

Uber in France: A route out of the banlieues

By Anne-Sylvaine Chassany

The boom in ride-hailing apps has created thousands of jobs for young adults from the poorer suburbs of Paris. But they have met opposition from traditional taxi drivers and now face a regulatory clampdown.

Baba, or “Sanka” as he is known to his friends in Bobigny, a suburb in northern Paris, likes to say that Uber got him out of jail and kept him out.

A high-school dropout, Baba started to slip into petty crime in his teenage years, much like many youngsters in the unemployment-stricken immigrant enclaves that encircle France’s capital. At 17, he was sentenced to four months in prison for a robbery. The conviction was erased from his record because he was under 18 but in 2012 he was in jail again.

By then, Uber had rolled out its ride-hailing app in France. A friend who had started a minicab company using Uber’s technology offered Baba a job as a driver and a judge let him out early under judicial review. Since then, Baba has been working 10 to 12 hours nightly, six days a week. In 2014, he gained a licence to operate his own chauffeur service.

“Without this job, maybe I would be in prison,” Baba says, laughing as he drives his Peugeot 508 to a garage through rundown rows of small houses.

Now, the 24-year-old wants to set up a transport company with his older sister and take on people to work for him. He is a role model for his friend Amara Koita, also an Uber driver, who says he avoided prison only because his mother sent him to Senegal to study religion for three years after he skipped school.

Pointing to an empty square surrounded by a kebab shop, a supermarket and blocks of flats, Baba reflects on how the job has



In this Dec. 18, 2015 file photo, a French livery driver has written on his car window “Stop Uber” as their cars block a traffic circle at Port Maillot, one of the entries to the city after they carried out a “Snail Operation” from Orly airport into Paris

It took only a few years for Uber and other platforms challenging the Parisian taxis’ monopoly to create more than 15,000 jobs

changed his life.

“Before Uber, we would all stand there, talking crap all day,” he says. “Now I own a beautiful car, I’ve bought a Zara suit. I love this job, I love driving through Paris, talking to clients. It’s good money if you work hard. I am not letting go of this job.”

Uber, though, has not been embraced by everyone. When the company opened its services in Paris and other European cities, it was resisted by taxi companies. The reaction was most fierce in France,

with angry protests and even attacks on Uber drivers. Two Uber executives were detained by police and are being tried in Paris on “complicity in the illegal exercise of the taxi profession”.

In French suburbs such as Bobigny, however, the rise of Uber and other French minicab services represents something else: a foothold in the job market for thousands of undereducated youngsters of immigrant descent.

The banlieues, as the deprived suburbs are

called, have been a thorn in France’s side for four decades. They were the scenes of riots in 2005 after the accidental death of two teenagers chased by police in Clichy-sous-Bois, 10km from Bobigny. The government has poured in 40 billion euros for renovation, but unemployment is still higher than average and the estates are plagued by crime and discrimination, as well as the more recent threat of Islamist radicalisation.

In Bobigny, joblessness stands at 22 percent, double the national rate. More than a third of those aged 15 to 29 are unemployed.

It took only a few years for Uber and other platforms challenging the Parisian taxis’ monopoly to create more than 15,000 jobs. About 5,300 are self-employed and the rest work for minicab companies. They compete against the 17,000

registered taxis in Paris.

“There has been a tidal wave of start-ups in the banlieues, an entire generation wants to be Uber drivers,” says Sabrina Lauro at Planet Adam, a non-profit organisation that helps residents in the suburbs set up businesses. Uber appeals to those without a diploma or work experience, she says.

Research seems to bear this out. Charles Boissel, a PhD student at HEC Paris, a business school, found that most minicab registrations were in the “suburbs of northern and south-eastern Paris, where economic conditions are harshest”.

After Uber agreed to partly open its database, Augustin Landier, professor at the Toulouse School of Economics, and David Thesmar, a professor at HEC, conducted the first detailed survey of Uber drivers in France. According to their findings,

provided to the Financial Times, an overwhelming number of drivers are male (98 percent); they are much younger than established taxi drivers (70 percent are under 40, compared with 30 percent for taxis), and more have experienced unemployment (a quarter were jobless before turning to Uber, and nearly half of those for more than a year).

