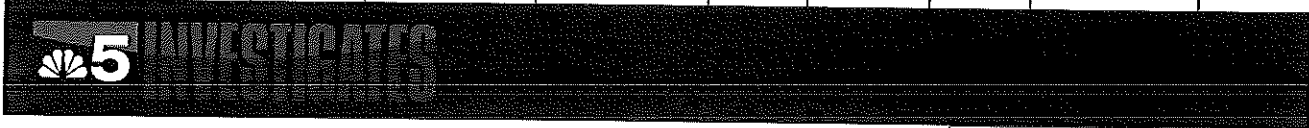




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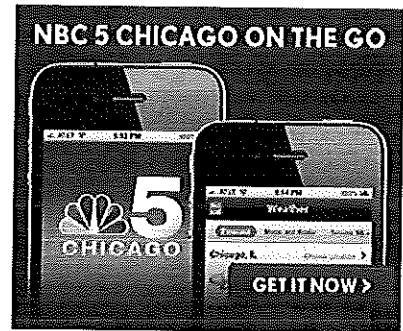
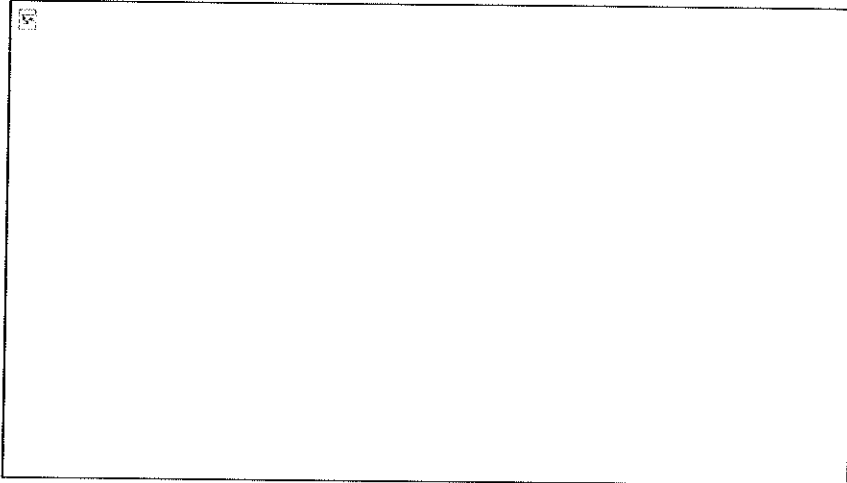
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INVESTIGATIONS

# Ride Service May Pose Risk to Passengers

By Tammy Leitner and Lisa Capitanini

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Passengers in Chicago and across the United States are taking rides from complete strangers and facing a potential risk, NBC5 Investigates has found. Tammy Leitner reports.

Friday, Apr 25, 2014 • Updated at 5:56 AM CDT

Passengers in Chicago and across the United States are taking rides from complete strangers and facing a potential risk, NBC5 Investigates has found.

Ride services are the modern twist on calling for a car service or taxi. The process is simple: Download an app on your smartphone, give your credit card information once, and then a total stranger will pick you up in his or her personal car.

- Uber Driver Arrested in SF Crash That Killed Girl

Companies like Lyft, Sidecar and Wingz have quickly gained popularity and are operating in more than 100 cities worldwide.

Uber is arguably the most well-known of the real-time ride-service companies. And UberX -- the least expensive of the four types of cars offered by Uber -- has quickly gained national attention and a devoted group of followers. But an NBC

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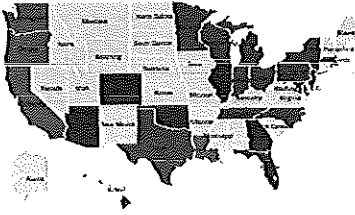
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Investigative team report found UberX drivers with questionable driving records and criminal pasts.

- Former Uber Driver Charged With Fondling Passenger



#### Interactive: Uber Laws State-By-State

NBC5 Investigates went undercover, hiring UberX drivers to take us to some of Chicago's most popular landmarks -- and found not a single driver knew his way around the city.

- House Bill Cracks Down On Rideshare Businesses

NBC5 then ran background checks on each of the drivers and discovered ticket after ticket -- for speeding, illegal stops and running lights. One driver had 26 traffic tickets, yet still passed Uber's background check.

