

Another Wakeup Call for Uber – Will They Finally Answer?

Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi has a new motto for the company: “We do the right thing. Period.”

“Doing the right thing” should include putting public safety first and foremost. But Uber refuses to require fingerprint background checks for its drivers, which are proven to be the most effective way of identifying individuals with a criminal history.

The result of Uber’s lax vetting procedures has been a steady drumbeat of stories about Uber drivers committing crimes against their passengers – including harassment, rape, assault, and murder.

And now we have even witnessed the first Uber-linked act of terrorism. Onetime Uber driver Sayfullo Saipov mowed down bicyclists and pedestrians in NYC on October 31st, killing 8 and injuring 12.

Notably, Saipov managed to pass Uber’s name-based background check despite several red flags, including an arrest record, underscoring the dangerous limitations of Uber’s background check procedures.

Until Uber modifies its policy to mandate fingerprinting of all drivers, and runs those prints against the FBI’s criminal history database, the company is jeopardizing the safety of its riders and the public at large.

For over 80 years, fingerprint checks have been required for positions of public trust, including a wide range of professions that involve the safety and security of the public, access to sensitive information, and unmonitored access to vulnerable populations. These include taxi drivers, bus drivers, teachers, mortgage brokers, nurses and home health aides, real estate professionals, government employees, and even many school volunteers.

Unlike the biographic queries Uber relies upon, which are vulnerable to imposters, fingerprints are tied to a person’s true identity. When used in combination with the FBI’s Next Generation Identification (NGI) database, which utilizes fingerprints, the true match rate is 99.6%. In addition, subscribers to the NGI database can access the “Rap Back” service, which continuously vets individuals by providing updates of new arrests.

Completing a fingerprint check is fast, convenient, and cheap: while the standard committed response time for civil background checks is 24 hours, for a small additional fee, the FBI offers a guaranteed 15-minute response time in cases where time is of the essence.

Fingerprint checks would not impose a barrier to entry or slow the process of hiring or “onboarding” drivers. In fact, Uber already requires new drivers in New York City to get fingerprinted, as mandated by the city’s Taxi & Limousine Commission (TLC). On its

[website](#), Uber advises prospective New York City drivers “it’s easy to schedule an appointment for fingerprinting” even as it argues that fingerprint-based checks are burdensome.

Elsewhere, Uber’s approach has been very different: the company has thrown its weight around to block proposals to require fingerprinting of its drivers. In Texas, where Uber and Lyft have spent over \$5.5 million on lobbying since 2014, the governor recently [signed](#) a law preempting attempts by cities such as Houston and Austin to require ride-hailing companies to perform fingerprint background checks. In Maryland, Uber [threatened](#) to pull out of the state if the Public Service Commission (PSC) implemented a law mandating fingerprint checks. Even without fingerprinting, the Maryland PSC’s tightened background check standards resulted in a [sharp uptick](#) in the number of new drivers booted from ride-hailing apps (more than 95 percent of them from Uber).

It is disappointing that Uber used its former status as a Silicon Valley darling as a free pass on policies that undermine public safety. It is also disappointing that regulators and legislators, whom we trust to uphold the public interest, are instead bowing to pressure and money from a privately held, for-profit corporation. By watering down background check requirements, governments are ignoring the recommendations of law enforcement officials, including the [National District Attorneys Association](#), who say that fingerprinting is the only way to keep dangerous individuals off the ride-hailing apps.

Uber has stuck by its position on background checks, even at the cost of millions of dollars in court [settlements](#), [fines](#), and lobbying expenses. Meanwhile, Uber’s response to each criminal incident involving a driver is a formulaic statement: Uber is “investigating the incident and cooperating with authorities” and the driver has “been removed from the platform.”

Sayfullo Saipov is the latest in a series of wakeup calls for Uber. Empty words are no longer enough: Uber needs to take action. The company should finally recognize that its name-based background checks are inadequate, and that only fingerprint background checks can identify bad actors before it is too late to stop them.

Let Uber follow its own motto, and “do the right thing. Period.”

About the International Biometrics + Identity Association (IBIA):

IBIA advances the adoption and responsible use of technology-based identification solutions to enhance identity security and privacy and to facilitate convenience and productivity for government, business and consumers. For more information, please visit our website: ibia.org.

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