

# TRACKED & TARGETED

NAVIGATING  
WORKER  
SURVEILLANCE  
AT AMAZON

OUR DATA BODIES  
INTERIM REPORT



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# INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, low-wage Amazon workers have been speaking out about injury and the perilous working conditions at Amazon’s “fulfillment centers” (e.g., warehouses). As reported by traditional media, social news, and a panoply of civil society organizations, injury rates are high, with 41 percent of Amazon workers reporting having been injured on the job.<sup>1</sup> These injuries don’t only happen during Amazon-featured promotional days like Prime Day and Black Friday when a high volume of orders come in. Amazon workers are being injured year-round, and Covid made the conditions worse. Many early reports of grueling working conditions pre-pandemic noted the ways in which productivity monitoring (colloquially known as “time off task” and rate) and monitoring of worker malcontent (through social media posts, for example) fuel a constant state of anxiety among workers. Workplace cameras—used not only to detect theft but also productivity—drive worker anxiety about meeting targets and achieving peak performance.

Worker’s health and safety concerns have steadily increased and have now shifted into high gear due to injuries related to inadequate protective personal equipment, faulty machinery, and increased surveillance systems that fuel anxiety. Warehouse workers have launched local campaigns that amplify their experiences, making surveillance at work a critical issue of our times. The concerns with how Amazon’s warehouse surveillance systems inform the values, practices, and everyday features of the 24/7 nature of the work and create the conditions for the injury culture to exist have compelled lawmakers and regulators to take a deep look.

Hearing about these issues and worker organizers’ actions to protect themselves begged us to ask, is surveillance much bigger than health and safety? Our hunch is that it is. As participatory researchers working as part of Our Data Bodies, a research collective that is interested in the impacts of data collection and surveillance on poor, working-class, and marginalized communities, we wanted to partner with worker centers that were organizing Amazon workers to examine their experiences with surveillance systems, the extent to which these systems have become finely tuned instruments of control in the workplace environment, and the impacts it has on all the workers, the managers and the managed.

Together, Our Data Bodies and worker centers hypothesized that systems and practices of

surveillance—in addition to health and safety issues—hit at core issues of control and power imbalances between companies like Amazon and systemically disadvantaged populations. In partnership with United for Respect, an organization that organizes workers, and Athena, a coalition of worker centers, this collaborative, participatory study examines the following questions focused on surveillance to understand power dynamics between low-wage workers, their work environment, and their employer, Amazon.

- How do dominant surveillance tech companies affect the strength and power of marginalized communities?
- And how do marginalized communities' strength and power affect how companies capitalize on surveillance tech?

In addition to these overarching questions, we collectively drafted sub-questions designed to understand the material, emotional, and physical dimensions of working under surveillance at Amazon warehousing and delivery as a whole and in comparison to other work experiences and to alternate visions of well-being at work.

We used the language of marginalization due to our prior expertise in studying data-driven technologies, surveillance, and marginalized communities, primarily in the context of housing precarity, prison reentry, and evictions and foreclosures. The workplace context has unique forms of marginalization, but like our interviewees in prior research, they express the feeling of a “no win” situation, in which they are forced to jeopardize their wellbeing and dignity. We wanted to probe this further, while understanding that the workplace is defined by systems of management and control that determine who or what has value in production processes.

In the pages ahead, we share some topline interim findings about the nature and impacts of the tracked-and-targeted workplace at Amazon.<sup>2</sup> We start with ten prominent themes, then present four composite characters that reflect our mostly non-white, female interviewee pool, and canvas surveillance systems and practice in the warehouse. These insights come from poring through post-interview memos, transcripts, and interview notes and holding analytic discussions about similarities or patterns and differences in the interview data. We conclude with brief reflections on how being tracked and targeted at Amazon converges with our earlier research on the impacts of data-driven technologies on marginalized peoples to meet their daily needs.



*Part I*

**AVOIDING  
TRACKING,  
TARGETING,  
AND THE TRAP**

## COMMON THEMES AMONGST CURRENT AND FORMER AMAZON EMPLOYEES

- 1** Work at Amazon begins with an air of pride and promise, but veers into desperation, instability, and disability.
- 2** Workers have few spaces to share stories and experiences.
- 3** Pervasive surveillance in the workplace connects to pervasive mental health struggles.
- 4** Workers cope with and challenge Amazon's surveillance system as a matter of survival, necessity, and dignity, albeit under precarious and unpredictable circumstances.
- 5** Under its surveillance-driven managerial system, Amazon achieves the opposite of its stated goals of trust and safety.
- 6** A surveillance-driven managerial system looks and feels like a caste-based one.
- 7** Surveillance in the workplace sets up a rigged system where workers bear the burden of responsibility for performance and productivity issues.
- 8** Amazon makes it easy to get hired, get fired, and get rehired.
- 9** Surveillance systems enhance Amazon's ability to act with impunity.
- 10** Surveillance is for Amazon's benefit, not workers' benefit.

In speaking with twenty-one current and former workers at Amazon, we are beginning to get the sense that workers do what they can and will do more to avoid the “trap” that defines the Amazon low-wage work experience. Our conversations about surveillance among warehouse associates, drivers, process assistants, and managers revealed a terrain of constant, hidden, unknowable threats that make it difficult for Amazon workers to cope and keep up. Meanwhile, Amazon makes it easy to join or rejoin the company and deflect workers’ urgent concerns about dignified working conditions. People’s stability and, ultimately, their autonomy are harmed. In this sense, surveillance at Amazon fuels a corporate deviousness, designed to control people’s behavior in the workplace and disable them, physically and politically.