"I have a three-page rap sheet," said California reformed criminal Beverly Locke, who agreed to help NBC test the system.

Uber says it does not hire anyone with severe driving violations or convictions in the last seven years for violent crimes, felonies, sexual offenses, drugs, or DUIs.

So Locke filled out an online application for UberX and waited. The ex-con has priors in California, dating back two decades, for burglary, drugs and assault. She is currently on probation from a guilty plea from 2012, when she admitted she nearly beat a woman to death.

Yet four weeks after filling out the online UberX application, Locke was hired to be a driver.

"I was kind of baffled, still am baffled how they let me in," Locke said. "If I had been offered a job like this, knowing that my life of crime was in burglaries and robberies, I would probably be in somebody's house. I would pick somebody up, take them to their airport, and my second thought would be: Go back to that house."

Uber spokeswoman Lauren Altmin declined to comment on Locke's hire, but said, "Uber works hard to ensure that drivers on the system have undergone rigorous screening and background checks." She went on to say that Uber has run 8,400 background checks so far this year alone, and has flagged fifteen percent of the applicants.

Yet NBC 5 Investigates found plenty of questionable drivers across the United States that still made it through UberX's screening process.

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In San Francisco, Syed Muzzafar was arrested for hitting and killing a six-year-old girl while driving for UberX on New Year's Eve. He also has a prior conviction for reckless driving 10 years ago, after he was arrested in Florida for driving 100 miles per hour into oncoming traffic, while trying to pass another car. Muzzafar declined comment through his attorney.

Back in Chicago, Tadeusz Szczechowicz told NBC5 he drove for UberX for a year - despite five prior arrests and two convictions for burglary and disorderly conduct.

And then there's Chicago UberX driver Jigneshkumar Patel. He was recently arrested for battery after a passenger accused him of sexual assault. She also took out a restraining order against him and filed a civil suit against him and Uber.

Patel calls the allegations "complete rubbish."

But NBC 5 Investigates found Patel should have never been hired by UberX in the first place, because he pleaded guilty to a DUI charge in 2012.

Uber again declined to comment, citing driver privacy.

"The consumer is in harm's way," said Illinois State Senator Martin Sandoval (D-Cicero), who also heads the Senate Transportation Committee.

Sandoval has led an effort to force ride-share companies to disclose information on background checks and turn over insurance policies. But -- so far -- these companies have been able to operate virtually unregulated in the Chicago-area.



**Interactive: Tracking Uber's Growth**

"You are at risk when you get into a ride-sharing vehicle," Sandoval said. "And people should ask: 'Do you have insurance?'"

But Jason Herrera never thought to ask about insurance before taking a ride with an UberX driver last September in San Francisco.

"All I remember was waking up inside the ambulance," said Herrera, who ended up in the hospital after his UberX driver smashed into another car - that just happened to be driven by a relative of an NBC Bay Area employee.

"You expect them to have coverage when you're their customer and I'm paying the bill to Uber," he said.

That is a reasonable assumption for anyone riding in a taxi, because taxis are mandated to carry commercial insurance. However, UberX drivers -- as independent contractors -- are only required to carry personal auto insurance.

"They destroyed my life, Uber," said Bassim Elbatniji, who was driving the UberX car that landed Herrera in the hospital. Elbatniji was also injured.

"My car is gone, totaled completely," Elbatniji said. "And also the insurance: After this happened, they denied me."

Elbatniji's personal auto insurance company denied his claim. And Uber has denied responsibility as well. Herrera is suing Uber, but Elbatniji says he can't afford to sue.

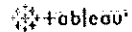
Uber declined to comment on Herrera's lawsuit or Elbatniji's employment as a former UberX driver, but a spokeswoman told NBC5 that drivers and passengers are covered by a \$1 million commercial liability policy.

"Our insurance policy is in excess to the driver's own policy, but it acts as primary insurance if the driver's policy is not available for any reason, covering from the first dollar," the spokeswoman said in a statement. "We have provided this coverage since commencing ridesharing in early 2013."

But Elbatniji and Herrera both say that Uber's insurance has not paid in this case. The Uber spokesman would neither confirm nor deny that.

## Uber Laws: State-by-State

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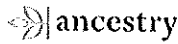




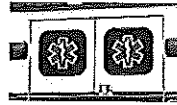
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