



# New York Taxi Driver Perspectives on News Coverage of Driver Suicides

Matthew Kelly<sup>1</sup> , Bessie Liu<sup>1</sup>, Hana Minsky<sup>1</sup> , Paul Nestadt<sup>2</sup> , and Joseph J. Gallo<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, MD, USA

**Abstract:** *Background:* In 2018, news outlets began reporting on a suicide epidemic among New York City's yellow taxi drivers. Within months, print, television, radio, and internet outlets had produced pieces describing the deaths of drivers struggling to endure transformations in their industry. *Aims:* We explored taxi drivers' perspectives regarding suicide news coverage and the degree to which the coverage affected their lives. *Methods:* Current and recent taxi drivers participated in open-ended, life-history-informed interviews, which were transcribed and analyzed thematically. *Results:* We interviewed 21 participants. Four themes related to interviewees' experience of suicide-related media coverage emerged: drivers' awareness of the news coverage and opinions regarding it, the degree to which the coverage motivated drivers to engage in conversation with others about stress, the extent to which coverage inspired drivers to think differently about mental health, and perceptions regarding the media's broader characterization of taxi drivers. *Limitations:* Interviews were conducted in English, a second language for many taxi drivers. *Conclusion:* Taxi drivers expressed diverse views regarding media reporting on driver suicides, with some viewing it as helpful, while others critiqued it as simplistic, stigmatizing, and sensationalist.

**Keywords:** suicide, media reporting, labor mental health, urban health, stigma

In February 2018, the *New York Post* published an article describing the tragic suicide of one of New York City's livery car workers, a professional group of for-hire drivers that includes chauffeurs and taxi operators. The piece described the individual's frustration with policies permitting the saturation of roads with for-hire vehicles and linked these frustrations with his suicide, which occurred at the steps of City Hall. It also quoted excerpts from the decedent's suicide note, which read, "This is SLAVERY NOW. . . I don't know how else to try to make a difference other than a public display of a most private affair" (Moore & Pagonos, 2018).

The article was the first of many – the proverbial canary in the coal mine. By February 6th, news outlets had reported that the driver's death was, in fact, the third suicide in 3 months among NYC's for-hire drivers (Celona & Tacopino, 2018). By early May, outlets announced a fourth suicide to befall the community (Fitzsimmons, 2018), followed by a fifth later in the month (Stewart & Ferré-Sadurní, 2018), a sixth in June (CBS News), and a seventh and eighth in October (Chung, 2018). By late 2018, the *New York Times* published a harrowing account of the City's taxi driving community, its headline – "Suicides Get Taxi Drivers Talking: 'I'm Going to be One of Them'" – sending a clarion call (Fitzsimmons, 2018a).

Many of these articles focused on the struggles faced by yellow taxicab drivers, a community of largely first-generation immigrants who incurred significant debt – upwards of \$1 million – to purchase taxi medallions permitting them to secure passengers on NYC's streets. Though medallions were

once regarded as a "better investment than gold," by the 2010s, the landscape of for-hire transport had transformed (Johnston, 2011). Drivers watched as ride-share apps flooded the City's streets with cars, rendering valueless the medallion's main asset: the exclusive right to pick up passengers who hailed at curbside. By 2017, monthly Uber and Lyft rides had surpassed taxi hails, with yellow taxi drivers left to shoulder their medallion debt without any means of paying it back.

The media's spotlight on NYC taxi driver suicides occurred even as scholars working at the intersection of mental health, public health, and journalism have advocated for strict guidelines governing media reporting on suicide, motivated by associations between media coverage and suicide rates (Niederkrötenhaler et al., 2020). To date, we lack a clear understanding of drivers' experience of this coverage. In this paper, we document drivers' perceptions of recent media coverage describing the mental health of taxi drivers and driver suicides. To do so, we adopted a semistructured, life-history-informed interview methodology, which afforded drivers the opportunity to organically share their opinions regarding media coverage surrounding driver suicides.

## Methods

### Study Sample

Eligibility criteria for the study included (1) current NYC yellow taxi drivers who had driven a taxi for at least 2 years

and (2) individuals who stopped driving a NYC yellow taxi in the previous year but who drove for at least 2 years. Participants were recruited in person at the taxi holding lot of NYC's John F. Kennedy International Airport, with supplemental recruitment through snowball sampling. Informed by prior qualitative research guidelines, we aimed to interview 20 drivers (Guest et al., 2006; Malterud et al., 2016). Participants took part in a single interview conducted in English via Zoom or telephone, with interviews recorded and transcribed. We planned 1 hour for each interview but permitted drivers to extend interviews if they expressed the desire to do so. All interviews were conducted by a member of the research team who received training in oral history techniques, qualitative interview methodologies, and approaches for responding to discussions of trauma and suicide.