- 1 Work at Amazon begins with an air of pride and promise, but veers into desperation, instability, and disability.** Workers see Amazon as the obvious choice for employment due to how easy it is to get hired, how easy it seems to get health care, and how decent the wage appears by comparison to other employers. Once hired, workers arrive with a sense of pride in joining one of the world’s biggest, most well-known companies and an expectation that a warehouse job will bring stability into their lives. But as soon as they get going, workers learn that Amazon has people chasing performance targets in ways that lead to unforeseen and devastating impacts on their wellbeing.

Workers experience punishing schedules that require them to be on their feet often for ten-hour shifts, straining their bodies to traverse the warehouse, lift or scan items nonstop, or delay eating or meeting bodily needs in order to keep up. Repetitive strain, persistent injury, and lack of workers compensation have led to missed mortgage payments, foreclosure, and divorce. Other hidden costs of working at Amazon also take their toll, such as the high price of food and beverages sold on warehouse premises, lost pay due to use of personal time off for sick days, or fees deducted from a paycheck distributed in advance of payday. In a matter of weeks, if not days, of being on site, our interviewees learned that working at the warehouse is neither as happy or well-cared for as Amazon advertisements would have you think.

- 2 Workers have few spaces to share stories and experiences.** Work at Amazon feels isolating by design. Picking and packing—common assignments in the warehouse—have workers working in silence, and except for the beeps of a scan gun, the voice of a manager telling workers they are dropping in productivity, or a robotic



unit whirring up to a worker's station, fulfillment centers are quiet. Headphones are rarely allowed, and speakers throughout the warehouse are used for emergency announcements. Tight scheduling means workers need to start meeting performance targets on the dot at the beginning of their shifts or between breaks. This keeps workers away from breakrooms, which also tend to lack capacity. Workers hoping to replenish themselves find themselves lining up to access only a few microwaves. The lack of spaces to share contributes to a culture where workers cannot easily build relationships or learn from one another.

- 3 Pervasive surveillance in the workplace connects to pervasive mental health struggles.** While the physical demands of work at Amazon are often discussed, the mental stress of the job is equally taxing. Constantly monitored, measured, and pressured to stay on task and make rate, Amazon workers get the sense that they are—and can never be—good enough. Subsequently, they get stuck in a loop of feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and unease over having to always be ready to move on to the next task and to look over one's shoulder. Loneliness is also pervasive. These mindsets increase in intensity as workers grow into their jobs and, as time passes, seep into workers' private lives. The tracked-and-targeted workplace leaves workers with the sense of never being able to shut down and take rest. Whether the mental health toll is experienced anew or exacerbated by the tracked-and-targeted workplace, workers often feel profoundly alone and lack reliable support.
- 4 Workers cope with and challenge Amazon's surveillance system as a matter of survival, necessity, and dignity, albeit under precarious and unpredictable circumstances.** Workers find they need to find ways to handle the intensity and insensitivity of Amazon's persistent monitoring of the workplace—and they do so often quickly in order to get by. While some actions help make the work environment and experience tolerable for the individual worker, other actions amount to collective actions that help others in the workplace name—and sometimes shame—the punishing, unsustainable pace of work. However, Amazon's retaliation can be swift, from an automated write-up to re-assignment to a highly isolating role in the warehouse. Despite this, workers refuse to accept the dehumanizing ways in which they are managed.
- 5 Under its surveillance-driven managerial system, Amazon achieves the opposite of its stated goals of trust and safety.** Amazon promises its workers—as well as consumers—a workplace environment that is trusted and safe.

Workers regularly receive management and workplace messaging about how much Amazon cares. But those claims to trust and safety could not be further from the truth in an environment where workers—rather than faulty equipment and inhumane performance targets—get blamed for injury. Meanwhile, injuries go untreated, requests for paid time off are thwarted, and management neglects insights from workers about day-to-day workflow improvements. Workers witness and experience a hierarchy of distrust: their actions are watched and recorded on camera, scan gun and badge data gets closely scrutinized, and extra body searches happen alongside metal detection. However, managers receive more lenient treatment.

- 6 A surveillance-driven managerial system looks and feels like a caste-based one.** Usually used in relation to religious contexts, caste appears in the Amazon warehouse in a couple of different ways. Managers often come to Amazon fresh out of college. Workers see a divide between themselves (mostly Black, Brown, migrant, or somehow otherwise “othered”) and managers (young, white, male, able-bodied, lacking in work experience, but ready to command). Clean and clinical, these young managers appear to dictate orders based on dashboards’ automated analysis, unaware and unmoved by how badly workers’ bodies break down in order to meet performance and productivity demands.
- 7 Surveillance in the workplace sets up a rigged system where workers bear the burden of responsibility for performance and productivity issues.** One companion to the feeling of never being “good enough” is the sense of always being at fault. At Amazon, there’s a model for every move a worker might make. Be it lifting, picking, packing, unloading, driving, or delivering, Amazon produces training videos that workers can access to let them know how to do it right. Between these models and the evidence generated by video footage and scan gun data, workers feel set up as “guilty,” because there is no margin for error. So-called evidence of stepping a wrong way, leaning this way or that, or carrying something incorrectly is interpreted without consideration of context. Because Amazon makes it easy to be hired, workers lack awareness of what they are walking into. And because Amazon makes it easy to quit or be fired and then rehired, workers often take that route rather than claim workers compensation.
- 8 Amazon makes it easy to get hired, get fired, and get rehired. Amazon promotes a type of warehouse “recidivism.”** While workers find Amazon attractive and start off with hope, once there, the mental and physical

toll of being targeted and tracked sets in. Workers struggle to keep pace and/or express difficulty in keeping pace, and along the way, they learn who is trusted and who is not, and whose expertise or opinions are valued and whose are not. While some dig in and refuse to be mistreated, many more find it easier to quit or be fired once targeted for productivity or performance issues, rather than dispute decisions, determinations, or even advice, like using personal time off when injured. Just as it was easy to get hired in the first instance, it is easy to get rehired, despite mistreatment and lack of care. A 30-, 45-, or 60-day probation period, waiting feels better than working through an overly complicated grievance system.

