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Uber's big problem that won't go away: background checks

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In this Dec. 16, 2014, file photo a man leaves the headquarters of Uber in San Francisco.

IMAGE: ERIC RISBERG/ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Child exploitation. DUI. Manslaughter.

Those were just some of the criminal convictions on record for four Uber drivers in Los Angeles before they were approved to work as contractors for the ride-hailing service, according to a [report](#) Tuesday from the *Los Angeles Times* based on court records from drivers ticketed at the Los Angeles International Airport.

It is yet another concerning news item on a long list of Uber incidents stretching across the country and the world — and raising concerns about how much Uber, and its users, really know about the drivers who work for the company.

Uber drivers have been accused of rape and sexual assault in [Dallas](#), [Boston](#) and [New Delhi](#). Legislators from California to Kansas have pushed for stricter background checks on car-hailing services.

Even before this week's report, news organizations had found instances of drivers with criminal pasts passing their background checks.

The \$50 billion company has fought tooth and nail to avoid being subject to stricter background check laws.

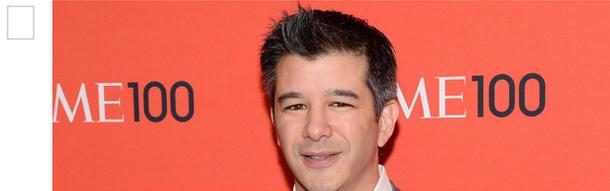
When Kansas pushed a bill in May that would require Uber background checks be handled by the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, Uber rallied its customers and political allies to protest, then temporarily [pulled its service](#) from Kansas.

Due to the political pressure from Uber, a more favorable bill was ultimately passed.

Uber has relied on third-party services like Hirease and Checkr to process background checks in various markets. Drivers are asked to provide social security numbers, vehicle registrations and drivers licenses, among other information, which are cross-referenced against court records and registries to check for felonies, DUIs, fatal accidents and more.

Yet, Uber has resisted adding additional measures, particularly fingerprint scans, which are standard with many government-approved background checks. Uber has argued that fingerprint scans are flawed, mistaking a significant percentage of "low quality fingerprints." Instead, the company is looking, predictably, to [new technology](#) like voice verification and biometrics to improve driver screening.

"While no system is 100%, we believe our background checks stack up well against others," a spokesperson for Uber said in a statement.



Uber CEO Travis Kalanick at the 2014 TIME 100 Gala in April.

IMAGE: EVAN AGOSTINI/INVISION/AP/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Sources close to Uber say the latest startling revelation in the *Los Angeles Times* is old news that the company itself talked about in a lengthy [blog post](#) on safety last month.

Uber, which has thrown a few sharp elbows at competitors in its day, sees evidence of competitive meddling here. An Uber insider suggests to *Mashable* that the report's timing is purely political as the city is currently weighing providing permits to Uber and Lyft for airport pickups, which would threaten the local taxi industry.

If it is a political move, it's an effective one. Uber's defenders typically frame its many fights with regulators and politicians by using technology buzzwords: innovation and disruption. To be against Uber, they suggest, is to stand in the way of progress.

That line of defense may work when debating the general use of an application to hail a car, but it's a much tougher sell when it comes to concerns about public safety.

"This is just another problem that will come up every time they try to prove they are a company that is worth trusting," says Paul Argenti, a professor of corporate communication at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth says about Uber.

Skeptics see a company playing by its own rules and perhaps sacrificing an extra layer of precaution to get more drivers on the road as fast as possible. In fact, Uber's team has hinted as much. "If we have to comply with a fingerprint mandate, it typically adds many weeks to the process of getting a driver on board and earning money," Sally Kay, an Uber representative, [said](#) in a meeting about background checks with Texas regulators earlier this year.

For all the political victories like the one in Kansas, Uber's refusal to go along with the standards for background checks may prove to be the PR problem that doesn't go away.

"It doesn't matter whether their system is better, as good or worse. The fact is no one is going to believe that they are better than what is a reasonable standard that

has already been set," Argenti says.

And if there's one thing Uber and its opponents can probably agree on, it's that there will only be more safety and background check issues in the future.

"The challenge we have is that a safety incident can be a one-in-a-million thing, but we do a million rides a day," Joe Sullivan, Uber's recently hired chief security officer, told [one publication](#) about the conversation Uber's CEO had with him early on.

"The company must do its utmost best efforts to use available resources and add potentially their own capabilities to ensure that no bad driver falls between the cracks," says Thilo Koslowski, an automotive analyst with Gartner. "That might be difficult to achieve in all cases since the company is growing so fast."

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