AIRPORT AIMS TO USE UBER DRIVERS' FINGERPRINTS TO CHECK PAST

News / Airports / Routes

A battle over background checks for Uber drivers at the world's busiest airport comes as cities like Los Angeles and Austin, Texas, consider more thorough screenings to prevent criminals from getting behind the wheel.

Uber has objected to the Atlanta airport's plan to use fingerprints to check criminal records of its drivers, saying its own record checks are sufficient.

But the district attorney in Uber's hometown of San Francisco has called the ride-booking firm's process "completely worthless" since drivers aren't fingerprinted.

In Houston, city officials say they found that background checks without fingerprints allow criminals who have been charged with murder, sexual assault and other crimes to evade detection in a variety of ways.

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Atlanta's city council on Wednesday is set to consider the airport's plan for screening drivers for Uber, Lyft and other ride-booking firms when proposed new rules go before the council's transportation committee.

Uber has agreements with more than 50 U.S. airports, none of which require the fingerprint-based background checks being proposed by Atlanta' s airport, the company said in a statement. Those airports include major air hubs in Denver; Los Angeles; Memphis, Tennessee; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Salt Lake City, Utah.

But New York City does fingerprint drivers, and the mayor of Los Angeles this month asked state regulators to allow his city to do so as well.

Houston, the nation's fourth-largest city, was among the first in the nation to require drivers for Uber and other ride-booking firms to undergo fingerprint-based background checks using the FBI's database. Houston's program began in November 2014, and city officials there say they're far more thorough than any other way of checking someone's criminal past.

"Public safety is our No. 1 priority - that's something the city of Houston does not compromise on," said Lara Cottingham, Houston's deputy assistant director of administration and regulatory affairs. "That's the reason we license any vehicle for hire."

Since Houston's ordinance went into effect, the city's fingerprint-based FBI background checks have found driver applicants who have been charged with murder, sexual assault, robbery and indecent exposure, among other crimes. Those drivers had already cleared the commercial background checks used by ride-for-hire companies, according to a city report released this month.

Potential drivers can pass background checks that don't rely on fingerprints simply by using an alias, the report found. For instance, one driver cleared by a company that does background checks for Uber underwent Houston's fingerprint check, which turned up 24 alias names, 10 listed social security numbers and an active arrest warrant, the report states.

Companies that perform background checks for ride-hailing firms typically seek to identify counties where they've lived in the past, then search public records from those places, the report states. But the checks don't search every county, creating "a huge potential gap where crimes go undetected," the report states.

"The FBI provides the only true nationwide check," the report states.

Uber has now been operating in Houston for more than a year, "and everything we've seen is that the number of drivers getting licenses continues to grow and their business continues to thrive," Cottingham said.

However, Uber maintains that Atlanta's plan would add "substantial, additional bureaucratic barriers for drivers," company spokesman Bill Gibbons said. Atlanta would use the Georgia Department of Driver Services to help check the backgrounds of potential drivers, though specific details of how drivers would be screened haven't been released.

The ride-booking firm Lyft also says Atlanta's proposal would prove difficult.

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"While the Hartsfield-Jackson staff has recognized the benefits Lyft provides, the current plan as proposed will make it extremely difficult for Lyft to operate," Lyft said in a statement to The Associated Press.

The conflict in Atlanta is the latest in a series of disputes Uber has had over its background checks of drivers.

In December 2014, San Francisco District Attorney George Gascón and Los Angeles County District Attorney Jackie Lacey announced a lawsuit against Uber, partly over its background checks.

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