

The Growing Precariousness of US Work

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The nature of work is fast changing in the US and not for the better. There has been lots of talk lately about the so-called Gig economy and the precarious work conditions of those forced to work as so called independent contractors for companies like Uber, Lyft, DoorDash, Postmates, Amazon's Mechanical Turk, and the like. These workers have no job security, little or no control over their wages and work conditions, and no social benefits.

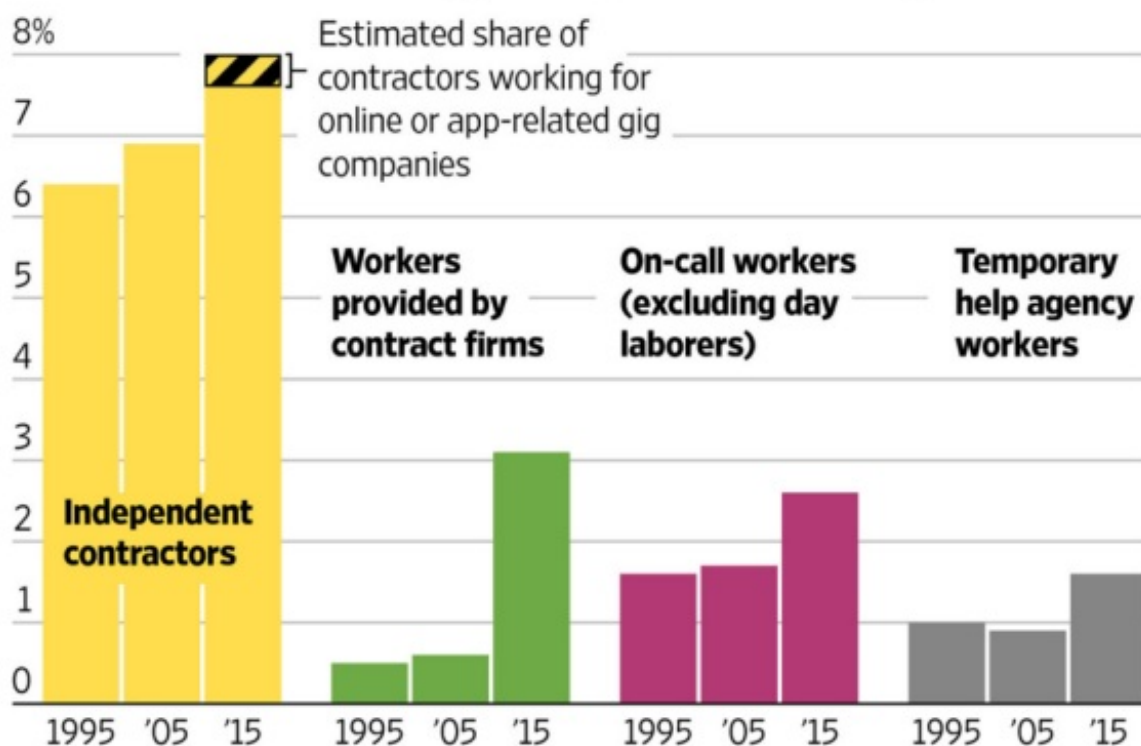
But Gig economy employment is just a small percentage of what is being called alternative work arrangement jobs. This broader category includes those working for temporary help agencies, as independent contractors, for contract firms or on-call. And, as a Wall Street Journal [discussion](#) of recent work by economists Alan Krueger of Princeton University and Lawrence Katz of Harvard University makes clear, the number of these alternative work arrangement jobs is rapidly growing.

As the figure below shows, the percentage of workers with alternative work arrangement jobs—what might better be labeled as precarious work—grew from 10.1 percent of all jobs in 2005 to 15.8 percent of the total in 2015. By comparison, alternative employment barely increased over the previous decade, from 9.3 percent in 1995 to 10.1 percent in 2005. The data is based on a person's main job, so someone with a full time position who also works a second more alternative job is still classified as a conventional employee.

Taking It Offline

Alternative work arrangement jobs, often known as gigs, have climbed rapidly since 2005, but contrary to popular belief, most of that growth has happened offline, not through apps such as Taskrabbit and Lyft.

