



# Exploring the Urban Experiences of Food Delivery Workers in Copenhagen

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## 1. Summary

This research project dives into the dynamics of food couriers in Copenhagen, specifically focusing on those who work for Wolt, one of Denmark's prominent food delivery platforms. As digital platforms increasingly shape urban life worldwide, this study aims to contribute to the debate, as these platforms are revolutionizing how we experience and navigate our cities. This interaction captures the attention of academia, government, and civil society, sparking interest and raising key questions regarding working conditions, the use of public spaces, urban infrastructure, and the broader local and global economy (Bauriedl & Strüver, 2022; Michel & Schröder-Bergen, 2022; Richardson, 2020; Sadowski, 2021).

With this in mind, our research highlights the vital importance of inclusive and holistic urban planning as a crucial component in building better, more sustainable cities. It particularly emphasizes the importance of incorporating the voices and needs of platform-based couriers and other often-overlooked community members when designing urban infrastructures, such as Copenhagen's bike lanes. Our research aligns with the goals of the University of Copenhagen's Green Solution Center, as it seeks to gather insights that amplify diverse perspectives in sustainable urban development.

Through our methodological approach<sup>1</sup>, we have unearthed two significant findings: First, while Copenhagen is celebrated for its extensive and high-quality bike lane infrastructure, this very framework coexists with challenges related to precarity and inequality for couriers. Second, the bike lane system can amplify speed, risks, and social stigma for those engaged in platform-based jobs. By illuminating the daily experiences of couriers, this study enriches our understanding of how digital labor is reshaping urban spaces, work dynamics, and social identities.

## 2. Copenhagen's Bike Lanes: Complexity and Contradictions in Urban Infrastructure

Copenhagen is an example of a city that champions cycling as a primary mode of transportation, distinguishing itself from many others that prioritized cars in the mid-20th century. This has fostered a culture where a remarkable 76% of residents support reallocating road space in favor of bicycles. The city proudly brands itself as a "City of Cyclists," showcasing its achievements in making cycling a practical choice for daily commuting and positioning itself as a blueprint for future livable cities (Freudental-Pedersen, 2019, 2022).

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<sup>1</sup> The study was conducted through in-depth interviews with couriers and a representative of Copenhagen Municipality, a participatory workshop aimed at mapping affections and emotions associated with the city, and autoethnographic memos based on the author's experiences as a courier.

The couriers we interviewed shared their positive experiences, highlighting the excellent material conditions and design of Copenhagen's bike lane network, expressing a high level of satisfaction with their riding experience.

In this context, platform couriers, many of whom come from migrant backgrounds, leverage a well-maintained network of bike lanes to navigate their daily jobs. Nevertheless, similar to other urban environments, they encounter "unavoidable frictions" (Wiechers, 2022, p. 86) that arise as platform companies implement their services. These challenges can hinder the delivery process and serve as a reminder that even in a city renowned for robust cycling infrastructure, couriers still contend with significant obstacles.

Throughout the research, we identified several key frictions stemming from the interplay of the nature of the work, the urban landscape, and the social dynamics at play. These interconnections manifest in various complex and sometimes conflicting ways:

- **Navigating Unequal Spaces:** Navigating the city is far from a simple task; it's a journey filled with emotions that can reinforce social and spatial inequalities. While some challenges, such as navigating crowded pedestrian areas or unfamiliar neighborhoods, are apparent, other less visible constraints such as stereotypes, prejudice, and racial profiling also influence couriers' day-to-day experiences, making certain parts of the city feel unwelcoming.
- **Precarity Behind Flexibility:** Couriers grapple with the realities of precarious working conditions, tight deadlines, and the physical demands posed by the urban environment. In a city like Copenhagen, these vulnerabilities coexist with what appears to be a safe cycling infrastructure. Additionally, the freelance nature of platform work, a structure utilized by Wolt, exposes workers to heightened vulnerabilities, often shifting the burden of responsibility from the company to the courier. This model of work offers a sense of flexibility, allowing couriers to set their own schedules; however, it frequently comes with the uncertainty of fluctuating income. This situation creates a tension between the perceived freedom of being one's own boss and the reality of precarious employment.
- **Temporal Pressures in Platform Work:** Time is also a critical factor that significantly impacts their work dynamic, directly influencing the income they can earn. The pressure of time constraints leads to heightened stress and can result in risky behaviors. Ultimately, this time compression reshapes the experiences and practices of couriers, underscoring the multifaceted challenges they navigate daily.

In conclusion, this research on the experiences and working conditions of food couriers in Copenhagen underscores the importance of considering their perspectives in urban planning. It emphasizes the need for inclusive city design that accommodates the diverse voices contributing to a just and sustainable urban environment. To achieve this, listening to these voices and conducting thorough research are essential steps toward understanding the role of infrastructure in daily life. Ultimately, the aim should be to develop more inclusive and adaptable infrastructure that serves multiple purposes and benefits the entire community.

### 3. Collaborators

The project supervisors are Natalie Marie Gulsrud, Associate Professor in the Department of Geosciences and Natural Resource Management at the University of Copenhagen, and Mark Vacher, Associate Professor at the Saxo Institute - Archaeology, Ethnology, History, and Greek and Latin at the University of Copenhagen. The external partner involved in this project is MiljøPunkt Nørrebro. Funding for the project was provided by the Urban Solutions to Green Transitions Living Lab at the Green Solutions Centre, University of Copenhagen.

## 4. References

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