**9 Surveillance systems enhance Amazon’s ability to act with impunity.** While workers get knocked for the slightest deviations in productivity and performance, deviousness is a shadow value operating in the background at Amazon. When workers are in need and looking to Amazon to take responsibility, the company is delinquent. It has set up actors—such as in-house medical care or outsourced third-party employers—that make it difficult for workers to understand who to turn to get help or, more simply, to get the help they need.

**10 Surveillance is for Amazon’s benefit, not workers’ benefit. Workers generally feel like the myriad surveillance tools in the workplace are not for mutual benefit.** For example, workers will hit a wall when trying to take Amazon’s claims of underperformance or wrongdoing to task and scrutinize their own task data or camera footage. In cases of more general safety issues, such as theft in the workplace, workers again lack the means to access information they need. Not everyone is passive, however, and some workers have been driven to collect their own workplace data, because this type of “counter-surveillance” is the only means by which they can dispute determinations or decisions made by management.

*Part 2*

# FOUR FACES OF THE AMAZON WAREHOUSE

**MALCOLM**



**NIA**



**HARPER**



**AKILAH**



Speaking to anyone—let alone researchers—about workplace surveillance at Amazon is a daunting task. In this section, we present four composite characters: **Malcolm**, **Nia**, **Akilah**, and **Harper**. These characters’ emotions, experiences, and behaviors reflect a patchwork of insights and stories shared with us by research participants that typically went out of their way to speak with us. Like in journalistic accounts, composites are used across the social sciences to protect participants from re-identification and retaliation.

## Malcolm

More or less, I work the graveyard shift at Amazon. I say goodbye to my wife at 8:30pm, hop in my car, and arrive at the warehouse ‘round 9:30pm. This is a huge facility—so it’s, like, 28 full-sized football fields of a building block. Like close to two miles long. I park in the lot, and I have a ways to go before entering the building. I got my head on right at the start of the shift, so I remember to grab my badge, which is basically my ticket to get into the building... and then basically for

**They have so many different ways to try and eliminate you.**

everything that I need to do at any time—like, how Amazon knows what I’m doing at any given moment. So I clock in at 2:30am, and then I have about 5–7 minutes to get to the place I’m going to be for, like, the next ten hours.



The way it works is, like, I’m standing there and imagine there’s a dresser with a Roomba underneath.

It’s like the way that this place is designed, it’s like impossible to do good. Initially, it seems doable. When I started

out... like, I'm in good shape. I was in the military. I'm not too bad for my age. And when I started at Amazon, I'd be scanning, trying to hit my targets. And when I was at my peak, I was scanning about every 8 or 9 seconds. That's like 360 items per hour. Or that's like 1100 every three hours. But who can keep up at that? And then they'll come back at you and say that they saw you could hit 1100, but that you're not doing it anymore. That's a productivity write up right there.

**It kinda feels like you're being watched in a jail.**

They have so many different ways to try and eliminate you. Like, after three, four, six months, it's almost as if they trying to purposely damage your body. I hurt my back and I put in a personal leave of absence because I didn't want to wait two weeks with a bad back just to hear whether my claim was valid. But a lot of people don't take personal time off. They just don't. They hurtin' and working for it. And then you're getting hit with the write ups. You're getting write up like this and you get thirty days, sixty days, or ninety days on probation. It could be a quality write up. Like, "Oh you made a mistake." Or a productivity write-up—like, the scan rate isn't fast enough. I said before this work is like slavery, but I need to watch out

because people get offended. But it kinda feels like you're being watched in a jail.

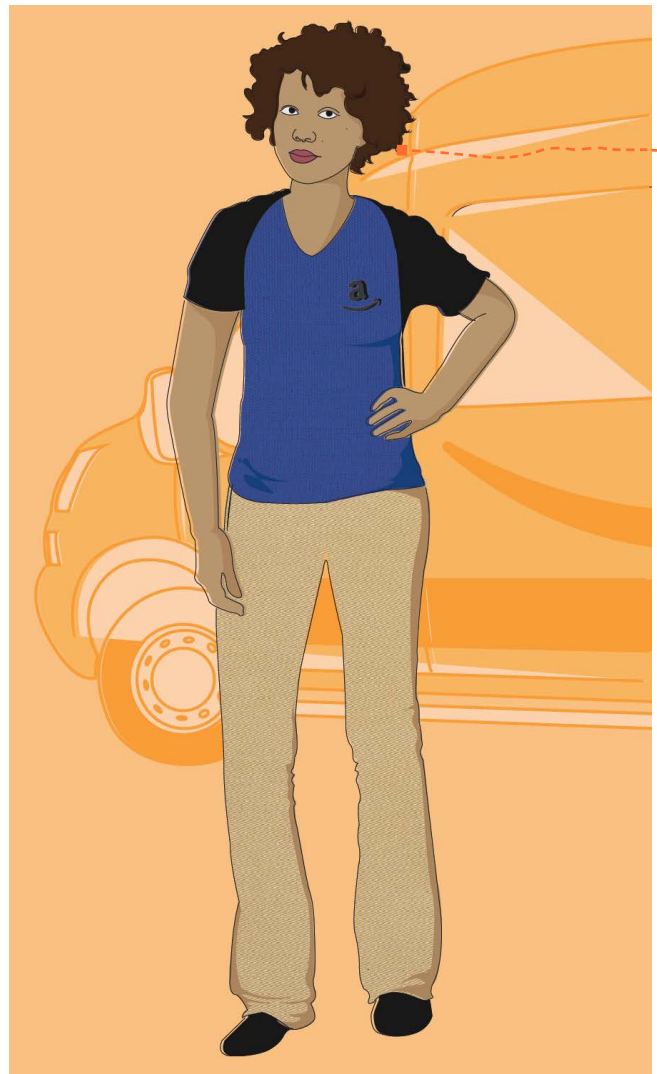
That's no good for me mental health wise. Because it feels like I've got someone looking over my shoulder all the time. Like even when there's nothing doing—it could even be at home—I'm looking over my shoulder. It happens all the time. And that's just my life. And it's like I'm distrustful all the time. It affects my relationships day to day, and for me, that's a lot. Because I'm working with my partner at Amazon for a lot of years now.

