



Transportation Network Companies & Minors in Washington State

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the past decade, the use of transportation network companies (TNCs) like Uber and Lyft have become mainstream. As people of all ages come to rely on them as a vital form of transportation, legislators face increased responsibility. This brief explores the impact of TNC usage on minors and proposes three key solutions: fingerprint-based authentication, in-app safety features, and annual safety reporting requirements.

II. OVERVIEW

Since their inception, TNC ridership has been steadily increasing. In 2024, Lyft reached 23.7 million active riders and Uber serviced 58.6 million riders (1,8). Across the nation, their use is heavily seen in metro areas. TNCs are often used as an alternative to public transportation or driving one's own car. Consequently, their biggest target markets end up lying in those who don't have access to their own reliable transportation - people with low incomes and teenagers. Recognizing the potential of this untapped market, in May of 2023 Uber launched a new platform called "Uber Teen" (12). This introduced accounts that allowed teenagers aged 13-17 to take Ubers on their own, as unaccompanied minors. The service was often

incentivized and marketed directly to teenagers by using different promotions and social media campaigns. Uber has seen initial success with this initiative, with more and more teens using the rideshare app to get to sports practice or engage in social activities.

A. Relevance

TNCs currently face a patched-up framework of regulations from the federal, state, and company levels. This translates into mixed signals and aren't fully effective at ensuring rider safety. Reports released by TNCs like Uber and Lyft reveal that there are thousands of incidents of sexual assault reported while using rideshare platforms (7, 9). Minors especially face increased risk in sexual assault situations. They are often unequipped with how to properly deal with them and end up facing larger ramifications. With rising TNC usage by unaccompanied minors, it's important that there are clearer, more consistent standards that are set in place.

Presently, there is also a lack of accountability and transparency regarding TNC safety. Major companies like Uber and Lyft do publish intermittent reports, but these often suffer from cherry-picked data and aren't always created at regular intervals. There is no consistent, publicly available data regarding overall accidents, injuries,

and/or incidents involving drivers and riders who use TNCs. Additionally, there are currently no systems in place for recourse or next steps after riders face these types of incidents. Current legislation is not able to clearly stipulate this in a consistent manner. When teenagers are using these services, there needs to be increased regulation in order to ensure their safety.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Currently, there is a huge lack of standardization in both the industry and across the country regarding minors and TNCs. Companies like Uber are fully embracing the market with services like Uber Teen while competitors like Lyft have strict age limits that prohibit anyone under the age of 18 from riding alone. While no state has outlawed unaccompanied minors from using TNCs, there are varying degrees of precautions that are currently put into place.

In Washington State, legislation has been passed regarding basic background checks for all TNC drivers, regardless of rider age. RCW 46.72B.090 currently stipulates that drivers undergo criminal background checks through third-parties, provide a driving history report, and be clear of any sex offences or criminal convictions (10). Washington state lawmakers oppose stricter standards because they worry that it could silence local innovation and adaptability, cause an increase in consumer prices, create an inefficient framework for drivers and platforms, or lead to a loss in potential economic growth.

Consequently, the rules in Washington are

relatively lax compared to other states in the country. In California, drivers must complete extra fingerprint-based background checks through the state, increased tracking, insurance, and training when transporting minors, and be cross-checked with the child abuse/neglect registry (5). When California imposed its minor-specific regulations, it caused Uber Teen to pause services in the state due to an inability to comply with their standards. However, this says more about industry standards and Uber's unwillingness to prioritize minors than it does about the impossibility of California's regulations. In fact, competitors like HopSkipDrive have been able to comply with the regulations and continue service in California to minors (5). When policy changes are made, TNCs continue to cite their bottom line as a reason for not making changes that would protect consumers.

When industry leaders like Uber show their lack of motive to protect the safety of minors themselves, it's important for legislators to step in. They must look past economic profit and update state standards to put their constituents first.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

Inherently, the primary stakeholders in this issue are the teenagers that utilize TNCs. Every time a teenager gets into a rideshare, they put their implicit trust into the company that they are going to be safe. Unfortunately, this age group is often also the last to realize when things are going awry and proper precautions aren't in place. When TNCs aren't safe, it takes away an important form of transportation from teenagers -

a demographic that doesn't have many reliable alternatives. As a result, they face an increased need for dependency and may have to limit the activities and jobs they participate in. These youth deserve to have a stake in this policy, ensuring that measures are taken so that they feel safe and protected.

The TNCs themselves are also valuable stakeholders to consider in this policy problem. They will be the ones tasked with the day-to-day implementation of potential policies and safety precautions. They bring a wealth of industry expertise to the table that's important to acknowledge when determining the feasibility of different proposals. However, it is important to be cognizant of any implicit biases that they may have when it comes to the policy problem. TNCs chasing the profit motive, looking to cut corners and maximize operations, are where safety standards for minors may be overlooked.

B. Risks of Indifference

The main risk of indifference to TNC regulations is the lives of the impacted minors when put in unsafe or harmful situations. Ensuring the safety of our youth should be the utmost priority for both stakeholders and legislators. Though they may seem few and far between, there are real, documented cases of sexual assault and violence occurring during the use of TNCs. Allowing this behavior to go unchecked can lead to disastrous consequences – especially for our youth. Continued legislative inaction signifies societal acceptance of the violence that occurs when using TNCs. The current lack of standardization for TNC regulations between companies and states

makes it hard to provide transparency and hold them accountable. Continuing to take no action to mitigate that will only worsen the issue. Currently, TNCs are a vital form of transportation in Washington. In order to maximize the economic growth, independence, and potential they provide, steps need to be taken to ensure everyone – especially minors – feel safe during their usage.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Regardless of one's political leanings, ensuring the safety of our youth is paramount. Utilizing nonpartisan intervention to address this issue in regard to TNCs will come with multiple benefits.