Share of workers in each type of alternate work arrangement



Sources: Labor Dept. (1995, 2005); Alan Krueger of Princeton U. and Lawrence Katz of Harvard U. (2015)

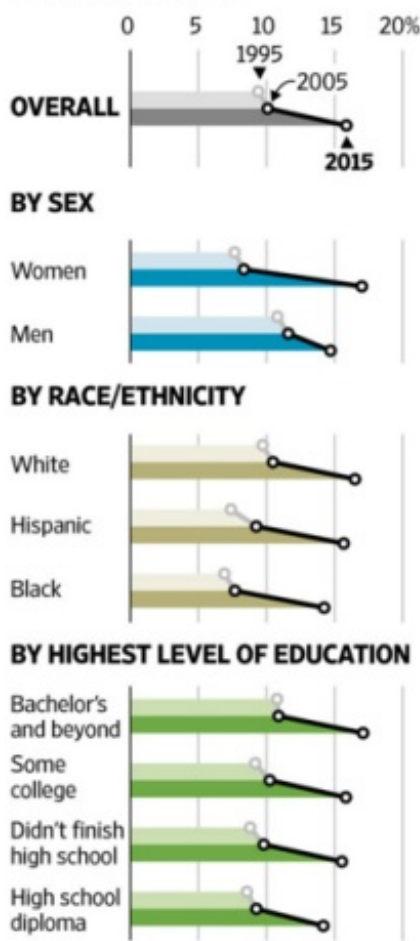
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Strikingly, as the following chart illustrates, these precarious work arrangements are exploding in almost all sectors of the economy and at all educational levels.

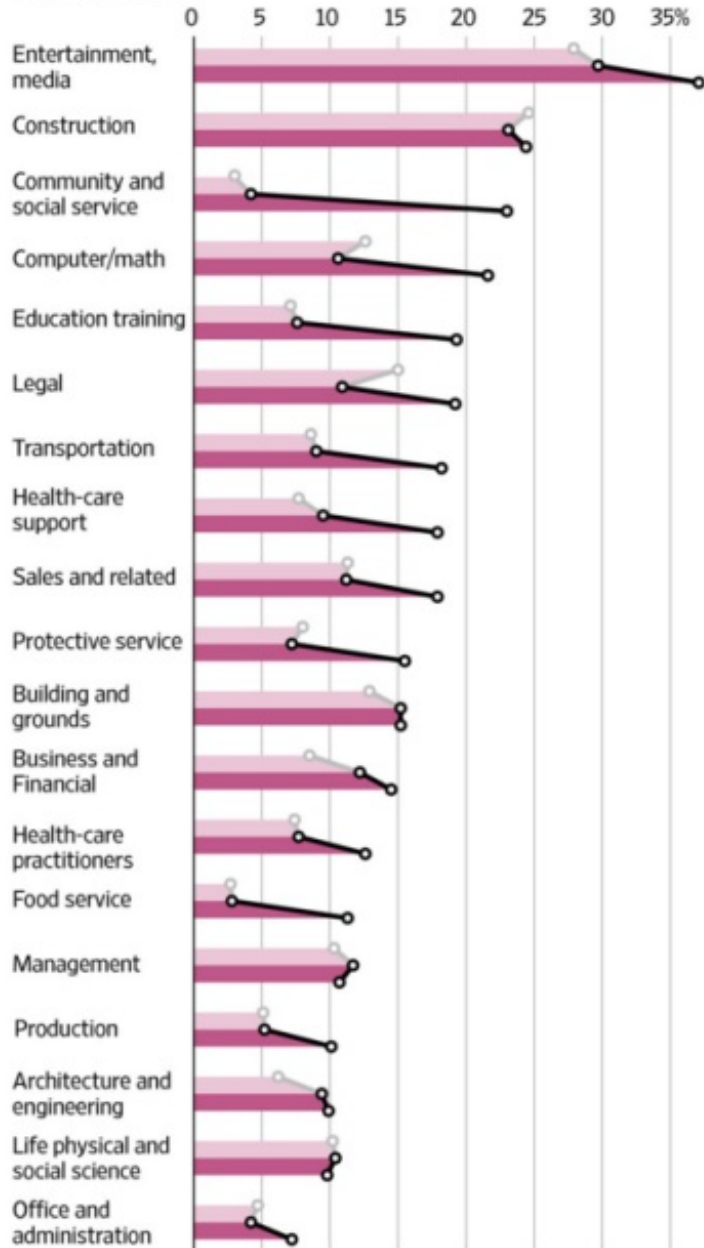
Gigging Is Up

Economists have found massive growth in alternative work arrangements since 2005, but despite stereotypes about working-class Uber drivers, those gains have mostly come offline, and among professional classes.

SHARE OF WORKERS IN ALTERNATIVE/GIG WORK ARRANGEMENTS



BY OCCUPATION



Sources: Labor Dept. (1995, 2005); Alan Krueger of Princeton U. and Lawrence Katz of Harvard U. (2015)

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As the Wall Street Journal explains:

The steep jump in workers in alternative employment complicates the rosy picture of the labor market highlighted by officials at the Federal Reserve and in the Obama administration. While the economy has added nearly 14 million jobs since 2010, more than recovering the number of jobs lost during the recession, the new data suggests a growing slice of the workforce has only tentative ties to a main employer.

This development has begun to spur [new kinds of organizing](#). However, at this point in time, the aggressive corporate restructuring of work has left growing numbers of workers, regardless of whether employed in conventional or alternative work arrangements, in a weakened position.