## Interview Strategy

Informed by sociological semistructured research methodology (Knott et al., 2022), interviews proceeded through six domains. Here, we focus on drivers' perspectives on media coverage documenting NYC taxi driver suicides. Other domains of our broader research inquiry include taxi driver stressors, their response to these stressors, and their perspectives on labor rights activism.

All aspects of our interview design were informed by oral history-life history theory, a methodology rooted in the "recognition that each individual has a life story to tell that is not only worthy of affirmative recognition but also that contributes to knowledge construction" (Field, 2007). In this approach, the interviewer serves as a guide providing opportunities for interviewees to reflect on different domains of their lives, while interviewees themselves determine the degree to which they discuss any given topic. Furthermore, rather than adhere to a rigid list of questions, interviewers respond to participants' reflections by asking follow-up questions specific to their experiences. This approach allows for an open-ended exploration of each interviewee's memories and perspectives, facilitating an organic elucidation of power relationships. All interviewees received a \$20 gift card as a token of thanks for their participation. The project was approved by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board (IRB00020891). The interview guide is available upon request.

## Analytic Strategy

Interviews were anonymized, transcribed, analyzed, and coded. Our coding process involved organizing data into

high-level categories developed through team discussion (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this process, team members individually suggested large subject areas (e.g., media coverage) present in interviews. We then developed a list of agreed-upon subject areas, or codes, and created a definition of each code to assure integrity of applications across interviews. The code-generation process was iterative, with code definitions revisited throughout analysis, and coders reaching consensus at all stages of the process (Boeije, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Malterud, 2001). Furthermore, we endeavored to generate codes from meaning inherent in the data rather than prespecified or predetermined categories (Mishler, 1991; Packer, 2011). Themes were then identified, developed, and used to summarize the meaning of experiences. During data analysis, we used several strategies to address trustworthiness, including immersion in the data through multiple close readings, frequent team discussions, and searches for discrepant cases (Morrow, 2005). We utilized NVivo qualitative data management software (Version 12, QSR International) to organize codes.

## Results

### Sample Characteristics

In sum, 21 drivers were interviewed, ranging in age from 25 to 65 years ( $M$  51,  $Mdn$  56.5). All but one identified as male, consistent with the demographic distribution of taxi drivers (Levingston, 2020). Interviewees had spent between 3 and 35 years driving ( $M$  20,  $Mdn$  19). Most drivers (87%) were born outside the US, hailing from Bangladesh, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burma, the Dominican Republic, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Israel, Lebanon, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, the Republic of Guinea, and El Salvador. Most (55%) owned taxi medallions, while the remainder leased medallions. Of drivers who owned or inherited their medallion, drivers reported medallion costs/debts ranging between \$95,000 and \$600,000 ( $M$  price \$221,000,  $Mdn$  \$223,000). The average interview length was 1 h 40 min.

Here, we present four themes related to interviewees' experience of media coverage documenting taxi driver suicides: (1) drivers' awareness of the news coverage and opinions regarding it, (2) the degree to which coverage motivated drivers to engage in conversations with colleagues, friends, or family members regarding driver stress, (3) the extent to which coverage inspired drivers to think differently about their mental health, and (4) their perceptions regarding the media's broader characterization of taxi drivers. Quotes are attributed to drivers using a T1-T21 convention and are reported verbatim.

## Awareness of and Opinions Regarding Media Coverage

Nearly all interviewees had encountered media coverage describing driver suicides. One driver reflected,

I worked on that Sunday morning, and I turn to [radio station] 1010 WINS, and as soon as I turned, the next thing I heard from 1010 WINS is, “Oh, it’s happened again.” That’s how the reporter put the report. “It’s happened again. One cab driver killed himself.” I said, “Oh my God. . .” (T11)

Others had not only read articles but were also contacted by reporters for comments on their colleagues’ suicides (T1).

Interviewees expressed diverse opinions regarding media reporting’s effect on their community. Among those who considered it helpful, some commented that it focused attention on issues that otherwise would be ignored. “I think [the articles] are helpful, of course,” one driver commented. “You know, nothing should be down under the rug. . . If there is a problem, it should be discussed and people should be looking for solutions” (T6). Others believed that coverage positively influenced the public’s perception of drivers: “I think that people are more sympathetic to a cab driver, you know? Especially with the drivers that committed suicide. I believe it has increased sympathy for the cab driver” (T18).

