

Uber Is Adding Annual Background Checks for Drivers, Still Won't Require Fingerprints

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Uber announced a series of new rider safety improvements on Thursday, including the addition of buttons that allow customers to more easily call 911 from the app and share their locations with others. Uber is also mandating annual criminal background checks for its drivers and hiring an unnamed company to track criminal arrest records on an ongoing basis. Drivers were previously only required to undergo one background check.

“The first thing that we want to do is really change Uber’s substance, and the image may follow,” CEO Dara Khosrowshahi told the Associated Press. “The announcements that we’re making are just a step along the way of making Uber fundamentally safer for drivers and riders.”

Background checks in particular have been a sore spot for the company in previous years. In 2015, Uber and Lyft decided to stop service in Austin, Texas, after the City Council passed an ordinance requiring that they institute fingerprint-based background checks, a method employed by the FBI. The two ride-sharing companies argued that fingerprint databases are often out of date and that fingerprinting holds up the hiring process. Uber and Lyft returned to Austin a year later after Texas Gov. Greg Abbott signed a bill that put the state in charge of regulating ride-sharing and jettisoned fingerprint checks.

More recently, the Colorado Public Utilities Commission fined Uber \$8.9 million in November for allowing 57 drivers with felony convictions and serious traffic violations, like driving under the influence, to operate in the state. Some of the drivers didn’t even have a valid license. Regulators later cut the fine in half after Uber argued that the commission had already dismissed 1,788 of the violations.

That same month, two women brought a class-action suit against Uber on behalf of U.S. riders who were “subject to rape, sexual assault, physical violence or gender-motivated violence or harassment by their Uber driver in the last four years.” Nine other women have joined the case since then, and Uber has reportedly been trying to settle it in private arbitration. The plaintiffs argue, in part, that Uber’s alleged reliance on credit-reporting systems for screening drivers is inadequate, as those records only go back seven years while fingerprint records go back further.

Uber still does not plan to add fingerprint checks in this latest round of safety updates, claiming that the combination of databases it currently relies on “stacks up well against the alternatives.”

