

Lyft and Uber say they train their drivers to spot human trafficking. Abusers sometimes bypass the system.

Lawsuits and prosecutions reviewed by NBC News say sexual abusers were able to bypass Uber's and Lyft's terms of service to transport unaccompanied children.



— Uber and Lyft ride-sharing signs on a windshield in Santa Monica, Calif., in 2016. Lucy Nicholson / Reuters file

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By David Ingram

Some people accused of being sexual abusers have used Lyft or Uber to transport unaccompanied teenagers or children to their doorsteps, according to criminal court records and lawsuits filed by the families of accusers.

NBC News identified 10 instances since 2017 in which adults who were alleged to have planned sexual abuse hired Uber or Lyft drivers for the purpose of taking teens or children to homes or hotel rooms, according to court records.

The findings come after the FBI [issued an alert](#) in 2022 warning of “reports of rideshare services being used to facilitate child abduction.” The FBI said that it appeared potential abusers believed “rideshare services afforded more privacy from potential witnesses than traditional modes of transportation.” And while the incidents are rare, the FBI said they also have a high impact on victims.

Uber and Lyft have made some changes in recent years to try to reduce the potential for abuse and increase safety for minors, including new training materials for drivers on how to spot abusive situations and a new Uber [program](#) aimed at allowing teens to take rides if approved ahead of time by a guardian.

Lyft and Uber said separate statements that they were committed to making their platforms safe and to providing resources to drivers and riders who are in vulnerable positions.

In six of the 10 instances, court records say a teen or a child took the ride unaccompanied, which would be a violation of the apps’ terms of service. In a seventh case, an abuser found a driver on the Uber app but then arranged the ride off the app, according to allegations in court records. In the three other cases, adults ordered Lyfts or Ubers thinking they were transporting teens or children, which would violate the terms of service, but they were instead communicating with undercover agents, authorities say.

While the incidents represent a small fraction of all Lyft and Uber rides, they are another example of the dangers teens and children face as the internet has created new ways for sexual abusers to find and lure vulnerable targets. The problem appears to have persisted for years, according to an NBC News review of cases, with the most recent alleged incident occurring in January.

How to stop human trafficking has been a subject of discussion and advocacy throughout the travel and tourism industries from airlines and train operators to hotels and casinos. Worldwide, 320 companies and organizations including Uber have signed on to an industry [code of conduct](#) to end child exploitation including through employee training, while Lyft and others have partnered with the Department of Homeland Security on an anti-trafficking effort called “[Blue Campaign](#).”

The 10 instances are distinct from related issues facing Lyft and Uber, including hundreds of reports of [sexual assault](#) against passengers and against drivers, as well as the fatal shooting of an Uber driver in March by, investigators said, an Ohio man who [told them](#) he thought she was scamming him.

Four of the 10 instances involved Lyft drivers, and six involved Uber drivers. In three of the 10 instances, the families of the accusers sued Lyft, claiming the company and its drivers were negligent. The company settled one lawsuit, and two others are pending. Neither Uber nor Lyft has been accused of criminal wrongdoing.

Michael DiPasquale, a lawyer for a Kansas teenager who said she was transported via Lyft when she was 13 years old, said Lyft and its driver should have picked up on numerous flags in her case to stop potential abuse. He also said Lyft had failed for years to put in place measures that might deter child sex exploitation, such as verifying riders’ ages.

“The more safeguards they put in place, the harder it is for them to gain users,” said DiPasquale, an attorney at the firm DiPasquale Moore. The status quo, he added, is “good for their bottom line, but it’s not good for users.”

In their written policies, both companies stop short of requiring drivers to act. [Lyft’s policy](#) says that a driver “may” ask to confirm a passenger’s age and that a driver “may also let a passenger know that the driver will have to cancel the trip if the passenger is indeed under 18.” [Uber’s policy](#) says that drivers “should decline” if they believe a passenger is a minor and that they “may” request verification.

But drivers have [complained](#) for [years](#) that they’re in a challenging situation. The Lyft and Uber apps don’t require passengers to verify their ages in most cases, so in practice, drivers end up as the front-line enforcers of corporate policies. Drivers are expected to be trained professionals who can spot a variety of suspected criminal behavior, but they are generally low-paid contractors, not employees, and there is a pervasive perception in the driver community that enforcing certain rules, such as those about unaccompanied minors, could result in negative consequences for drivers.

Several people on driver message boards have written that they've been [penalized](#) or have faced negative consequences after they turned down ride requests for unaccompanied minors, through [lost time](#), retaliatory customer [reviews](#) or failure to receive cancellation fees. NBC News reached out to 16 of the people posting. None agreed to an interview.