More commonly, drivers shared mixed feelings regarding coverage. As one commented, “At times I think it is helpful. [But] when someone is gossiping, or telling what you are doing, or what your character is. . . you may not like it. Especially when that person is telling a negative thing about your profession” (T3). Others feared that the coverage would make people less likely to pursue a career as a driver:

The positive way is to tell people how taxi drivers get stressed. . . But the negative way. . . [is that a] lot of people who want to join the taxi, and. . . think the taxi is the place to make money. . . will [be] scared about driving the taxi. And then they will say. . . I’m not gonna drive [a] taxi because it makes me stressful. The people, they kill themselves. (T9)

Some drivers worried that media reports failed to discuss the many sources of stress drivers navigate (T8, T11). Others feared that the articles would make the public judge drivers more harshly, such as one who commented, “Sometimes people see [the articles] and they like to say, ‘Oh, well, why [are] they complaining? They signed up for this. They did this to themselves. . .’ It becomes very toxic if you keep on looking at it” (T21). Several criticized

reporting as insensitive and sensationalist, such as one interviewee who reflected upon the *New York Times* article, “Why Are Taxi Drivers in New York Killing Themselves?”:

It would probably, for some people, make [them] empathetic to the taxi driver. But in a lot of cases, maybe some people say, Oh, I told you they were all crazy. They’re killing themselves now. . . Oh, it’s good for them “cause they’re such bad people.” You run the gamut on that, [with] a headline like that, if you don’t read the article. You know, you’re going to get whatever bias you have. . . And I don’t think it’s helpful. . . It’s one of these headlines that they use to catch attention. (T20).

Although the perspectives presented thus far capture drivers’ mixed feelings, others judged the articles to be universally unhelpful. Several expressed a belief that nobody in the city cared about drivers and that no amount of coverage would change the situation (T4, T5). Others stated that city leaders were already aware of all that was reported. “The article alone is not helpful unless somebody follows up. . . Nobody cares about us. . . [W]e [are] not treated like human[s]” (T4). Of note, several drivers suggested that suicides represented acts of weakness and that media coverage stigmatized drivers: “Listen, when he kills himself, he is [an] idiot. You know? The people think, ‘If he has a brain, he will never kill himself’” (T5). A second suggested that those who died by suicide shared some blame for their deaths: “[I]f anybody is gonna kill themselves. . . that’s because they were not doing the right thing to begin with. . . I think [of] people who kill themselves. . . as losers” (T16).

One interviewee reflected at length upon the media’s framing of driver stress as a mental health issue, arguing that it shifted attention away from historically rooted inequities that had disempowered drivers:

I don’t want people to take it as mental health. Because when you get abused and then they say to you, when you’re crying, they say, “It’s mental health,” I don’t want that. We got abused by the government! We got abused by the system! And if it becomes a mental health on some other people, with me it is not a mental health. I’m fighting a life of abuse! (T12)

## Media Coverage’s Effects on Driver Discussions of Mental Health

Though several drivers shared that the media coverage had failed to motivate conversation between drivers (T12, T18), some shared the opposite experience. As one stated, “Absolutely, we talk about it all the time” (T2). Others

shared that the articles motivated them to reach out to colleagues to see if they were ok (T21). Some noted that drivers circulated articles through social media groups: “We drivers talk about it. . . Especially with the social media nowadays. Like Facebook, we have so many groups.” (T13). Others argued that media reports served a vital function in articulating drivers’ stress for those who struggled to communicate their experiences in English (T19).

When asked if media coverage had prompted drivers’ families to inquire about their stress, several said that it had not. As one described, “I don’t think anybody who knows me on an intimate basis is calling up, [saying] ‘I just want to make sure you didn’t kill yourself,’ you know? I think the people who know me just assume that I’m strong within” (T18). However, others shared the opposite experience. One, for example, noted, “When I came back from work, [my wife] just asked me, ‘Are you ok?’ . . . My mother-in-law too, she always asked me too when she heard that someone [was] killed” (T11). Another similarly stated, “[Family members] want to talk about the article. And I’m like, ‘Yeah, it’s hard for me to explain.’ Because how do you explain stuff like that?” (T7). A fourth described family discussions in detail:

[W]e talked about these people that committed suicide, but they know that I am very stubborn and it’s very difficult for me to commit the suicide because I gotta be really depressed and down, and something drastic or dramatic must happen to you. I consider myself [a] tough cookie. Of course, we talk about it, but they know that I am stubborn enough not to commit the suicide. I mean, upon the normal circumstances. You never know what people are gonna do if something dramatic or drastic happens in their lives. (T6)

