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Breaking News > The City

Uber drivers with criminal history jeopardize future business



San Francisco District Attorney George Gascon speaks during a press conference at the Hall of Justice on Wednesday, August 19, 2015. (Michael Ares/Special to S.F. Examiner)

By Joe Fitzgerald Rodriguez on August 21, 2015 1:00 am



Murder. Sexual assault of minors.
Kidnapping.

People convicted of those crimes also drove thousands of rides for Uber.

On Wednesday, District Attorney George Gascon alleged Uber's drivers had extensive criminal histories not found by the ride-hail giant's much-touted criminal background checks, despite it advertising "background checks you can trust."

The allegations may spur change in regulation of companies like Uber, experts say.

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As Uber's value peaks at more than \$50 billion and it expands to cities worldwide, questions about how these allegations will shape its future linger. The California Public Utilities Commission is considering new regulations for transportation network companies (TNCs) like Uber and Lyft.

Among these "Phase II" regulations are potential rules for criminal checks — the very subject of Gascon's allegations.

But special rules may or may not allow the CPUC to consider Gascon's allegations, CPUC spokesman Christopher Chow told Examiner in an email.

"We will continue to monitor the litigation and determine what aspects of the litigation, if any, we might admit in the CPUC's rulemaking," he wrote.

Susan Shaheen, a co-director of the UC Berkeley Institute of Transportation Studies' Transportation Sustainability Research Center, who specializes in TNCs, said very little research exists into the best methods of criminal background checks regarding for TNC drivers. There's also very little research into why passengers trust or do not trust their drivers.

"In the absence of understanding, policy makers do have to make decisions," Shaheen said. "It makes it challenging."

Matthew Daus, former New York taxi commissioner, recently co-authored a report through the University Transportation Research Center called "One Standard For All: Criminal Background Checks for Taxicab, For-Hire, and Transportation Network Company (TNC) Drivers."

His report alleges Uber's criminal checks are less strict than those used by taxi companies. Uber's checks uses third-party companies that search publicly available databases, whereas taxis use the more robust Department of Justice criminal database.

Taxis also conduct checks using fingerprints, which, Daus says and Gascon's suit alleges, are more robust than Uber's name and social security checks.

Daus said he believes if Uber chooses to change its policies, the company will likely say "'Okay, okay, we'll do fingerprints,' and do it themselves."

Daus said Gascon's allegations show the need for fingerprint scans to be conducted by a third party.

Uber has defended the limits of its background checks, which allow ex-offenders to move on with their lives, the company wrote in blog posts.

Larry Kamer, a crisis consultant who managed campaigns for Nike, Safeway and Chevron, said Uber's much like other

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companies who “attract every kind of controversy.”

“Until they do something major to declare this phase is over and do something very different, or even a little surprising, people will just keep throwing darts at them,” Kamer said.

Laura La Gassa, a San Francisco resident, said she highly distrusts Uber. She noticed her female friends, more than men, “are sharing the news story and their feelings of disgust and mistrust for the company.”

Kamer said shifting opinions can even eventually damage a company as enormous as Uber.

“Uber is titanic right now,” Kamer said. “But they said the Titanic couldn’t fail either.”

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