When you're a picker like me it means this dresser-like thingy on a Roomba comes up to where I'm standing. And it stops in front of me. I look at the screen. It's like spinning around basically telling me what to pick up and scan with my scanner. Beep. Like a million beeps. Some places let you have headphones. Or one headphone in. But usually I'm not listening to music. I'm just being told what to do by a robot. And it's like if I don't scan something every six, seven, eight seconds, if I'm dipping under ten, then that means some PM [process manager] is going to call me to go over to the flow desk. Or maybe they're going to come over to where I'm standing. Whatever it is, it's, like, annoying. Somebody coming over to me telling me I'm dipping under telling me I'm goin' get written up. That's bs. Like, what do you want from me and why you coming over here talking to me slowing me down?

What happens to me is I get all scatterbrained. Like I'll leave my jacket

or a cup or worse my water somewhere. Anywhere. I don't know. And I'll get to where I'm standing, and I'm tryin' to work fast but I'm dehydrated and Imma get one but I can't because, you know, it'll take fifteen minutes for me to go to the vending machine and get one of those overpriced water bottles. So I can't get any water. I can't take a break. And I can't work well. So it's very hard to, like, to be like what I used to be like when I first started working.

If I'm not scanning an item for, like, two minutes, some process manager's gonna comm over and bother me. They got these White kids fresh out of college... and he's gonna come over and start bothering me about why I haven't been scanning fast enough. What do they know? They've got 30, 40 people on a team. They can't even keep up.



## Nia

I came to Amazon in 2021. And I got terminated in 2022.

It was a good job. I was excited. But it's like if you want a check that look decent, you gotta put in, and it's not worth the hype.

I started through [a temp agency], and I ended up being converted to an Amazon employee. And then I went from warehouse worker to driver—it's the first company I ever drove for. And I did that all through Covid. Two full years. Sometime during that

**We figured out how to hack the scanner. It's easy. So it's like we take back stolen time.**

time period, all this stuff happened. Like I went from working at Amazon to working for a DSP [DSP or delivery service provider]. It's like a Black-owned business. There are lots of them that's tied to Amazon.

At Amazon, it's tough. I ain't going to lie. And I'm not going to tell you that

you shouldn't work there. But Amazon don't really care who you are. They just interested in performance.

It's a lot on you. They got the pressure on you to get your number down. And that's got us on alert and doing everything we can. Like we figured out how to hack the scanner. It's easy. Like you swipe out of the app. And then scan your item, and the timer goes back on. So it's like we steal some time here. We cheating. There's no time off task. We got it down.

We never go home on time. Some lady—she had a heart attack a couple of weeks ago. She probably been doing doubles like the shift that I had. It's so much stress. There are mornings where I'd be waking up and I'm just crying before work. It sucks.

In the break room the treat us like slaves. I remember one time, I was just beat tired. They said, "Ok, it's time to go." And we all just sat down, not moving. And then if you don't get up, you get a write up. Or you get a warning. And it's like you can never win. I had an injury, and I was trying to rest in the break room and they wrote me up. Because I was tired. It's like they don't care. They don't care. They don't care if you can. They don't care if you can't. It's all about the numbers.

It's no different when I was driving... it doesn't matter if you're a man who goes to the gym or a person who's crippled. You're

still going to carry two hundred packages.

I drove for two years. I done driving before then. It was different. Basically, if you messed up, you might be taken off route, and then you gotta watch a training video. But Amazon, I know other drivers been terminated for the same. They gone off route, and then it's game over. You're out.

You're being watched all the time.

About a half a year ago, I got injured. And I got in trouble because I didn't go through the doctor at AmCare, which was weird because the DSP was my boss at that point. And through that I learned that the

DSP has to give me insurance. I'm here working for this Black-owned DSP, and it's the same shitty, treating me

bad and passing the buck on my health needs. Basically, I got injured, and it felt like I didn't matter anymore. I got told by Amazon that I could take time off to go to the doctor, but then the DSP told me it was a mistake.

Basically, I found out that the I got terminated because I was trying to figure out my PTO [paid time off]. Everybody's supposed to take it, but what really happens is most people just take unpaid time off. Because it's easier. And then when I tried to make sense of this PTO, I got terminated. And then after I tried to get worker's comp, I found out that this DSP had switched workers insurance and didn't

**Most people just take unpaid time off. Because it's easier.**



tell me. It's like they were intentionally making it shady, making me do my own paperwork, and then basically firing me. Like I was too much trouble for trying to get help and I was costing too much money to deserve some attention to my injury. That's not right.

