was smuggled across the border in 2011, finding work as a labourer in the construction industry. In 2017 a friend encouraged him to join Uber Eats, which had just launched in Cape Town, but Sam had neither a valid licence nor asylum papers. "But there are people that can help you with all those particulars," Sam told me. He estimated that just one in ten drivers on the platform had signed up with legal documents.

To join Uber Eats, drivers apply online. The [signup page](#) says: "Work on your schedule. Choose your wheels. Earn good money."

A section seemingly pasted from an international template, and intended for a rather different society, adds: "Put on your favourite tunes and enjoy driving around your city."

In a statement to GroundUp, Uber Eats said that drivers were subjected to "a stringent onboarding process", with each applicant required to submit a valid licence and vehicle registration disc. Drivers also had to demonstrate that they had active vehicle insurance, including cover for food delivery, and were legally entitled to work in South Africa.

The company indicated that it did not have specific measures in place to detect fraudulent documents, and that it did not at any stage physically inspect drivers' bikes.

OrderIn and Mr D Food – which operates in more than 1,900 suburbs across the country – declined to answer questions. There were more than 14 food delivery companies operating in South Africa last year, according to [MoneyWeb](#), but this story is focused on the three largest.

Sam, who lives in Gugulethu, became an Uber Eats driver without knowing how to use a motorbike. He asked a friend for lessons, buzzing around a parking lot until he felt able to balance. On his second day at work he crashed in town, escaping without injury. A few months later, in Camps Bay, he spun out on a corner. His knee swelled to four times its normal size, he said, and he couldn't work for nearly a month.

Since then, mercifully, he has not been in another accident, even though his current bike has a single mirror and dangerously smooth tyres. Most days he waits for orders on Kloof Street, where a group of mostly Zimbabwean drivers have claimed a section of pavement. They sit on wooden benches outside the Engen, sharing them with the car guards, or straddle their bikes, texting and listening to music. When their apps chime they grab their helmets and swing into the traffic, knowing that a customer is waiting.



### Mr D Food reaches milestone of 1 million downloads

2 Aug 2018



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Drivers can be penalised for late orders. In a typical day, they earn between R300 and R500. (Each company has different fee structures, but earnings fall within a similar range.) Out of this they must pay for their petrol, mobile data and vehicle maintenance; a large number rent motorcycles from private owners, pushing up their running costs. Dean, the Tanzanian who crashed in Woodstock, said, "In a month you take home maybe R4,000 or R5,000." For this story I spoke to more than a dozen drivers, who all reported broadly similar earnings.

Between food deliveries, drivers also need to eat — an exercise in restraint when they haven't earned enough. "I've made R100 since eight o'clock," Dean told me one afternoon. "I can't eat that money." And so he had bought white bread and margarine from a Somali-owned shop. Other drivers have eaten orders instead of delivering them, risking deactivation from the app.

Most days, Dean hangs out at the McDonalds on top of Long Street, a spot popular with drivers from east and central Africa. By late afternoon, before the dinner rush, up to 50 bikes can crowd the curb. There are drivers from Zambia, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo. When I visited recently, some Burundians were streaming soccer on Facebook.

Nodes like these have sprung up across Cape Town wherever there is sufficient wealth for restaurants to aggregate. On a frigid Monday evening in Observatory, as drinkers wandered back and forth between the bars, a group of Congolese drivers hunkered on Lower Main. “This work’s no good, but what else is there?” a man in an old biker jacket said, browsing Gumtree for a second-hand cellphone. He had recently recovered from breaking his knee on Voortrekker Road.

That night I counted at least a dozen scooters with broken lights between Mowbray and Gardens. On Kloof Nek, a major thoroughfare for deliveries, a man in a Mr. D jacket swerved in front of me, peering at the cellphone strapped to his arm. His taillights and rear indicators were out. His delivery box was wobbling. In the mirror I watched him pull a U-turn, narrowly missing another car.

“Every day there are new drivers on the road with unroadworthy motorcycles,” said Brent Blight, the founder of a motorbike training school called Bike Sawy. “It’s a free for all, and there’s no interest in making sure that these guys are safe.”



Between orders drivers sit on their bikes, texting and listening to music. When their apps chime they grab their helmets and swing into the traffic, knowing that a customer is waiting.