Several drivers shared that reporting had prompted passengers to ask about their well-being. One recalled of a passenger, “When she gave me that extra [tip], she said, ‘You guys are going through a lot of difficulty. I can do whatever I can do’ . . . A lot of old people in Manhattan are going to say, ‘I don’t like what these people did to you cab drivers. I heard on the news’” (T11). Another driver shared that 50% of passengers asked about the coverage (T16). However, others reported different experiences. When asked if passengers ever inquired about the coverage, one driver replied, “Not at all. Not even one person. They don’t care” (T4).

### Media Coverage’s Effects on Drivers’ Perceptions of Their Mental Health

Several drivers shared that media coverage had motivated them to reflect on their own mental health struggles, such

as one who explained, “[I]t makes me think, in a way, where not [to] let this stuff that’s happening take me” (T20). Another explained that media coverage allowed drivers to examine their suicide risk factors:

It’s helpful. . . [W]hen that story came, when it started happening, I said to myself, “It would never be me. . .” So, it’s helpful in the sense of checking yourself, where you fall. Will you be one of those that might be that stressful that would take their life? Or would you be one of those that stand against it, and. . . have the mindset to have control over it? Yes, absolutely it’s very helpful, if you pay attention. (T2)

Others additionally noted that the coverage had inspired them to research mental health resources online (T21).

### Drivers’ Perceptions Regarding the Media’s Broader Characterization of Taxi Drivers

Although interviews initially focused on media coverage of drivers’ mental health struggles, many drivers voiced concern with broader characterizations of taxi drivers in the press. As one noted, “My friend, all the articles in NYC, they always talk about the bad things about the taxi driver. But they never talk about the good things. . .” (T5). Another driver noted that, each year, drivers did remarkable things, from returning large sums of money left in their cars to aiding in the delivery of babies. However, media outlets rarely reported such events. One reflected,

I asked the [Taxi and Limousine Commissioner], how come they don’t have any public service announcements on TV with the cabbies. . . showing positive things. . . You see sometimes city workers being portrayed as the smiling person, the bus driver helping an older person in the bus. . . [W]e are actually a utility of the city. . . We are actually ingrained in the city transportation network. They want to treat us like all the other services, [then] they should be complimenting us, right? (T20)

Other interviewees expressed frustration when outlets reporting on taxi drivers involved in accidents cited the total number of traffic tickets the drivers had accrued. As one explained, “If a guy’s been a cab driver for five years and they look back [at] his whole history and are like, ‘He’s had 15 tickets,’ they make it seem like he’s some kind of mass murderer or something. And it’s like, it’s not that big of a deal. You’re mischaracterizing the way people are” (T18). Another argued,

If you do a fair comparison of driving skills, there is . . . no better driver than the yellow taxi driver. But the public doesn't think that way. Why? Because they do not consider the fact of all the stress that we have to endure. . . They just look at yellow. And the media spreads that thought. (T16)

Several interviewees also shared historic concerns with media coverage of taxi drivers. As one reflected, "The media too, I remember one time during the Giuliani regime, we had a very tough time with his regime. . . You know, we are very easy to target. . . If you [were] a politician and you want[ed] to quickly make good. . . I will tell you, target. . . yellow cab drivers" (T11). Another driver echoed the point: "You're driving this yellow target. It opens you up to all different stereotypes that have been propagated in the news and in the media" (T20).

## Discussion

By employing a life-history-informed interview methodology, we have documented diverse NYC yellow taxi driver perspectives on media coverage of suicides among members of their community. Virtually all drivers were familiar with media reports of driver suicides. Some viewed the coverage as positive, noting that it had motivated discourse between drivers, families, and passengers. However, others argued that it stigmatized drivers, oversimplified their struggles, or blamed them through the medicalization of the effects of systemic abuse.

## Limitations

Before discussing the findings, potential limitations of this research warrant comment. While NYC taxi drivers are fluent in English, some declined participation due to concerns that they would not be able to fully express themselves. Additionally, we cannot discount a possible selection bias whereby drivers participated because they experienced high levels of stress and wished to share their experiences. However, this bias was likely counterbalanced by the fact that some drivers declined participation because they were so stressed that the hour required to interview would have posed an extreme burden. In any case, the goal of semistructured interviews is to understand the breadth of experiences of stress of NYC taxi drivers rather than to infer from sample to population.