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Lyft and Uber declined to make any executives or employees available for interviews.

Uber said in a statement that it has worked to stop human trafficking in multiple ways. It [launched an education program](#) for its drivers in 2018, and its training materials include a [19-minute video](#) with tips for how to identify victims. It gets advice on its training from multiple nongovernmental organizations, including the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. In 2016, it signed on to a travel industry [code of conduct](#) to end child exploitation; companies are required to report annually on [six criteria](#), including efforts to train employees.

“While we are not experts in this space, Uber is committed to doing what it can to combat the societal problem of human trafficking as we recognize that it can present itself on our platform, and we partner with organizations who are experts in this space to help accomplish this goal,” the company said.

Uber rolls out safety measures geared toward women passengers

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“We do recognize that at any given time, there are thousands of eyes on the road and want to do as much as we can to arm drivers with information and resources and encourage them to be vigilant while driving,” it said.

NBC News sent the court cases to the companies for comment. A representative for Uber said two of the incidents were stings in which no minors were involved. In a third, the driver called law enforcement after having dropped off an unaccompanied minor – leading to an arrest, though not in time to stop an assault, prosecutors say. In a fourth, the abuser, who has since been convicted, used Uber to find a driver willing to travel 700 miles to pick up a victim but then paid in cash and with a money-transfer app, not through the Uber app, according to court documents.

A representative for Lyft didn't answer written questions about specific incidents or about the lawsuits against the company.

Lyft will require account holders to verify their identities if there are “multiple reports for appearing to be underage,” according to [company policy](#). A representative didn't respond to a written question about how often that has happened.

Lyft said in a statement that “safety is fundamental” and that it constantly works “to make Lyft an even safer platform.” It continued: “We don't allow passengers under the age of 18 to take Lyft rides without an adult. Drivers should report requests to transport unaccompanied minors to our support team so we can take appropriate action.”

Neither Uber nor Lyft responded to written questions about why their corporate policies use the word “may” in describing a driver's responsibility not to transport a suspected minor. Both companies say they have on-call staff members available to assist drivers with safety concerns.

Like Uber, Lyft offers videos about human-trafficking awareness to drivers, and in February it [said it was partnering](#) with the Homeland Security Department to supplement its existing tutorials.

Neither Lyft nor Uber responded to written questions about how often drivers watch their training videos or for how long.

If teenagers and children are taking rides unaccompanied, that might be a sign that drivers aren't getting enough training, said Yvonne Chen, director of private sector engagement at PACT, a nonprofit organization dedicated to fighting child trafficking. PACT has a partnership with Uber in which it provides Uber with training materials. Chen said she didn't know how often drivers see that material.

Many of the trafficking instances started the same way, with potential abusers meeting teenagers or children online through social media and then persuading them to meet in person.

The youngest reported victim was an 11-year-old girl. The man accused of abusing her called her a Lyft late on a Sunday night in 2018, and she got in the vehicle unaccompanied wearing pajamas and a child's backpack, according to a lawsuit filed by a parent. The driver didn't ask why she was using the man's account, the lawsuit says. The alleged abuser had entered an address for the wrong hotel, so he ordered a second Lyft, and the second driver also didn't ask, according to the lawsuit. The suit says that the assault happened after the second ride and that, during a third Lyft ride the next morning, a third driver also didn't intervene.

All three drivers later said in depositions that they were unaware of Lyft's ban on unaccompanied minors, said Nadeem Bezar, a lawyer at the firm **Kline & Specter** who represents the girl's family.

“On three occasions, the perpetrator of the sexual assault contacted a Lyft for her to be transported. So she was transported on another person's account without an adult in the car,” he said.

“Could you create another scenario that sounds more sinister?” he said.

Lyft and a co-defendant, the Days Inn motel chain, agreed last year to pay \$9 million collectively to settle the lawsuit. Days Inn didn't respond to a request for comment.

The man accused in that case, Bernard Rogers, was 23 years old at the time. He was charged with rape and other crimes, court records say. Court records don't say whether he has entered a plea or whether he is still in custody.

Lyft's terms of service prohibit people under age 18 from using the service unless adults are with them. Uber's terms of service also prohibit unaccompanied rides by minors unless they're 13 or older and have signed up ahead of time for teen accounts, which need a guardian's permission and are available only in some cities.

