

Stockton students rethink Uber, Lyft safety after murder of USC senior

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GALLOWAY TOWNSHIP — Cheyenne Baiocco, a Stockton University sophomore, always shares the details of her Uber or Lyft ride with her mom or boyfriend before getting in the car.

And she avoids the “pool” option after an uncomfortable experience with a fellow passenger.

“There’s more of an opportunity for something to go wrong,” said the 20-year-old from Egg Harbor Township.

The topic of ride-share safety was revived earlier this month when Samantha Josephson, a missing University of South Carolina student from Robbinsville, Mercer County, was murdered allegedly by a driver she thought worked for Uber.

She had been by herself, and investigators found the car’s child-safety locks had been activated, preventing her escape.

The killing has colleges, riders and safety experts on edge, with precautions and safety tips being shared to prevent another tragedy. Some elements of ride-share services add another dimension of risk not present with taxi cabs, some experts say, including the limited efficacy of current background checks, and the use of unmarked cars.

But the murder in South Carolina has been widely discussed enough, that, if change isn’t coming to the technology, it certainly is to users’ habits.

Uber said in a news release they are sharing their “Check Your Ride” campaign through ads in college newspapers, telling riders to double-check all of the details on the app once the car pulls to the curb.

Diane D’Amico, a spokesperson for Stockton, said the school will be distributing precautionary tips with students at their “Cones with Cops” event Monday, including asking the driver who they are there to pick up.

One of the most universal tips? Avoid using the services alone.

“I’ve never really taken one alone,” said Rae Hemple, 22, of Galloway Township, who’s graduating from Stockton in May. “I always trust that within groups that I’m fine. Beyond that, I don’t take many precautions.”

That’s preferable, said, Steve Kardian, a former detective who now works as a security expert for national media outlets and specializes in women’s safety.

“In a perfect world, it would be great if we all did the ride share with somebody else,” Kardian said. “When you get into a car with a stranger — and that’s basically what you’re doing, both in a taxi and both in an Uber or Lyft — you’re giving them isolation and control.”

With that in mind, he said, there are ways to protect yourself if you need to hail a ride by yourself from Uber or Lyft.

Wait on the sidewalk with people, Kardian said. Compare the license plate on the car to the one on the app. If it matches, open the rear passenger-side door to ask who they're picking up. Check to see the child safety locks aren't engaged. Share the details of the ride with a friend through the app, he said, and make a call to those at your destination so the driver knows people will be expecting you. Take a picture of the driver, if all else fails, for documentation.

"Put him on notice that somebody else knows that he's with you," he said.

The administrator of United Drivers South Jersey, Bob Pellegrino, 67, of Sicklerville, Camden County, has driven for Uber and Lyft in Atlantic City for three years.

A common mistake riders make is asking the driver if their name is the one on the app, instead of asking what their name is, he said.

"I've been trying to make people feel more comfortable," Pellegrino said, "so when they approach the car now, I'm actually saying, 'Are you Tammy?'"

Legislation may have a hand in curbing issues, too. Jersey City, at the beginning of April, became the first city in to require all ride share cars to show illuminated signage.

But the news has Baiocco second-guessing her use of ride-share services altogether.

"That's scary that we have to think about (that), essentially, as women in college," she said. "Since then, I've tried not to use it as much. It just ... it freaks me out, honestly."