Unlike U.S. drivers, who tend to use Uber to add to their income, 81 percent of French drivers have no other job. Two-thirds say they want “to start a new long-term career”. A fifth work more than 40 hours a week. Most earn 20 euros an hour, more than twice the minimum wage.

Mr Koita, Baba’s friend, says he could pocket 1,700 euros a month after the 20 percent Uber charge, fuel and other costs. This is as much as he made working as the manager of his un-

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Uber in France: A route out of the banlieues (continued)

cle's supermarket, which was burnt down by an arsonist.

"Uber is a social game-changer," says Professor Thesmar. "Starting a company is usually the best way for immigrants to integrate. That's what Uber shows: if you make it easier for those youngsters to set up companies, it's more efficient than any urban policy or state subsidies."

A bipartisan commission set up in 2007 by Nicolas Sarkozy, the centre-right former president, estimated that opening up the taxi market could yield 35,000 to 45,000 additional driver jobs in the Paris region alone.

The new competition has boosted demand. According to the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies, the revenues of the sector - taxis and minicabs - increased by 10 percent between 2010 and 2015.

That should be good news for François Hollande, the Socialist president who has vowed to curb record unemployment before next year or else abandon plans to seek re-election. The trend also supports the push by Emmanuel Macron, the economy minister, to pull down barriers of overly protected sectors as a remedy to France's two-tier jobs market.

"For many young people it's easier to find a client than a job," Mr Macron said.

Yet, under lobbying pressure from the powerful taxi sector - whose largest company, G7, has long-established links with the Socialist party - there are plans to restrict the use of Uber and other ride-hailing platforms.



French President Francois Hollande

If adopted, it would mean that people with criminal records, like Baba, would be unable to obtain a licence. A proposal to ban drivers operating under a collective transport licence from using the platforms threatens at least 7,000 jobs: the government insists the status, used by most drivers because it is cheaper and quicker to obtain than a minicab licence, can only apply when carrying between two and nine people, not just one.

"Uber's success in the banlieues is a spontaneous response to decades of public policies that have failed to combat discrimination and boost job creation," says Thomas Kirszbaum, a sociologist at École Normale Supérieure

de Cachan. "And now, once again, we're pondering measures that could have a disproportionate effect on discriminatory, he says. Mr Landier and Mr Thesmar estimated that if Uber drivers were to lose

“Uber’s success [...] is a spontaneous response to decades of public policies that have failed to combat discrimination and boost job creation.”

THOMAS KIRSZBAUM
SOCIOLOGIST

an already vulnerable population." In countries where ethnic statistics are collected - France does not - such measures could be seen as

their jobs, more than 20 percent of them would still be unemployed two years later.

For Fouad Baadache, a

23-year-old entrepreneur born to Algerian parents, the latest clampdown could damage his business. His 30 drivers, all employed under permanent contracts, could lose their jobs because they use the collective transport status. One of them, who at 31 had never had a proper job, came to him in tears, he says.

"The state has never done anything for us and against all odds we create actual jobs," says Mr Baadache, who lives in Asnières-sur-Seine, northern Paris.

"Now they want to prevent us from succeeding, they want to send us back to the banlieues. The government doesn't realise the situation is explosive. It could be worse than in 2005."

The government insists it is seeking to prevent the excesses of a rapidly expanding industry. "New forms of exploitation have emerged," Ms Lauro of Planet Adam says. "Some drivers without a car and a licence can operate, but they sometimes have to work nonstop to barely cover their costs."

The regulatory scrutiny is not unique to France. In Germany, Italy and Spain, courts have ordered bans on Uber's low-cost service. Uber drivers have been arrested in Brussels and Amsterdam, while curbs have been discussed in the UK. Unions have complained about the company's policies towards workers.