When an unaccompanied minor uses a TNC, they are the only person in the vehicle with the driver. Thus, it is increasingly difficult for the minor to defend themselves if the driver wishes to do them harm. Humans have a tendency to repeat their behavior. If one has a criminal record or a history of violent and erratic behavior, the chances are high that they will conduct themselves in a similar manner while working at a TNC. Requiring extensive background checks and continuously verifying driver identity will help mitigate the risks of that repeated behavior. This vetting process will reduce the risk that unaccompanied minors face during TNC usage, inherently increasing their safety and aligning with Washington state's commitment to child welfare.

With this increased safety comes increased public trust in TNC services. Subsequently, more parents will view them as a viable form of

transportation for their kids. With the proper regulations, TNC services will become as close to a controlled environment as possible. More minors will end up using TNCs, leading to overall economic growth and independence.

V. TRIED POLICY

In Olympia, recent legislative pushes regarding TNCs have come with HB 1332, passed in 2025 (4). HB 1332 focused on compensation, platform, and vehicle standards for TNC drivers. The last time safety considerations for TNC users in Washington state was considered was in 2022, with the passing of HB 2076 (5). In addition to compensation changes, HB 2076 detailed statewide regulatory requirements that TNCs had to follow. These include a zero tolerance drug and alcohol policy, local and national background checks for drivers, prohibiting drivers with moving violations and certain criminal convictions, and more. Lawmakers were largely in favor of these policies, with most of the bill's backlash coming from its stance on paid family and medical leave for drivers.

Recently, the state of California has implemented several new guidelines regarding the transport of unaccompanied minors by TNCs. On December, 2024, the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) adopted D.24-12-004 (5). This required all TNC drivers who transported minors to pass fingerprint-based background check requirements. Additionally, their parent companies were required to file an "Advice Letter", describing safety measures that would be taken during the transportation of unaccompanied minors. These guidelines also

include regulatory requirements around insurance and annual reports to the CPUC. This policy faced mixed opinions from TNCs in the region. Industry giant Uber stated that they were unable to comply and withdrew all Uber Teen services from the state (2). However, HopSkipDrive proved that it was possible and was able to meet all of the CPUC's regulations. They are currently the only TNC licensed to transport unaccompanied minors in the state of California.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Fingerprint Authentication

Washington state currently requires name-based criminal background checks for TNC drivers. However, since these rely on a person's demographic data – such as name, date of birth, gender, address, etc. – they are prone to error. Often, a single piece of information (such as date of birth) isn't enough to properly identify someone and needs to be combined with other data to make it personally identifiable information (PII) (3). Additionally, it is not uncommon for multiple individuals to share the same demographic data. This can lead to redundancies and identification errors when conducting the background checks.

Alternatively, fingerprint-based background checks rely on biometric information. Since these are physical traits that are unique and cannot be changed, they are less likely to fall victim to misidentification or redundancies. Typically, they query both state criminal databases and the FBI's Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS), providing access that isn't

available with a simple name-based background check (6). The technology behind fingerprint-based background checks has improved in recent years, making the process seamless and accurate.

Additionally, TNCs can take fingerprint authentication a step further. Multiple mobile apps already use two-factor authentication to protect sensitive information like bank records or health queries. TNC apps can require a fingerprint scan or face-id to be used before a driver signs into their account. This is meant to mitigate the risk of people using other driver's accounts in order to accept rides. Ensuring that the person behind the screen is actually who they say they are is vital for riders' safety.

In-App Safety Features

Parents are often worried about letting their children use TNCs alone – and for good reason. Mandating the introduction of the following in-app safety features will help give everyone peace of mind.

- 1) **Linking Accounts:** Any teenager (ages 13-17) wishing to use a TNC as an unaccompanied minor must have their own account. This account must be linked to a parent/guardian's account so that they can monitor their activity. After the accounts are linked, parents have the ability to opt-out of any of the other safety features as they see fit.
- 2) **Parental Consent:** Any time the teenager wants to use a TNC, the parent must approve the ride from their own account.

Before approval, they will be able to see the length of the ride, path, and driver profile.

- 3) **Real-Time Monitoring:** From the parent account, they will be able to see where the TNC vehicle is and receive notifications if it goes off of the preapproved path. They will also receive access to live audio capabilities during the ride. All of this data will be stored for the duration of the ride and shortly after before being deleted in order to protect rider privacy.
- 4) **Driver Reports:** This feature would be applicable to all riders, not just minors. Riders will have the capability to file a report if they felt unsafe during TNC usage. The company will be responsible for investigating repeated behaviors and reports against drivers.

It is important to note that TNCs are not limited to just these safety features. Rather, these are the bare minimum and they will have the freedom to do more if they wish.

Annual Reports

In order to promote transparency and accountability, TNCs are required to publish annual reports that are available to the public. These will detail different statistics and trends including but not limited to driver reports, overall usage, unaccompanied minor usage, and demographic information. These reports may be reviewed and used to develop further regulations or policy changes in the future.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

This brief explored some of the potentially negative consequences of TNC usage by unaccompanied minors in Washington State. However, the solution to this problem isn't to completely prohibit unaccompanied minors from using TNCs. Rather, policymakers need to mandate and incentivize TNCs to adhere to stricter regulations that put the safety of our youth first. Ultimately, keeping our children safe isn't about sheltering them. It's about doing everything in our power to give them a controlled environment where they can grow their independence and learn. This brief proposes the usage of fingerprint authentication, in-app safety features, and annual reports in order to develop that controlled environment. It is vital that Washington state adopts these regulations and leads the push to change industry standards.

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