In the end, I'm not sure I ever felt respected at work. Come to think of it, it's like no one ever told me, "Hey, good job!" Like you work at other places, and I've been told that I'm doing something right. But not at Amazon. Crickets. But then they have people out there that's just waiting for you to do one wrong move, and then, bam! They'll tell you, "You stepped out of the car wrong, so you're at fault." I know other drivers who had this happen to them, and one of them ended up figuring out that he had to start double recording. Like recording himself, because otherwise Amazon was going to try and catch him out!

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## Harper

I ended up at Amazon in 2018. Sort of just needed a job. I was trying different things. But nothing was coming through that stuck. I went to Amazon because I was looking for something stable. And for something with benefits. I needed the health care. I needed the money. I had no career. I had had a tough time at my last job—and I just needed to find something secure. I got retaliated against for something I did that was political. It was horrible.

I walk a lot at Amazon. I'm a picker. I'm walking up and down these rows and rows that have cardboard boxes. I have a

**I start forgetting who I am and what I need to do to take care of myself.**

scanner. And it will tell me where to go. I look at the scanner. I go to the box. I get the thing out of the box that the scanner tells me and put it in a plastic bin. And I keep doing that until the plastic bin has the appropriate amount of things in it. Then I



send it down the line. And from there it gets packed and goes to the customer.

I work in a mega facility. It's enormous. It's more than a couple stories high and a couple of miles long. And I'm walking every day like that. I probably walk like fifteen miles a day. It's rows and rows. And more walking. I'm pretty isolated. And it's not like there are speakers. Well maybe some are for fire safety. But I'm usually by myself every day like that. The only talking that might happen is when you've stopped, and you're not picking fast enough. Then the management will come down and talk to you.

I mean in general, you gotta make sure your picks are quality. Or else you'll get written up. I never get written up. I mean my quality and productivity are pretty high. I've never gotten a write-up. But I know it happens to other people all the time. It'll just feels random at times. People will one day get this write-up, and they'll be like, "Really? Is that right?"

It's like the environment is pitched just at this level where you come in thinking, "Ok, this job is going help me get it together." But then it's nothing like that. I mean for me... I had... I had been in a tough place. And I'm diabetic. But mentally, I was in a tough place. And I came to Amazon not looking for a career or anything like that, just some stability. But I don't know, I've had days where I've been

feeling bad. Things are dropping. My blood sugar level—it's not right. I'm dizzy. And it's only till later I realize that I forgot to eat, because I'm on this schedule—or, like, I'm on a mega shift for ten hours and I have to meet a certain standard and I start forgetting who I am and what I need to do to take care of myself.

I remember that the medical representative would tell me that I should take my PTO [personal time off] to take care of myself. That is not right. I get accommodations now because of my diabetes. That means I work 40 hours max. That's for a disability! What???!?

**I was too outspoken. I was also probably too feminine. And they didn't like that.**

It's like I know I'm a good worker. I know I am. I know that I'm not screwing up.

But there are times when the whole experience is messing with my mind.

Once I was in the pack department, and because I speak up, because of my background, because I've got politics, because I'm gay... the whole experience really contributed to my mental health deteriorating. Like, I threatened them somehow. It was the talent show—Amazon's Got Talent—so they asked us all to do a routine. So I did a song that was to the tune of *Let My People Go*. But instead of "Let my people go," I sang "Give us PTO."

I had written a song about getting voluntary time off during peak season, which is so messed up. Like you're being forced to work these crazy 60-hour weeks

and then you basically get forced to take voluntary time off. But, like, if you want to take off at any time of the year, it's probably peak season, because you need it. Anyway, I came in seventh place. Not bad. There were people cheering and clapping, and really vibing with it. I got everyone cracking up. It was great. It just had to be sung. I was pretty proud of it, and it was definitely the shape of things to come in terms of my organizing.

But I guess they didn't like it because after that I got put in this department almost, like, to be punished. And even though probably I should have been promoted—I fit their mold, high performing, white—but I didn't get it, because I was too outspoken. I was also probably too feminine. And they didn't like that. I didn't come to Amazon for a career, but when you're doing right and you're noticing how things are done and saying something about it, that's when they come for you. It really took a toll on me mentally. They moved me from pick to pack, where you're isolated. There's no community. There's no people. I wasn't in a good place. I think I cried every day.

I've worked off and on at Amazon for five years. A lot of the work is transitory. Like a lot of people come in as contractors. I mean I may be out of line for saying this, but I remember a few years back I was a labor share to another building. And I'd say almost all of the people working there didn't even speak English. It was a new building, and people weren't getting the break times they were due. I mean, of

course, between that and no job, you're going to take the job. But it's not a right way to do it. And in assembling its network of contractors, Amazon has fundamentally altered the career expectations and training of its workers. Say good bye to what was once a steady union warehouse job into a temporary job. Because people are desperate, they do it.

There's no chance to advance here. It's like they don't even think to ask us what might work better in management. Like they never... they don't want to hear from us. They don't ever think—like, “Oh, that guy's been working at Level 1. Maybe he knows a thing or two.” It's like they're thinking while we're sleeping. I've heard that a million times, and I believe it.

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## Akilah

A day in the life for me? I get to work at 6:30am, and I leave at 5:00pm. I have two 15-minute breaks, and one half-hour break. It's my choice. I like it here, but it's bittersweet.