In Bobigny, Ismael Rakhmi, who with Baba attends prayers at the local mosque, recalled that he had to work for 13 hours a day for six days to earn 1,900 euros a month - a lower hourly wage than his previous six-month temporary job loading trucks at TNT. Because he had no licence and no car, he retained less than a third of each fare.

"At TNT, I had two days of rest a week," he said. Mr Rakhmi has applied for a minicab licence but has to wait longer now because of the clampdown.

Uber's decision to slash fares by 20 percent in October was also painful, drivers say. It hurt more than the repercussions of the Paris terror attacks that killed 130 people in November, which led to Parisians staying at home.

The benefits of Uber cabs go beyond economics, the drivers say: they improve social cohesion at a time when France, divided over its Muslim population, needs it badly.

"It's two worlds meeting at last," says Joseph Francois, who heads one of the largest minicab companies with 140 drivers. "You've got young people from the suburbs transporting Parisian lawyers from Neuilly, artists, people coming from China or Australia. All of a sudden, social barriers and prejudices vanish. They talk. They have a better understanding of each other."

Some of his drivers have the highest Uber grades yet do not fit the stereotype of the perfect employee: one is heavily tattooed and another has dreadlocks.

"People from the banlieues feel stigmatised, most have difficulties speaking proper French, but all of a sudden they are wearing a suit, driving a nice car. They feel appreciated," Mr Baadache says.

Baba, though, worries about the effect of the new regulations. "If 10,000 drivers are gone, we won't be able to meet the demand. Prices could go up, wait times could be longer."

As for the drivers who would be left without a job, Baba shrugs. "Most of them will go back to the banlieues, many of them will go back to crime."

Additional reporting
by Murad Ahmed

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Backlash: taxi drivers appeal for state backing

Parisian taxi drivers have not been shy about showing their irritation at the rise of ride-hailing apps, organising protests that have occasionally turned violent and urging the government to restrict their use. In February, the powerful lobby headed by Taxis G7, the largest company of its kind in the Paris region, and owned by André Rousselet, a one-time adviser to former French president François Mitterrand, asked Manuel Valls, prime minister, to ramp up police controls on Uber drivers, which he did two weeks ago.

The object of their ire is the collective transport licence under which most Uber drivers operate. Taxi drivers argue it can only be used to carry between two and nine people, not just a single client. A government decree last year upheld the taxi driver's complaint, saying it is illegal to transport just one client using this particular licence.

For their part, Uber drivers, and those using French

equivalent platforms, such as LeCab and Chauffeur-Prive, criticise the constantly changing legal environment. "This is absurd: so we could use the licence to transport nine people but not one?" says Joseph Francois, who employs more than 140 drivers under such licences and who has recently set up Alternative Mobilite Transport, the industry's trade body. "Why did the government let us use it in the first place?"

The government is expected to outline new measures as early as next week. A mediator has suggested setting up a retirement fund for taxi drivers who bought licences on the secondary market for up to 150,000 euros.

Meanwhile, more than 7,000 drivers are at risk of being fined at police controls. "We're being harassed at the airports, at stations..." says Fouad Baadache, who employs 30 drivers. "Most of the time, officers don't know the law and fine us anyway."



Staffers Brian Bunge (left), and Kevin Beck navigate and steer a sonar device being dragged above the seabed in a search for missing Malaysia Airlines Flight 370



Members of the Hydrospheric Solutions and Phoenix International Holdings search team launch the SLH ProSAS-60 sonar device from the GO Phoenix

Monotony and ‘moments of terror’ mark search for Flight 370

By Kristen Gelineau, Sidney

THE shifts on board the ship are punishing: 12 hours on, 12 hours off, seven days a week, for a month straight — though pingpong and poker during the downtime help break up the monotony. But for the American man who designed a sonar device being used in the hunt for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370, spending nearly six months at sea searching for the plane was something of an honor.