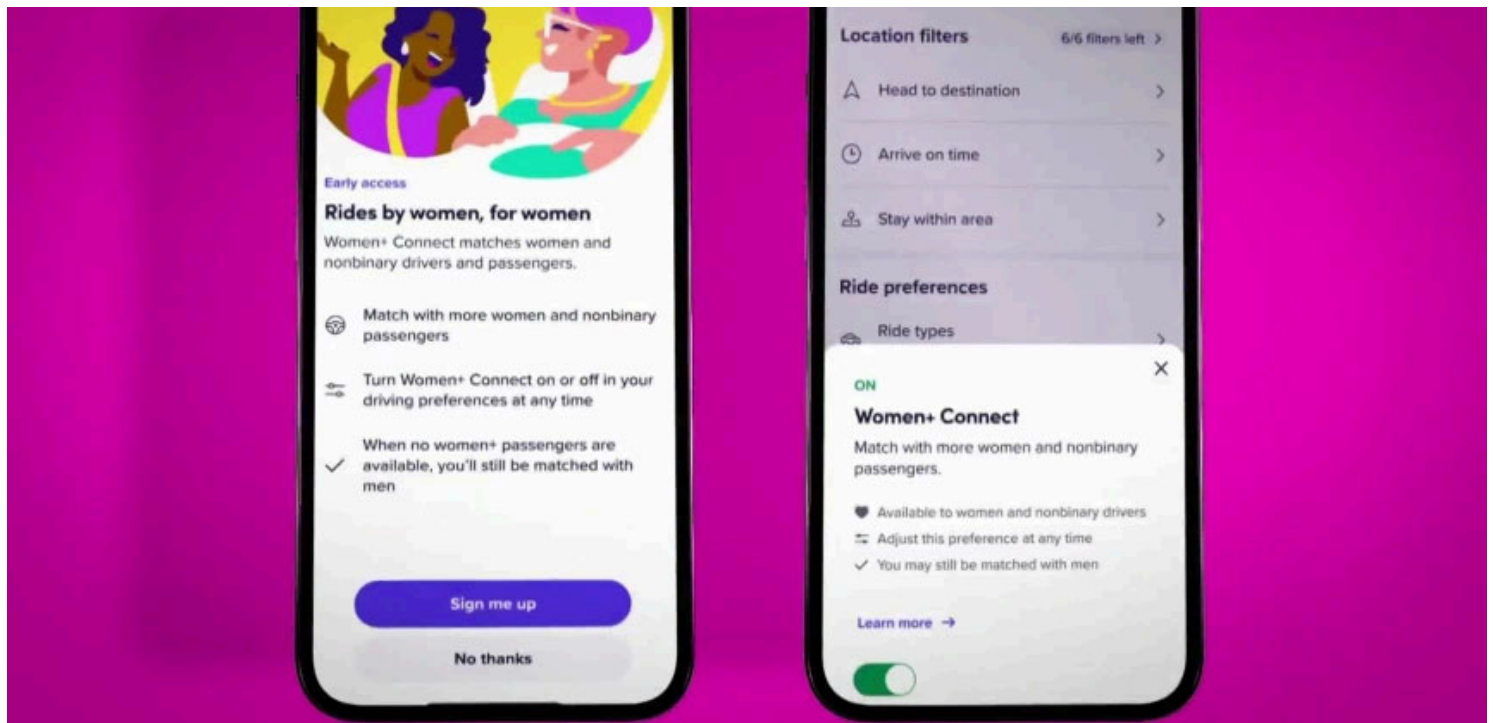
Despite those restrictions, many teens have routinely used Uber and Lyft, including to go to school in the morning, according to [multiple news reports](#). When an NBC News reporter recently signed up for accounts with both services, neither asked for a date of birth or proof of age or identity. The apps require agreeing to the terms of service, which include the 18-and-over requirement.

In at least one documented case of an unaccompanied minor, a ride-hailing driver intervened, leading to an arrest. In 2019, an Uber driver in Alabama [became concerned](#) about a passenger after having dropped her off and called police, according to state and federal authorities. The passenger had said she was 18 but turned out to be a 15-year-old girl, federal prosecutors said. The man who arranged for the Uber [pleaded guilty](#) to interstate travel for sexual contact with a minor.

Scrutiny has been increasing. Last year, a bipartisan group of U.S. senators [said they were investigating](#) how Lyft and Uber ensure their apps aren't used for human trafficking. The senators cited a [2018 survey](#) by Polaris, which runs the National Human Trafficking Hotline, that found that 9% of victims or traffickers used ride-hailing services such as Uber or Lyft during their exploitation, that traffickers used their own vehicles in 81% of cases and that taxis were used at some point in 47% of cases. (Survey respondents could select multiple options.)

