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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 in Bobigny, however, the rise of minicab companies. They represent an entire generation are being tried in court, the rest work for businesses.

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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”.

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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.

Uber in France: A route out of the banlieues

By Anne-Sylvaine Chassany

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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.

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

“There has been a tidal wave of start-ups in the banlieues, an entire generation wants to be Uber drivers,” says Sabrina Lauro at Plan-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 harsher”.

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

Backlash: taxi drivers appeal for state backing

Parisian taxi drivers have not been shy about showing their irritation at the rise of ride-sharing apps, organising protests that have occasionally turned violent and urg-ing the government to restrict their use. In February, the popular lobby group Taxi G7, the largest compa-nie’s supermarket, which was burnt down by an ar-sonist.

“Uber is a social game-changer,” says Professor Thierry Tchan. “Start-ing 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 compa-nies 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, estimat-ed 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 Econom-ic Studies, the revenues of the sector - taxis and minicabs - increased by 10 percent between 2010 and 2015.

That should be good news for Francois 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 peo-ple it’s easier to find a cli-ent than a job,” Mr Ma-cron said.

Yet, under lobbying pres-sure from the powerful taxi sector - whose largest com-pany, G7, has long-establish-ed links with the Social-ist party - there are plans to restrict the use of Uber and other ride-sharing plat-forms.

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

“Uber’s success in the banlieues is a sponta-neous response to decades of public policies that have failed to combat discrimi-nation 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 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 Amièures-sur-Seine, northern Paris.

“Now they want to pre-vent us from succeeding, they want to send us back to the banlieues. The government doesn’t realise the situ-a-tion is explosive. It could be worse than in 2005.”

The government insists it is seeking to prevent the ex cesses of a rapidly ex-panding 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 cov-er their costs.”

The regulatory scruti-nity is not unique to France. In Germany, Ita-ly and Spain, courts have or-dered bans on Uber’s low-cost service. Uber drivers have been arrested in Brus-sels and Amsterdam, while curbs have been discussed in the UK. Unions have complained about the company’s policies towards workers.

In Bobigny, Ismael Ra-khmi, who used to attend prayers at the local mosque, recalled that he had to work for 13 hours a day for six months to make 1,900 euros a month - a lower hourly wage than his previous six-month tempo-rary job loading trucks at TNT. Because he had no licence and no car, he re-tained less than a third of each fare.

At TNT, I had two days of rest a week,” he said. Mr Rakhami 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 Octo-ber was also painful, drivers say. It hurt more than the re-percussions of the Paris ter-ror 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 a social meeting at last,” says Joseph Fran-cois, who heads one of the largest minicab companies with 140 drivers. “You’ve got young people from the suburbs transporting Pari-sian lawyers from Neuil-ly, artists, people coming from China or Australia. All of a sudden, social bar-riers and prejudices vanish. They talk. They have a bet-ter 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 tattoooed and an other has dreadlocks.

“People from the ban-lieues 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 individuals 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 would go back to the ban-lieues, many of them will go back to crime.”

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

By Kristen Gellineau, 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 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.

“He wants to finish the search. It’s that whole cliche of putting it over to someone who doesn’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 crew can operate the sonar in up to 4-meter swells, but anything bigger forces them to pull up the gear to prevent anyone from getting hurt. 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.’”

On board, two teams of three people work alternating 12-hour shifts every day, a job that requires close attention and coordination.

Larsen’s team 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 shore 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 out for trouble wrangling volunteers.

“Everybody wants to be on the MH370 search,” he says. “It’s that whole cliche of putting it over to someone who doesn’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.

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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.

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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 the factor causing the problem was 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 Elisebeth Layne, 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 $1 a week on two cases. He’s among the 30 percent of Americans choosing water off the shelf.

“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 used.

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 50 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.

**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 is very prominent in the winter months here so take care of you and your cats.

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 ease the eye infection symptoms.
   - The virus can lead to eye problems and may be treated with antibiotics.

2. PANLEUKOPENIA
   - Feline Panleukopenia is a highly contagious disease that causes retinal dystrophy and eye lesions. Other symptoms of the disease include fever, vomiting, dehydration and depression.
   - 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 ease the eye infection symptoms.

3. FIP
   - The feline infectious peritonitis (FIP) is an infection caused by a virus.
   - FIP causes infections of the cornea, eye lenses and pus 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 lymph nodes 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 the disease.

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 can 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

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