With that honor has come the weight of responsibility — for the families of the 239 people on board the vanished plane still desperate for answers. Now, with the search of a remote patch of ocean off Australia’s west coast drawing to a close and the plane’s wreckage proving stubbornly elusive, Jay Larsen is among those feeling the pressure.

“I think there is some tension building as the end of the job comes nearer,” says Larsen, whose Whitefish, Montana-based company built one of the devices scanning a mountainous stretch of seabed where the plane is believed to have crashed nearly two years ago. “Everybody wants to find this thing, including us.”

Larsen has been involved with the hunt from the beginning, when marine services contractor Phoenix International Holdings hired his deep-water search and survey company, Hydrospheric Solutions, to provide the sonar equipment used on board the search vessel GO Phoenix. The Malaysian-contracted vessel participated in eight months of

the hunt until June last year.

Most recently, Larsen and his team flew to Singapore to load their sonar device onto a Chinese ship, the Dong Hai Jiu 101, which has just joined three other vessels scouring the southern Indian Ocean for the plane. He then traveled on board the Dong Hai to the west Australian city of Fremantle, and, after ensuring the sonar and his team were ready to go, bid them adieu last month as they set out for the search zone 1,800 kilometers to the southwest.

Larsen’s company has a crew of eight people on the Chinese ship who are tasked with running the sonar system — or “flying the fish,” as he puts it. That “fish” is actually a 6-meter long, 1.5-meter wide, 3.5-ton bright yellow behemoth called the SLH ProSAS-60, which is dragged slowly behind the ship by a cable.

The device hovers just above the seabed as it scans a patch of ocean floor 2 kilometers wide, sending data to computers on board that process the information into images.

The black-and-white, near-photo-quality pictures that pop up on the screen resemble the surface of the moon. The imagery, produced by synthetic aperture sonar, is higher quality than conventional sonar, Larsen says, giving him confidence that his team won’t miss the debris field if they drift over it.

The job can be grueling. Larsen was on board the GO Phoenix at the start of the underwater search — from September 2014 to February 2015 — breaking only to return to sho-

re once a month for fresh supplies, and flying home once to the U.S. for the holidays.

“It almost ruined my head, my brain, my heart, my marriage, but we got it going,” he says.

On board, two teams of three people work alternating 12-hour shifts every day, a job that requires close attention and coordination. One of Larsen’s employees sits at the controls flying the sonar, while a navigator sits beside him looking at

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upcoming terrain to warn him of obstacles. A third staffer sits in a nearby seat providing a backup set of eyes. Another team member pops in occasionally in case anyone needs a break.

The work is both monotonous and intense; there are long stretches where nothing happens, until bam — a massive mountain in the seabed suddenly appears in front of them. The sonar could be destroyed if it hits a rock wall, or it could

get hopelessly stuck on something and languish forever on the ocean floor, which reaches depths of 6.5 kilometers (4 miles).

“It’s that whole cliché of hours of boredom interspersed with moments of terror,” Larsen says. “Some of the terrain out there is just incredible, these mountains and trenches and stuff that we’re trying to get every last look into to make sure we don’t miss anything. So the more daring we are, the better in terms of the imagery — but the consequences are real. [...] It’s a couple-million-dollar piece of equipment and we don’t want to lose it.”

Larsen’s team must work closely with the crew to ensure the vessel is maintaining the right speed so the sonar doesn’t sink to the bottom.

Those on board also must grapple with the region’s notoriously brutal weather. The team can operate the sonar in up to 4-meter swells, but anything bigger forces them to pull up the gear so it isn’t damaged. Maneuvering the massive device out of the water when the waves are big is tricky, as it can swing violently from the crane as the ship rocks. Well-planned choreography by more than a dozen people is required to prevent anyone from getting hurt.

The first month Larsen’s team was on the hunt, they were in a constant state of alert, expecting the plane would quickly be found. As time passed, some of that anxiousness waned and the job became more routine. But they’ve never given up hope that the aircraft will be spotted, even though there’s just 30 percent of the 120,000

square kilometer search zone left to check.