## Conclusion

Despite these limitations, our findings deserve attention because they are the product of the first systematic

investigations of taxi drivers' experience of suicide-related media coverage – and, more broadly, one of the first rigorous analyses of communities' perceptions of suicide media coverage. Research investigating the mental health of NYC taxi drivers is limited largely to a comparative survey of discrimination and a cross-sectional needs assessment documenting discrimination as a social determinant of health (Mirpuri et al., 2018, 2020). Other studies have examined drivers' experiences of substance use (Lui et al., 2023). However, no research to date has examined drivers' perspectives on the rise in media reports discussing their colleagues' suicides.

Our findings contribute to a broader literature, informed by cultural studies, that seeks to understand how communities generate understanding of suicide from multiple discursive traditions. As Warwick Blood and Jane Pirkis argue, "Media discourses, medical discourses, health communication discourses, and, most importantly, lay discourses about suicide are locked in a contrasting and competing struggle in the production of meaning. Research on this contextualized knowledge is lacking in studies about the complex relationships between media portrayals of suicide and audiences" (Blood & Pirkis, 2001). By employing a life-history-informed interview methodology, our research sheds light on how individuals affected by suicide generate meaning from media reporting.

Furthermore, this research is timely, as recent research suggested that taxi drivers are reluctant to discuss mental health struggles (Marani et al., 2020). Additionally, mental health professionals continue to debate the deleterious effects of suicide-related media coverage (Pirkis et al., 2006; Stack, 2020). The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), the World Health Organization (WHO), and ReportingonSuicide.org recommend that outlets abstain from publishing the location or method of suicide, avoid describing suicides as the result of any single cause, and refrain from quoting suicide notes. However, many of the news pieces describing taxi driver suicides diverge from these recommendations. Thus, it is particularly important for researchers to assess drivers' experience of such coverage.

As our findings underscore, determining ethical reporting practices will not be easy, as drivers hold diverse views regarding media reporting. However, it is vitally important. In cases where individuals refrain from discussing suicide with others and lack therapeutic relationships with clinicians, media reporting may play a powerful role in shaping their understanding of suicide and their perception of drivers who die by suicide.

By allowing taxi drivers to express, in their own words, their perceptions of suicide-related media coverage, this research may inform both journalistic practice and

municipal policy. It also reminds us that the subjects of news reporting are themselves subjected to its effects and suggests that greater care be paid to characterizations of disempowered groups, particularly when their members are affected by suicide.

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### History

Received April 27, 2024

Revision received September 9, 2024

Accepted September 13, 2024

Published online November 15, 2024

### Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

### Publication Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the story. All procedures in studies involving human participants were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institution's Human Research Ethics Committee (Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health IRB, IRB00020891)

### Authorship

Matthew Kelly, conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing - original draft, writing - review & editing; Bessie Liu, formal analysis, investigation, writing - review & editing; Hana Minsky, formal analysis, investigation, writing - review & editing; Paul Nestadt, methodology, investigation, writing - review & editing; Joseph Gallo, conceptualization, formal analysis,

methodology, supervision, writing – review & editing. All authors approved the final version of the article.

### Funding

This research was partially funded through the William Walker Award Grant from the Johns Hopkins University Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences.

### ORCID

Matthew Kelly

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6272-0247>

Hana Minsky

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8038-4646>

Paul Nestadt

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2479-703X>

Joseph J. Gallo

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7878-0321>

### Matthew Kelly

Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine  
733 North Broadway  
Baltimore, MD 21205  
USA  
mkelly91@jh.edu

Matthew Kelly, PhD, MPH, is an historian of medicine. He is the author of the 2023 book *The Sounds of Furious Living: Everyday Unorthodoxies in an Era of AIDS* (Rutgers Press), a fellow at the Johns Hopkins Center for Medical Humanities and Social Medicine, and a fourth-year medical student at Hopkins.

Bessie Liu is a fourth-year medical student at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. Her clinical interests include primary care, community health, and health justice.

Hana Minsky is a third-year MD/PhD student at Johns Hopkins University. She is part of the Medical Scientist Training Program, and her PhD will be in pathobiology.

Paul Nestadt, MD, is the James Wah Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. His clinical expertise is in treatment-resistant depression and anxiety disorders, and he is the Co-Director of the Center for Suicide Prevention at Johns Hopkins.

Joseph J. Gallo, MD, MPH, is a professor in the Department of Mental Health at the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health. He is an epidemiologist and health services researcher with expertise in psychiatric epidemiology and mixed methods.