I mean if you're thinking about working at Amazon, you really need to think about what you're going to face. You want the job. Fine. But know at the end of the day, there's gonna be challenges. If you're old like me, just know that you're gonna be standing or your gonna be walking for ten hours. Ten hours. And I don't need to work here. I've worked other jobs. I was in the



you're walking to get items, it's like 65 football fields. You can't imagine just how big it is and how much you gonna hurt. I mean learning the ropes is easy at Amazon. You'll pick things up quick enough. But if

**The time off task is just brutal, it has people literally doing things like peeing in water bottles or holding it in for hours because they're afraid they will be written up or fired.**

you think you're going be in a place where the company cares about you [think again]. If you're needing accommodations, and you think your managers are going to have your back and help you get or keep those accommodations—or even figure it out that you need a longer break to work well, forget it. No one is here concerned about you or looking out for you. It's either you can or you can't. Good luck.

It's bittersweet. It's really bittersweet. I like what I do. But Amazon actually makes it harder for you to do the job you gotta do.

Like I remember having an issue with my manager and the bathroom. It's Amazon. And they want you to stay hydrated. You gotta go to the bathroom. If I'm drinking, I'm peeing. And on top of the fact that it takes a while to walk to the bathroom and back, it's like... it'll prompt a warning no doubt. Manager told me I'm screwing the flow, so he told me to go home. The time off task is just brutal, it has people

medical insurance business. I did clerical work for the state. I worked in retail. I raised three Black children in a racially charged city. I know work.

But, you know, you get here, and I don't want to be the one that tells you don't work at Amazon, because it's not like how it is in all the commercials, where everyone is smiling and feeling good and helping each other out. You get here, and

literally doing things like peeing in water bottles or holding it in for hours because they're afraid they will be written up or fired.

And it's like you have accommodations, but it's not really all that. I once knew this blind guy at Amazon. He's a good guy. He had accommodations. He's there walking around with assistant. But he's gotta still make rate like all the others. What's that all about?

I mean I got a bad knee, and I had a manager who sympathized with my cause, so I got accommodations and got put in a different department up on the second floor. And it's usually all white people up there. And the general manager came down and kept on asking, "Why are you all up here?" Mind you this is a place that doesn't get tracked as much. Not like, how we do with rate and all, and managers can see all that we doin' on the cameras. We're not even supposed to be on our phones or have earbuds, but management comes in with that, while they're watching us. It's too much.

The management, you know, it's like they need some help. They gone and got these white whippersnappers just out of college, and they don't know much about nothing. They never learned how to talk people. You know, say it in a nice way, because that's what gets people doing what you want them to do. It's about respect. Respecting others' gonna get you respect. So if you don't do that, I'm gonna report

you. Or I'm just gonna say it straight to you. And even that doesn't change the dynamic. Because at the end of the day, they're gonna speak to you as if...

Either way, it's too much. It's not right when your accommodations is dependent on whatever manager you get. I shouldn't have to depend on the mercy of this whippersnapper to get me the support I'm due. That's not right.

Don't get me wrong though. I'm loud and I'm proud. I have no problem whatsoever speaking out about how we feel. And we have gone and showed them. We got them a couple of times where we all stopped scanning, because, like, where's our bonuses? Where's those raises? We did our job. You asked. We met the demand. But where's our money? You've got to deliver. And that's how we do. And we shouldn't have to if we're going above and beyond. I mean... it's not right. And I'm not going to have a problem saying how we feel when it comes to that. That's part of what makes it bittersweet. We got something done!

Right now, I'm thinking of what I'm going to do next. I wouldn't mind going back to my old job. Where I'm from, I've seen how you can get proper raises and proper rights. It's not a place like here where one day, someone is going to go up to you and say, "Go home. You're fired." But we're so close to making a change, and I don't want to go just yet.

**Where's our bonuses?  
Where's those raises?  
We did our job.**

## *Part 3*

# WHO AND WHAT TRACKS AND TARGETS AT AMAZON

Loss prevention cameras  
Fob Key or Badge  
Scanner  
Netradyne  
Mentor DSP  
ADAPT or Automated Write-ups  
Amazon A to Z  
Metal detectors  
Additional Security Checks  
Clear Plastic Bags  
Injury Care  
Functionality Capacity Exam

In this last section, we detail the surveillance systems and practices shared by workers. Amazon surveillance is a cut above the rest. Though workers accept the workplace will always have some degree of monitoring, they find the intensity of surveillance at Amazon outpaces anything they have experienced at other jobs, like working for the military, the court system, casinos, restaurant services, and rival delivery services. Workers named Amazon's unrelenting monitoring pushes them beyond their limits and creates a culture that sets workers up for failure. Though the company touts trust as its priority, workers often face mistrust and mistreatment and feel the company cares little for its employees' physical and emotional well-being.

Below are examples of how they are monitored while working:

## Surveillance Systems

### LOSS PREVENTION CAMERAS



Except for bathrooms, cameras are everywhere at Amazon.

Amazon uses camera surveillance to prevent employees from committing theft. Note that while the precise manner by which the live feeds or recordings are used and analyzed is not clear from the interviews, cameras are trained on them constantly. Compared with human loss prevention associates on the warehouse floor or on "the docks," cameras project the feeling that someone or something takes note of everyone and everything happening. The chain of command is unclear, with a lack of transparency as to who has access to camera feeds or footage, why, or for what purpose.

Their presence is strongly felt, and workers tend to be aware of the consequences of workplace theft. Yet, while theft prevention may be warranted, the warehouse floor can feel like a prison in terms of the degree of camera surveillance that takes place, leaving workers feeling unduly watched and, more importantly, controlled. Meanwhile, workers do not see the same standards of safety and security applied for their benefit or protection. For example, car break-ins regularly occur in warehouse parking lots, but these are not surveilled locations.