Some attempts at help have come from private quarters. Devin Paisley, the owner of Woodstock Motorcycle Company, a millennial-friendly biker shop, began noticing a glut of unsafe drivers in 2017. “These riders are being taken advantage of and endangering their lives,” he posted on Facebook, calling for donations from the biking community. Since then, he told me, more than 30 couriers had received safety gear, including used helmets, gloves and jackets.

But the problem, he said, is systemic in nature. “Instead of owning a fleet and paying for maintenance, the companies have basically handed off responsibility.”

The City of Cape Town and Western Cape traffic departments did not respond to emailed questions.

Even for trained and cautious riders, South African roads are extremely dangerous, with unchecked drunk driving and a limited awareness of motorcyclists. Professor Elmin Steyn, the head of surgery at Tygerberg Hospital, told me that motorcyclists were “one of the most vulnerable groups” for trauma ward admissions, adding that accidents typically peaked at month’s end and in rainy weather.

“There’s a very high risk of serious injury,” she said. “Drivers have minimal protection, and their vehicles are often not obvious in traffic.”



## Food delivery men say they're exploited

Tariro Washinyira 20 Jun 2018



One night in April, a Tanzanian food courier was killed in a collision in Goodwood. In August 2017, a Zimbabwean driver crashed and died on Orange Street. Last summer a West African man came off while delivering food in Green Point; he died on the scene as paramedics attempted to resuscitate him. At around the same time, a Malawian man was killed returning home from Stellenbosch, and a Burundian man was killed in an accident in Claremont. Yet another driver died on Liesbeek Parkway, crossing the bridge towards Observatory.

A spokesperson for NetCare 911’s ambulance service, Shawn Herbst, said that accidents involving food couriers had “exploded” across South African cities in the last 18 months. “We see a lot of bikes in terrible condition,” he told me, including headlights that had been broken for so long that their insides had begun rusting. Uber Eats would not comment on how many drivers had been killed nationally, citing privacy concerns.

Herbst added that many drivers refused treatment, waiting for friends beside the road instead of going to hospital — a strategy, he suspected, for undocumented immigrants to evade detection by the authorities.



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In August 2018, Uber Eats [announced](#) that it was offering free insurance to its drivers, including emergency medical cover and payouts for death and disability. (These are capped at R200,000, according to an online copy of the policy.) The company also pledged to assist with claims to the Road Accident Fund. A spokesperson, Samantha Fuller, declined to confirm how many cases had been processed since the initiative launched. “The safety of our delivery-partners,” she wrote in an email, “is a top priority.”

Yet several drivers I interviewed were unaware that they were even covered. Others were afraid to use the service in case their false papers came to light. In January this year, a driver named Godfrey opted to return to Zimbabwe rather than claim, his left hand paralysed in an accident. And rival delivery platforms do not offer insurance at all. “If you crash, and call Mr. D, the first thing they ask you is if the food’s okay,” one driver said.

Even so, some of the staunchest defenders of food delivery remain the drivers themselves — young men who the formal economy otherwise excludes. “If you don’t fix your bike, if you drive like an idiot, it’s on you,” one of them told me. Another, to murmured approval from his colleagues, said: “We knew the deal when we signed up.”



## Uber Eats launches in Soweto, introduces bicycle deliveries

Andy Walker 6 Jun 2019



It is true that, no matter the working conditions, drivers have agreed to them, and that for the majority no compelling alternative exists. It is also true that, in many of the African nations they hail from, road safety is even laxer. “At home, those guys would be driving without helmets,” a Zimbabwean man said, deriding his colleagues from further north.

But the question is whether this should absolve food delivery companies of scrutiny — especially in South Africa, one of the world’s least equal societies and a beacon for immigrants from across the continent. “Nobody can be held accountable,” said Blight, from Bike Savvy. “And that’s become the norm.”

On Friday 21 June, a cold front blasted into Cape Town, [tearing roofs off houses](#) and uprooting trees. Many of the drivers I’d met went home early. “Skad (scared) about this rain,” a Rwandan man wrote to me by WhatsApp. “Very bad for work,” a driver from DRC said. But others logged on, knowing they’d be kept busy – orders were rolling in, and there were fewer scooters on the road. It was the worst storm in months, triggering power outages across the city. The drivers shuttled food late into the night.

Read the [original article](#) on *GroundUp*.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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