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Stop attacking Uber for lax safety standards

Despite the spate of bad press, Uber is as safe as riding a taxi.

By Matthew Feeney

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An illustration picture shows the logo of car-sharing service app Uber on a smartphone next to the picture of an official German taxi sign in Frankfurt, Sept. 15, 2014. (Kai Pfaffenbach/Reuters)

It's been a bad few weeks for Uber, the San Francisco-based transportation technology company.

After a spate of bad coverage, the ride-sharing business is facing bans in [Spain](#), [the Netherlands](#), and [Nevada](#), as well as [a lawsuit in California](#) scrutinizing its driver background checks. The service was banned in New Delhi, after an Uber driver was accused of rape by a passenger earlier this month.

Last month, senior vice president Emil Michaels was roundly criticized for suggesting that the company should dig up dirt on journalists critical of Uber. The company also recently disciplined a New York executive after he tracked a reporter's location in an Uber car. Earlier this month, an Uber driver in New Delhi reportedly confessed to raping a passenger.

These reports are troubling, to be sure. But that doesn't mean we should start regulating Uber more stringently, or ban it outright. The company boasts comparatively rigorous safety requirements, and provides a very real value to consumers.

For example, most American jurisdictions require a [five-year](#) gap between any felony convictions and a taxi driver's application process. Uber mandates that its drivers not have DUIs, violent crimes, or sexual offenses on their record within [seven years](#) of their application. In addition, Uber requires seven years to pass before it considers applicants with gun-related violations or driving offenses such as hit and runs and reckless driving on their record.

Uber also lets passengers and drivers rate each other, adding another layer of accountability. At the end of a bad ride, an Uber passenger can provide details of a driver's behavior on the Uber app. Unlike taxi drivers, Uber drivers know inappropriate behavior will be reported quickly. This

is an excellent safety feature, and the fact that drivers also rate passengers provides both passengers and drivers with an incentive to behave well.

Critics, however, say it's not enough.

Unlike many taxi driver applicants, Uber does not fingerprint its drivers. Hirease, the company used by Uber to carry out background checks, uses publicly available data to screen applicants. The data comes from sources such as federal and county courts, national sex offender registries, and a Multi State Criminal Databasel search, which includes information from state authorities . The courthouse records are checked in the jurisdictions where the applicant has lived in the last seven years.

True, fingerprinting can pull up information that isn't caught by a traditional background check. For example, fingerprints pulled from a crime scene might match a potential driver, even if that driver was never apprehended or charged with a crime.

But these databases are flawed, and often include inaccurate or incomplete information. In July 2013, the National Employment Law Project [released a study](#) on the FBI's employment background checks and found that "FBI records are routinely flawed."

NELP's study shows that while law enforcement agencies are diligent at reporting fingerprint information to the FBI, they are less diligent in keeping the data updated. This means someone can be fingerprinted after being arrested for a crime they're eventually found innocent of.

If the fact that such a person is eventually cleared of any wrongdoing is not reported to the FBI, then that person's FBI background check will not be an accurate.

Second, even if an arrested and fingerprinted person is found guilty, there is a good chance that he or she will have pleaded down to a lesser conviction. NELP's study indicates that "of those initially charged with a felony offense and later convicted, nearly 30 percent were convicted of a different offense than the one for which they were originally charged, often a lesser misdemeanor conviction." Such incomplete information means that an FBI check is not a panacea.

Uber is an entirely new kind of service and forcing it to adhere to the standards of ordinary taxi companies may not be the best way forward. Consumers should make an informed choice about Uber and balance the innovative services it provides with the potential pitfalls of new and uncharted territory.

There will always be bad apples in every pool of workers. Taxi drivers have been accused of [assaulting passengers](#). That doesn't mean the government should ban taxis. Uber has a strong incentive to provide a safe environment for its users. Its very business model depends on consumer trust.

Matthew Feeney is a policy analyst at the Cato Institute and author of a forthcoming Cato study Is Ridesharing Safe?