## FOB KEY OR BADGE

At Amazon, most low-wage Associates will tote a blue badge, which designates having worked at the company for between zero to four years.<sup>3</sup> Temporary workers and contractors will carry yellow and green badges, respectively.<sup>4</sup> The badges used in fulfillment centers may also have a long thin plastic knob with barcode.<sup>5</sup>

Badges are a point of surveillance at Amazon warehouses. Swipe data lets managers know not only when workers start and end their shift, but also when they take their 10-, 15- or 30-minute breaks. Workers report that badges also allow managers to track their location in the warehouse.

While an indispensable feature of the modern workplace, the badge can feel like a ball and chain for some workers. It serves as a reminder of how little they are trusted, what control they lack in the warehouse, and how fast they need to work.

## SCANNER

The scanner is the basic hardware device that links workers to a complex warehouse inventory system. The scanner holds two purposes: “quality” and “performance.” Quality refers to the process of improving “binning” and “picking” accuracy. “Performance” refers to worker productivity.<sup>6</sup> The constant monitoring of performance makes workers unwell, both mentally and physically.

At Amazon, some workers say that your boss is a scanner. Whether a “stower,” “picker,” or “packer,” Amazon Associates must use the scanner. For example, Associates who work as “stowers” make a product available to consumers by using the scanner to register a product’s barcode before placing the item in a bin. Associates who work as “pickers” read what appears on the scanner’s screen, get an item from a bin, and then place the item in a yellow plastic crate. “Packers” must also use a scanner, for example, to track inventory of items they have picked from shelves and stored in bins or boxes. Whichever the role of an Amazon Associate, managers receive automatic notifications if scan rates drop below desired thresholds and will punish workers for lulls. Workers will receive “adapts” or automated write-ups (see below), leading first to warnings and then to termination.

The monitoring of scan rates—also known as “time off task” as well as ToT—forces workers to neglect their physical needs such as bathroom breaks or stretching in order to maintain



their rate. Often, the time needed to walk to the bathroom can take the duration of the break (typically two ten-minute breaks). The same logic applies to workers when it comes to their lunch breaks. It can take 8 minutes to traverse the warehouse floor to reach the breakroom, where often a lengthy line to use, for example, the microwave deters people from bothering with their home-brought meal. Workers are directed to use their scanner no less than ten minutes from the time they have clocked back in from their break, leading to shorter break times lasting eight minutes.

In general, the scanner’s “performance” function perpetuates a constant state of anxiety: workers need to keep moving if they want to avoid a penalty.

## NETRADYNE



Netradyne refers to an in-truck and dashboard surveillance system that feeds back to managers as well as drivers when driver behavior is out of line. According to the company, it is an AI-enhanced tool designed with the intention of improving driver safety and performance. Following its use of SmartDrive for long haul vehicles, Amazon introduced Netradyne into its delivery trucks in 2021 to make “improvements to the driver experience... and to set up drivers for success.”<sup>7</sup>

Netradyne uses cameras in the cab and on the dashboard. Based on a set of parameters and live video-feed analysis, Netradyne will trigger automated alerts to drivers as well as managers. If a driver is driving close to another car or runs a stop sign, she will “get dinged.” Some drivers have stated that such transgressions translate into automatic fines to Amazon.

While Netradyne promises to influence driver behaviors for safe driving, it also invites a constant state of unease among drivers. The feeling of being watched follows drivers from work to home, distorting their sense of time and making the completion of everyday tasks into a race to perform.

## MENTOR DSP



Mentor is an app for use by last-mile drivers at Amazon. eDriving, the maker of the Mentor app, bills itself as a digital driver risk management tool. According to its website, Mentor recently won accolades in the categories of Compliance Solution and the Governance, Risk & Compliance Solution from the Annual American Business Awards.<sup>8</sup> The app allows baseline and real-time analysis of driving behavior, provides “micro trainings,” and instantly notifies drivers of problems.

As compared with Netradyne or other in-truck and dashboard surveillance systems, Mentor does not rely on camera footage. However, it nevertheless engages in some degree of monitoring: it admits to monitoring cell phone usage and location triangulation in the event of collision. Some we spoke to prefer it to in-cab video monitoring, though (perhaps erroneously) may have the impression that Mentor does not involve continuous monitoring.<sup>9</sup> Media reports suggest that Mentor erroneously registers drivers as using their phone, when in fact they are just trying to get on the app.<sup>10</sup>

## ADAPT OR AUTOMATED WRITE-UPS

As mentioned above, the scanner or scanner functions as a productivity monitoring tool, leading to “ADAPTs” or automated write-ups. ADAPT stands for Associate Development and Performance Tracker. It measures how many tasks a worker completes relative to location-based customer demand. The higher the demand, the higher the rate for task completion. Often peak days, such as Amazon Prime Day, will trigger higher thresholds for productivity.

The surveillance mechanism behind ADAPTs is the measurement of time off task or the rate of failing to complete a task, such as scanning an item and putting it in a yellow plastic “tote.” Management monitors scanner metrics to make sure that associates are on top of rate. For those workers who get promoted from warehouse associate to a management position, they go from being required to make rate to ensuring others do so through surveillance and write-ups.

## AMAZON A TO Z

Amazon hourly-paid Associates must download and use the Amazon A to Z app on their personal phones. This app requires Amazon login credentials. It allows associates to

- submit time off requests, check your accrual balances, and claim voluntary extra time or time off
- view in/out times, upcoming shifts, and calendar
- view pay, tax, and direct deposit information
- stay up to date with the latest happenings internal to Amazon
- update personal information, emergency contacts, and view your Amazon.com discount code
- visit several other employee resources for new jobs, retirement planning, learning management, and more.<sup>11</sup>

From the workers' side, the app feels like an impediment. While the app collects, analyzes, and stores information about and from workers and is intended to ease the work experience, some view the app with mistrust and feel A to Z works to Amazon's benefit, not theirs. Requests and/or communications with management are delayed with little explanation as to why.

