Here's Why Uber Should Report Data on Violence Involving Its Drivers

More stories by Eric Newcomer

Uber, Lyft, Didi and the rest of global ride-hailing industry look more and more like public transportation, both in the number of customers that they serve and the variety of transportation options that they offer. Yet we know very little about how safe these services are. How often do drivers get into accidents? How often do those accidents result in serious injuries? How frequently do drivers attack passengers and vice versa?

This topic is on my mind because I wrote Thursday about 14 women who say they were assaulted, raped or harassed by their Uber drivers. Their stories are terrifying. One of the women says she was "jolted awake" when her Uber driver began sexually assaulting her. Another woman says her driver took her, not to her sister's apartment, but to her driver's, where he forced her inside and raped her. These nightmare allegations are hopefully tragic anomalies. But how rare are they?

We don't know. Unlike most public transportation services in the U.S., which release data about arrests and are subject to public records requests, San Francisco-based Uber and its ilk share very little information about how often tragedy strikes. The Bay area's BART subways, for instance, replied to my request for data in seven minutes with a report showing a 24 percent increase in violent crimes in 2017. It's not a comforting trend line, but putting the information in front of the public is a first step to addressing the problem. BART has increased the number of arrests.

In contrast, I submitted a public records request months ago for Uber drivers that had been arrested in San Francisco. After several months, police shared a smattering of arrest reports that could not have represented all the violent incidents involving Uber drivers in the city. Several police forces said it would be impossible to provide any data because they don't specifically track Uber drivers.

Uber is actively debating whether it should release incident data and what that data might look like, people with knowledge of the discussions say. Most companies take great pains to avoid releasing information that could paint them in a bad light. But there are good reasons for Uber to do so. After the initial shock, people's focus would turn to whether the numbers are improving over time. That's what happened after technology companies started reporting diversity statistics. The resulting conversations have been healthy.

The perception of safety is essential to the viability of ride-hailing services. If people don't think Uber Technologies Inc. is safe, they'd probably be willing to pay more to take an alternative. Uber's reputation when it comes to safety is already under siege. Local news jumps on just about every report of violent incident. Uber's detractors are tracking and amplifying those

reports. Uber could use a more comprehensive answer when something horrific happens, one that puts it in context and perhaps shows violence going down.

Given that safety is so important to the long-term health of its business, Uber would benefit from regular public scrutiny. The company's founding philosophy essentially put growth above everything else. Dara Khosrowshahi, who took over as chief executive officer of a company in turmoil last fall, has said last year's scrutiny "not only started a real cultural change that was painful for Uber but incredibly positive. The leaks, etc., led Uber to finally understand that it had to make the changes that it is making."

New leadership aside, Uber maintains a trust deficit. Customers don't give it the benefit of the doubt. Uber wants to be a once-in-a-generation global company that runs the world's transportation infrastructure. If it wants to prove it can do things better than the government, it needs to be at least as transparent when things go wrong. After Khosrowshahi took over Uber, he rewrote the company's cultural values. Two stand out: "We help improve access to transportation, and make streets safer," and, "We do the right thing, period." Prove it.

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