



# Uber hit with lawsuit over alleged sexual assaults

The ride-hailing company is being sued after two women allege they were sexually assaulted by Uber drivers. The plaintiffs say Uber needs to do more to keep passengers safe.

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by [Dara Kerr](#)

Uber has been struck with a new lawsuit alleging the ride-hailing company knowingly neglects the safety of its female customers.

The suit, filed Thursday in US District Court in San Francisco, claims Uber aims its marketing at young women who have been drinking but doesn't conduct adequate background checks on its drivers. That lapse has led to a number of sexual assaults, according to the [52-page complaint](#) filed on behalf of two "Jane Does" who allege their Uber drivers sexually assaulted them.

"What Uber has not shared with riders is that making the choice to hail a ride after drinking also puts those same riders in peril from the Uber drivers themselves," the complaint reads. "By marketing heavily toward young women who have been drinking, while claiming that rider safety is its #1 priority, Uber is instead putting these women at risk."

The lawsuit alleges that Uber's "negligence," "fraud" and "misleading statements" led to the sexual assaults of the two women listed in the complaint. In addition to seeking unspecified damages, the suit is requesting a jury trial and a permanent injunction against Uber to overhaul its safety measures.

If successful, this case could have sweeping repercussions for the company because Uber would be forced to exert more control over its drivers, who are [classified as independent contractors rather than employees](#). Uber is the most valuable venture-backed company in the world, worth more than \$50 billion.

The plaintiffs are asking the court to order Uber to boost its safety standards by adding several new measures. These include creating 24-hour customer support hotlines in all cities in which it operates; requiring all drivers to install GPS tracking systems on their cars that would set off an alarm if deactivated; disabling child-lock features on passenger doors; and conducting fingerprint-based background checks and in-person interviews with drivers.

Uber declined to comment specifically on the lawsuit.

The San Francisco-based company has [come under fire](#) for dozens of sexual assaults allegedly carried out by its drivers worldwide. A handful of states, including California and Texas, have [launched investigations](#) into Uber, claiming it routinely fails to adequately screen drivers and has hired drivers with criminal histories.

Uber's website says the company has "strict safety standards" and that "the Uber experience has been designed from the ground up with your safety in mind." Before driving for the company, drivers must pass several background checks through a third-party firm called Hirease. In the US, would-be drivers' names are run through seven years of county and federal courthouse records, a multistate criminal database, a national sex offender registry, and Social Security and motor vehicle records. Uber says it rejects anyone who has a history of violent crimes, sexual offenses, gun-related violations or resisting arrest.

"Liability boils down to whether Uber could have foreseen the drivers' misconduct," said Sarju Naran, an attorney who chairs Hoge Fenton's employment law group. "Even with thorough background checks, it is often difficult to predict if or when someone might engage in violent or other criminal acts. But with or without liability, there's no way to avoid the reputational damage caused by these types of incidents."

### **Two attacks, one lawsuit**

Jane Doe 1's alleged assault took place in Boston at around 2:30 a.m. local time on February 8, 2015, after she and her friends had been at a party, the complaint says. The Uber driver dropped off Jane Doe 1's friends first, drove her along an off-route detour and then groped her and forcibly kissed her, according to the complaint. She managed to unlock the car door and escape.

The complaint says Jane Doe 2 was at a bar with friends in Charleston, South Carolina, on August 9, 2015, when they were picked up by an Uber driver. After dropping off her friends, the driver drove Doe 2 to a remote parking lot and raped her, according to the complaint. Doe 2 then escaped and got help.

Uber barred those drivers from its service immediately after the incidents were reported, according to a company spokesman.

"Our thoughts remain with the victims of these two terrible incidents," said the Uber spokesman in an emailed statement. "We proactively worked with law enforcement in Massachusetts and South Carolina at the time to share information and aid their investigations. Both drivers have been permanently removed from the platform."

Dozens of alleged sexual assaults by Uber drivers against passengers [have been reported](#) over the past year, within the US and in India, France, China and Canada.

"No woman should have to be physically violated because a company has decided to put profits over safety," said Douglas Wigdor, of Wigdor LLP, who filed the lawsuit. Wigdor also represented the hotel maid who brought sexual assault charges against Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former chief of the International Monetary Fund. That suit settled in 2012 for an unspecified amount.

**Update, 3:09 p.m. PT:** *with comment from Uber spokesman.*