## Other Surveillance Practices

### METAL DETECTORS



Metal detectors form part of the warehouse environment. Workers must pass through the detectors coming in and leaving the warehouse. The combination of detectors with cameras and other punitive surveillance practices and systems contribute to a contradictory feeling at Amazon. That is, although the company prides itself on trust as part of its brand and as a part of its workplace culture, a hierarchy of trust tends to permeate fulfillment centers: low-wage workers are simply not to be trusted.

### ADDITIONAL SECURITY CHECKS



Detectors are found at fulfillment centers for the purpose of theft prevention. Workers may be subjected to an additional security check should they raise suspicion or set off a metal detector. The detectors contribute a sense of unease, since theft detection is for workers checking out and leaving the facility, implying that anyone crazy enough to bring a gun into the facility could, undetected. The detectors add another layer of disquiet for those workers who have accommodations and who raise alarms when passing through the facility. For some, this demonstrates a single-mindedness of its surveillance architecture and a blatant lack of care for workers.

### CLEAR PLASTIC BAGS



Many fulfillment centers require low-wage workers to show up to work with clear plastic bags to go through security. However, other workers with higher ranks can show up to the warehouse with opaque bags and generally suffer less scrutiny. The discrepancy again contributes to a hierarchy of trust in the workplace.

## INJURY CARE



Dealing with injury at Amazon entails another layer of being watched and not necessarily cared for. In-house monitoring happens through AmCare clinics, on-site medical representatives evaluate and treat Amazon warehouse workers. Amazon characterizes AmCare as care that falls under the category of “first aid” or care “provided for injury or sudden illness before emergency medical treatment is available.”<sup>12</sup>

Workers feel pressured to report injury to on-site medical representatives first and foremost, rather than seek outside medical attention. The advice to use AmCare comes from managers, however treatment advice feels rudimentary, such as instruction to take ibuprofen for pain. Meanwhile, injury data at Amazon is notoriously hard to come by.<sup>13</sup> Medical attention can also come across as invasive, with carers gathering information potentially unrelated to pain or injury.

If an injured Amazon Associate manages to consult with outside doctors, rather than the in-house AmCare clinic or on-site medical representative, Amazon may issue a request for information. This form asks the worker to give their consent to talk to the worker’s doctors as well as to detail general medical history, whether such history relates to the injury under question.

## FUNCTIONAL CAPACITY EXAM



In the context of worker compensation, workers will need to undergo a functional capacity exam to determine whether s/he/they are fit for duty on the job. Functional capacity exams vary in type and price, but overall, they are designed to measure the cognitive and physical performance of a worker on the job. These are often ordered by a treating physician—in this case often AmCare doctors—and they involve some combination of intake process, review of medical history, a physical examination, and testing of specific work functional skills on the job such as lifting, following directions, or organizing. Insurance often will cover the cost of an exam, but sometimes workers must fund for these exams out of pocket if they wish to get workers compensation and continue working. The process can be invasive due to the amount of questions a person might be asked in the process of documenting cognitive and mental ability.



# Conclusions and Next Steps

Our interim findings on workplace surveillance resonate with what we saw on the ground in our previous research on data-driven technologies and their impacts on racialized, marginalized people living in Charlotte, Detroit, and Los Angeles. We learned over and over again that surveillance tools and practices destabilize people's sense of safety and belonging under conditions where no other alternative to surveillance exists. Surveillance tools and practices endanger the health and wellbeing of those being watched. They further expand the reaches of policing, diminish people's dignity and humanity, enables modern day enslavement, and disenfranchizes communities on the margins, all in the name of so-called innovation and growth.

The throughlines between workplace surveillance and the impact of data-driven systems that racialized, marginalized people experience when reentering society, foreclosing on homes, being evicted, and being forced to live on the street are taking shape in the stories we heard.<sup>14</sup>

The experience of being disposable or replaceable in a workplace environment where every action is recorded echoed a refrain previously heard of being dehumanized by the constant watch of the police or other state agencies. The theme of predation—being kept as prey—that we saw in our earlier research resurfaced here. So did themes of profound emotional, physical, and material costs of hypersurveillance; limitations on and hindrances to people's ability to self-determine, have autonomy over their lives, and meet their basic human needs; feelings of insecurity and misrepresentation of their datafied, surveilled selves. Whether at work or in the streets, surveillance tools and practices are for powerholders' benefit, not those who are tracked and targeted.

Yet, like residents of the most systematically disadvantaged neighborhoods in the three cities we researched, workers at Amazon warehouses are not dupes of these terms and conditions they're given. They find ways to speak out, disregard, or undo the surveillance-driven managerial systems at work, though the support they need to make changes needs improvement. Suffice it to say, be it in peoples' public, private, and work lives, there is a lot to be done to protect poor people and working poor people from the continuous violence perpetrated by surveillance.

This interim report marks just the beginning of this work. We hope that this iteration of this project inspires our readers as well as government leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders in positions of power and authority to challenge Amazon's surveillance-

driven managerial culture, to listen to workers' lived experiences, and to hold the company accountable for the harm it causes its workers, past and present. Amazon sets a harmful precedent for workforce culture that disappears the humanity of workers who give up their bodies and their peace of mind. To stand by and do nothing, makes us as culpable in the process as the perpetrators themselves.

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