Lyft unveils 'Women+ Connect' to address safety issues

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In September, a Texas law [took effect](#) that requires ride-hailing companies to provide drivers with annual training in how to spot human trafficking. The training must include a video that's at least 15 minutes long, [the law says](#).

Some people accused of being sex offenders are alleged to have hired ride-hailing drivers to transport teenagers long distances. Federal prosecutors said a New Jersey man [used the Uber app](#) in 2022 to find a driver willing to pick up a 15-year-old girl from Indiana and take her 700 miles to New Jersey. The man, Arnold Castillo, then paid the driver \$1,000 in cash, prosecutors said. Last year, Castillo pleaded guilty to transporting a minor for criminal sexual activity and to coercion of a minor, and a judge [sentenced him](#) to 15 years in prison.

In 2019, a Lyft driver picked up a 13-year-old girl from Kansas near midnight and drove her alone more than 150 miles to the Nebraska home of a man she had met online, according to state prosecutors and a lawsuit filed by the girl's family.

The lawsuit alleges that Lyft “was aware of unaccompanied minors using its Lyft app to obtain rides and knowingly allowed it to occur, consciously choosing not to take the steps necessary to prevent unaccompanied minors from using its Lyft app, in order to preserve and increase its revenues.”

Chad Lucas, who represents the girl's family along with DiPasquale, said the company should adequately train drivers to verify the ages of riders at pickup.

“Lyft is putting the drivers in a bad position – in a no-win position – and then when something bad like this happens, they say: ‘It’s all the driver’s fault. Sorry,’” said Lucas, an attorney at the firm Kuhlman & Lucas.

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“She’s a kid when this happens – she’s 13 years old – and going through that sort of trauma at that age is something that you hope your kid never has to deal with,” he said.

The Nebraska man, Nicholas Avery, pleaded no contest in 2020 and was [sentenced to 60 years](#) in prison. The family’s lawsuit against Lyft is pending.

Lyft and Uber have faced questions since their early days about how they enforce their restrictions on unaccompanied minors. In 2016, they [sent written plans](#) to California regulators, saying their enforcement largely consisted of disclosing their terms of service and publishing information on websites.

Uber used to ban unaccompanied minors as Lyft does, but last year, it began offering a ride service aimed at teenagers called “Uber for teens,” expanding into a [growing market of apps](#) that offer transportation for teens. It’s available in parts of 50 states with the consent of legal guardians, according to an [Uber website](#) for the program. Guardian must have accounts already, and they are notified when teens request rides, the website says. Teens also must complete a safety course before they request their first unaccompanied rides. All but one of the alleged incidents reviewed by NBC News occurred before the debut of “Uber for teens.”

An Uber representative said the company had no information to share about how many people have signed up for teen accounts.

The service isn’t available to Uber’s U.K. customers, who must be at least 18 years old to ride unaccompanied. “An under 18 taking a trip alone is a safety concern,” an [Uber website](#) says.

Robotaxis – autonomous vehicles that don’t have human drivers present – could complicate the situation further. Waymo, which [operates robotaxi services](#) in California and Arizona, says it prohibits unaccompanied minors and may use cameras to enforce the policy if necessary.

“We respect and protect the privacy of our riders, but we do have safeguards including interior cameras that allow us to identify violations of our terms of service or for fraudulent activity,” Waymo said in a statement. “If potential violations of our policies are detected, we will confirm and suspend the account.”

Since 2018, the FBI has charged at least three people in sting operations in which the defendants were alleged to have used Uber or Lyft to try to transport people they thought were teenagers or children. In each of the cases – in [Pittsburgh](#); [Louisville, Kentucky](#); and [Los Angeles](#) – the defendants were communicating online with undercover agents, authorities said.

In at least one case, Lyft has pushed back against the suggestion that its driver could have identified a 14-year-old girl as a minor. In 2022, a man used Lyft to call a ride for the girl from a street corner in Connecticut to his home 150 miles away in New York City, where, she says, he sexually assaulted her, according to a [lawsuit filed by her mother](#). At the pickup, the girl wore pajama pants and a hoodie and carried a book bag, it says.

Lyft lawyers argued that the suit should be dismissed in part because it included “no facts demonstrating that the driver knew or should have known that Jane Doe was a minor.” The lawyers added: “As both minors and adults can wear pajama pants, hoodies and bookbags, this allegation is hardly sufficient to establish that the driver knew or should have known that Jane Doe was a minor.”

In February, a judge [denied Lyft’s motion](#) to dismiss and allowed the lawsuit to proceed.

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