“It literally could be any minute, we could look up and see debris on that screen,” he says.

When Larsen’s team isn’t on duty, they burn off energy at the ship’s gym, watch movies, read and play poker, pingpong and somewhat contentious rounds of Monopoly. But often, they prefer to retire to their rooms for much-needed solitude. Most people share a room with one other person, but work opposing shifts so they get the space to themselves.

The Dong Hai crew is planning to stay in the search zone for 38 to 42 days at a stretch before returning to port for supplies. It’s a tough assignment, but Larsen didn’t have any trouble wrangling volunteers.

“Everybody wants to be on the MH370 search,” he says.

The job comes with some perks, such as the novelty of being the first humans to lay eyes on much of the underwater terrain. The seabed in the search zone is so remote that it had never even been mapped before the hunt for Flight 370 began. In that sense, the search has proven thrilling, though Larsen is conscious of the larger goal.

“There are 239 families out there, so it’s hard to be like, ‘We’re excited! This is awesome!’” he says. “But at the same time, we’re really proud right now to be a part of the search because it’s a huge effort and I hope to bring resolution to those families. And that’s really the thing that drives us all is, ‘Put a lid on this thing. Let’s get this done.’” AP

Americans split over safety of US drinking water

By Ed White and Emily Swanson, Detroit

WHEN it comes to water, only about half of Americans are very confident in the safety of what's flowing from their tap, according to an Associated Press-GfK poll, which found that trust is even weaker among minorities and people with lower incomes.

The lead-contaminated water in Flint, Michigan, has been in the headlines for months, and more than half of Americans believe it's a sign of widespread problems in the U.S. About seven in 10 drink tap water, but about half of them first run it through a filter.

"Of all the water systems in the nation, Flint can't be the only one that's faulty," said Elsbeth Jayne, 28, of Christiansburg, Virginia, who's very comfortable with her own tap water.

Joseph Johnson, 46, of Brooklyn, New York, said he only drinks bottled water, spending about USD8 a month on two cases. He's among the 30 percent of Americans choosing water off the shelf.



Water from the Flint River flows through the Hamilton Dam near downtown Flint, Michigan

"I've always been under the assumption that water wasn't 100 percent clean. The Flint situation brought more of the story to the surface," he said last week.

Flint, with a population of about 100,000, was drawing water from the Flint River for 18 months as a way to save money until a new pipeline to Lake Huron was ready. But the corrosive water leached lead from the city's old plumbing because certain treatments weren't added. Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder, whose administration repeatedly downplayed the lead threat, now

calls it a "disaster."

No level of lead in the human body is considered safe, especially in children. The river water also may have been a source of Legionnaires' disease, which killed at least nine people in the region.

The poll found only 47 percent of Americans say they're extremely or very confident about the safety of their drinking water, while 33 percent say they're moderately confident and 18 percent are not very confident or not at all.

Forty percent of African-Americans polled and 28 percent of

Hispanics were less likely than whites — 54 percent — to be very confident in their water's safety. Less than 40 percent of households making less than \$50,000 are very confident.

"The perceptions are realities," said Marc Edwards, a water expert at Virginia Tech who played a vital role in documenting the lead problem in Flint. "Generally, tap water in the United States is safe. Problems that surfaced in Flint, including Legionella and lead, disproportionately affect poor minority communities."

He said the problems are partly due to the "abysmal state" of old pipes in neighborhoods and homes across the country.

Half of Americans say the federal government should do more to ensure safe drinking water, while 40 percent said the government's role is about right. A regional director of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, who was criticized for not helping Flint sooner, resigned in January.

More than 60 percent of blacks and Hispanics say the federal government should do more, compared to 44 percent of whites,

the poll found. Nearly 60 percent of households making less than \$50,000 want the government to do more. Only 40 percent of households making more than \$100,000 had a similar view.

Karl Bantom wants the government to be active. He said he and his wife have been using bottled water for years in their Philadelphia apartment.

