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Uber Won't Change Screening Procedures, Add Panic Button After Kalamazoo Shooting

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02/22/2016 06:43 pm ET | Updated 20 hours ago

Uber has no plans to change its screening procedures or make a promised "panic button" available to U.S. riders after one of its drivers was charged with killing six people and attempting to kill two others Saturday in a shooting spree in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the transportation giant's top security official said Monday.

"No background check process would have flagged and anticipated this situation," Uber security chief Joe Sullivan said in a conference call with reporters. And the "panic button" -- a feature the company uses in India and [announced last year it would implement in Chicago](#) -- won't be coming to the U.S. anytime soon, Sullivan added.

Uber performs background checks on drivers, and its mobile app allows users and their drivers to rate one another. Jason Dalton, the suspected shooter, did not have a criminal record and passed the background check. He was approved to be a driver on Jan. 25, and gave just over 100 rides, earning a 4.73 out of 5 rating on the app. Some riders had lodged complaints against him.

"He said he had gotten some bad reviews, but he thought it was from drunk college kids just being mean," Sara Reynolds, a part-time student who caught an Uber ride with Dalton on Feb. 14, told The Huffington Post.

The suspected shooter was driving for Uber Saturday evening and reportedly picked up passengers between the shootings. About an hour before the shootings, [Uber passenger Matt Mellen called police to report Dalton's erratic driving](#), Mellen told Kalamazoo television station WWMT. Mellen also said he "tried contacting Uber after I had talked to the police." Sullivan referred questions about Mellen to law enforcement, but an Uber representative noted that although the company immediately suspends drivers when it receives reports of violent behavior, it talks to drivers before suspending their accounts over reports of erratic driving.

[Some studies](#) of the safety of Uber and chief competitor Lyft have shown that these services are generally as safe to use as traditional taxi companies. Uber, however, has come under fire for violent incidents involving drivers before. Over the last few years, drivers across the country have been accused or convicted of [sexual assaults](#), [violent attacks](#), [kidnappings](#) and [driving under the influence](#). In 2014, [California prosecutors sued](#) Uber over its background check process, arguing the company lies to consumers about the strength of its security measures. The state expanded its complaint in August 2015 after prosecutors found the background checks failed to flag 25 drivers with criminal records, including one who had been [convicted of second-degree murder](#).

"Our experience has been that Uber has not only failed to adequately conduct background checks of its drivers, but it has also failed to respond to complaints about drivers who have then gone on to commit atrocious acts of violence," said Douglas Wigdor, an attorney who represents women who [claim they were sexually assaulted](#) by Uber drivers.

Wigdor represented an Indian woman who sued Uber in a U.S. court last year alleging the company [failed to screen a driver](#) who [raped her](#), missing major red flags, including a criminal record. The [lawsuit alleged](#) that a little over a week before the attack, another woman gave the driver 1 out of 5 and said the assailant had stared at her inappropriately. (Uber Technologies [wrote in a court filing](#) that it never had any contractual relationship with the assailant and the contract was with Uber B.V., a Netherlands-based company.)

After the woman sued, Uber [launched](#) a "panic button" in its app in India, which the company says allows riders to send their location and other trip information to police, and connect with law enforcement directly. The company also said that it was creating a local team that would be [notified when a rider hit the panic button](#).

After two former Uber drivers were [accused in Chicago of sexually assaulting passengers](#), company managers promised to roll out a similar "panic button" feature there. Uber representatives told the Chicago Sun-Times in February 2015 that [the company would activate the feature](#) within the next several months, and promised it would eventually be used more broadly. But the feature never materialized in Chicago, Sullivan confirmed to HuffPost on Monday. The company is looking at ways to better share its GPS data with law enforcement in such situations, and does currently offer riders the option to share their ride information in real time with anyone.

So for now, a panic button appears to be off the table for U.S. riders.

"In the U.S., 911 is the panic button," Sullivan said. "We may consider rolling out a version of that in other markets around the world, but it would be a stretch to try and be better than the 911 system and we don't want to do that."

Kim Bellware contributed reporting from Kalamazoo, Michigan.