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Report: Uber, Lyft As Safe As Taxis

A Cato Institute study shows key differences between rideshare services and taxis, but passenger safety isn't one of them.

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Amid driver misconduct allegations against ridesharing companies such as Uber, a new think tank report shows there is no evidence that passengers are in more danger in rideshare cars than they are in taxis.

Ridesharing companies like Uber and Lyft have been under scrutiny by local lawmakers, Congress and taxi drivers for safety and regulation concerns. Uber, in particular, has been in the spotlight after drivers were accused of rape, harassment and attacks on passengers.

The libertarian Cato Institute's January policy analysis claims that the companies have adequate driver background checks.

Researchers from Cato and other organizations Tuesday debated whether ridesharing should be regulated. Some lawmakers are working to include companies like Uber and Lyft under the taxi regulation umbrella, but the Cato analysis claim they're too different from traditional taxis and warrant their own regulation system.

In 2013, a Washington woman accused her Uber driver of rape, although prosecutors did not charge him. Additionally, a San Francisco Uber driver was arrested for bashing his passenger in the head with a hammer in September.

Most recently, a 26-year-old woman was allegedly assaulted and raped by an Uber driver in New Delhi, India, in December. He pleaded not guilty. Since the attack, Uber CEO Travis Kalanick has promised to evaluate the company's background check system. On Wednesday, Uber added a panic button to the app in India, which allows passengers to connect with local law enforcement immediately.

Taxi drivers complain that driver background checks for private ridesharing companies are less exhaustive than for taxi drivers. While local governments perform taxi driver background checks and fingerprinting, ridesharing companies have their own verification systems that do not require fingerprints.

“People with criminal histories have been approved as drivers for these companies,” said Royale Simms, business agent for the Washington, D.C., Taxi Drivers Association. “You can’t do that as a taxi in the city.”

Both Uber and Lyft require background checks for a number of offenses – such as DUI, violent crimes and sexual assaults—going back seven years. According to Cato research, though that time span may be short, the requirements are often stricter than some of America’s biggest cities’ taxi requirements.

Rideshare services have other precautions, like driver-passenger mutual scoring and passenger self-identification.

While much attention has been focused on passenger safety, James Szekely, director of the International Taxi Driver's Safety Council, noted the dangers taxi drivers face, equating driving a taxi to "picking up hitchhikers."

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics data, homicides accounted for between 56 percent and 80 percent of work-related deaths in the taxi industry between 2003 and 2012. Drivers are also subject to a high risk of nonfatal violent assaults, especially because they often carry cash.

Rideshare drivers have access to information about their passengers, including credit card data and contact information. Matthew Feeney, who wrote the Cato ridesharing policy analysis, said this makes the exchange safer than taxi rides for both the driver and passenger.