"When I turn my water on, I get a sulfur smell. I'm not drinking this," Bantom, 55, said. "They should test the water more thoroughly."

When told about the poll results, a spokesman for the American Water Works Association, which represents water professionals, said the "vast majority" of water utilities in the country surpass federal and state standards.

"If people question the safety of their water, I'd encourage them to be in contact with their utility personally and ask the hard questions," Greg Kail said. "Examine your utility's water quality report. Talk to public health professionals. Get the answers you need. And then make an informed decision."

The AP-GfK Poll of 1,033 adults was conducted online from Feb. 11-15, using a sample drawn from GfK's probability-based KnowledgePanel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.4 percentage points. AP

ASK THE VET

by Dr Ruan Du Toit Bester



9 FREQUENT CAUSES OF CAT EYE PROBLEMS

WE are currently seeing a lot of cats with ocular problems, mostly caused by viral infections. Cat flu seems to be prominent in the winter months here so take care of your cats eyes and respiratory system. If you notice any eye discharge or sneezing/coughing please come go see your vet. Cat eye problems are caused most frequently by bacteria or the feline herpes virus. The symptoms include inflamed red eyes and there will also be a discharge from the eyes. The feline eye infections are treatable, but you need to detect them in timely manner, to avoid further complications. The treatment will depend on the factor causing the infection.

1. FELINE HERPES VIRUS

The feline herpes virus is the number one cause of conjunctivitis, which is the inflammation of the eyes.

The virus is transmitted through contact with infected cats.

The virus is likely to cause ulcers on the cornea, dry eyes or inflammation of the cornea.

The treatment consists of eye drops that contain antibiotics.

2. PANLEUKOPENIA

Feline Panleukopenia is a highly contagious disease that causes retinal dysplasia and eye lesions. Other symptoms of the disease include fever, vomiting, dehydration and depression.

The eye infection can be managed with oral antibiotics.

The condition cannot be treated but may be prevented by the administration of the panleukopenia vaccine.

3. FIP

The feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) is an infection caused by a virus.

FIP causes infections of the cornea, eye lesions and puss can accumulate in the area.

FIP is a fatal disease, but may be prevented with vaccination.

Support treatment may be administered to infected cats, including prednisone, which will ease the eye infection symptoms.

4. FELINE LEUKEMIA VIRUS

The feline leukemia virus (FeLV) can cause eye infections.

The virus is transmitted from other infected cats and will also cause anemia, swollen lymphatic glands and lethargy.

Your cat should get the FeLV vaccine to avoid the infection with the virus.

5. FIV

The feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) also known as feline AIDS can be transmitted through saliva and other body secretions. If your cat gets bitten by an infected animal, the virus will show no symptoms for a long time.

However, an infected cat will have a weak

immune system and eye infections are common in FIV positive felines.

Other symptoms of the disease include fever, swollen lymph nodes, weight loss, respiratory diseases, frequent infections, stomatitis, gingivitis or skin problems.

It is important to manage each infection to prevent other complications.

The eye infections can be treated with antibiotic eye drops.

6. CALCIVIRUS

The feline calcivirus causes conjunctivitis, which can be treated with antibiotics.

7. CHLAMYDIA

Chlamydia is a disease caused by bacteria that can lead to eye problems and may be treated with antibiotics such as tetracycline.

8. TOXOPLASMOSIS

Toxoplasmosis may be transmitted from other felines or rodents. The disease causes eye inflammations which may be treated with oral antibiotics.

9. FUNGI

Fungal infections may often affect the eyes. Cryptococcosis is a serious fungal infection that may lead to blindness, detached retinas and inflammation of the retina and cornea. Cryptococcosis can also affect the central nervous system, so it needs immediate attention. Anti fungal medication should be



administered.

Eye infections may be caused by different viruses, bacteria and fungi. The treatment can include eye drops, oral antibiotics or anti fungal medication. Holistic remedies are also available. Remember to vaccinate your cats. Prevention is better and cheaper than cure.

Hope this info helps
Till next week
Dr Ruan

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