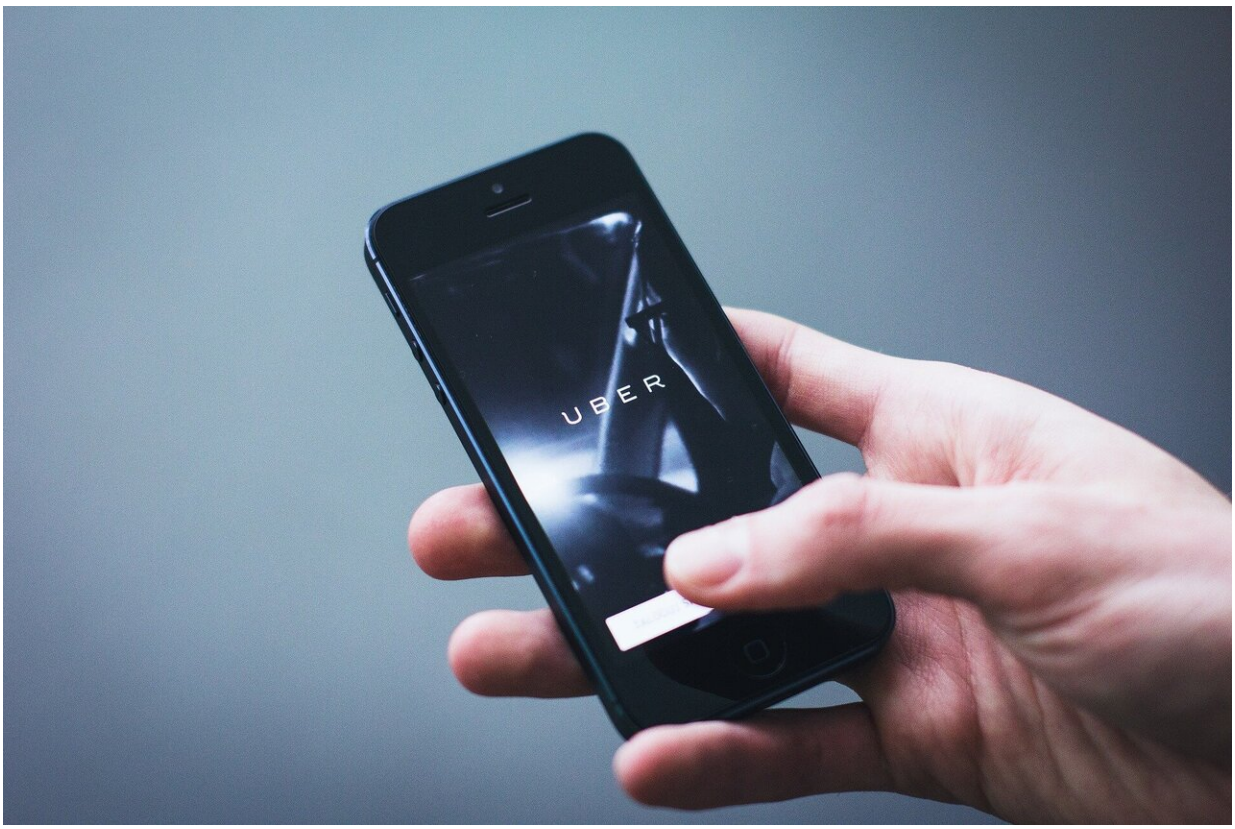
Surprising NYC ridesharing study findings have implications for policymakers

July 8 2019



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Researchers have limited access to information about how people use popular ridesharing services like Uber and Lyft. But recent analysis of aggregate data about ridesharing trips in New York City, conducted by

researchers at UConn and published last month in *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board*, sheds new light on use of the service by people in the city's outer borough neighborhoods.

Analyzing available data from New York City's Taxi and Limousine Commission, a local regulator that requires some limited reporting from ridesharing companies about the trips they provide within the city, the researchers found that for-hire trips in New York's five boroughs increased by 46 percent—82 million rides annually—from 2014 to 2017.

What surprised the researchers, however, was that, even within the limits of available data, the surge in rideshare trips that originated outside of Manhattan was apparent and significant. Rideshare trips starting in the outer boroughs have exploded, increasing to 56 percent of the market in neighborhoods that are typically home to minority and low-income households that do not own vehicles of their own.

"These are really important things that are happening, and they're changing the city," said Carol Atkinson-Palombo, a professor in UConn's Department of Geography, co-director of the Transportation Technology & Society Research Group and the lead author of the study. "We really can't afford to not have more transparency about what's going on, because policymakers can't respond if they don't have a sense of what's happening, and we can't rely on the companies to optimize the public good."

These neighborhoods have typically been underserved by public transit as well as traditional taxi services, Atkinson-Palombo said, and while companies like Uber and Lyft may well be serving a mobility need, and doing so in a way that is convenient to users, the fact that they are companies primarily driven by profit raises significant equity concerns.

"From one side, the service is filling a gap, and that's a really positive thing," said Atkinson-Palombo. "But I think we have some concerns that they are for-profit entities and, at some point, especially now that they've gone public, they might need to charge market rates."

Riders also have no control over weather or traffic conditions that can enable the companies to enact surge pricing, she said, which raises a real vulnerability for users who come to rely on the service.

"Mobility is so important," she said, "and you can't be held to ransom....they're not accountable to anybody and, at the end of the day, their remit is not to provide public transit. Their remit is to make profit."

The increase in ridership also has implications for cities trying to address greenhouse gas emission targets and enact climate action plans, Atkinson-Palombo said.

"All of these trips that are being take are probably something called 'induced travel,' so it's like extra on top," she said, "and there are going to be greenhouse gas emission implications from that. Very few of the cars are electric vehicles."

Increased usage of single-ride vehicles, and the practice known as "deadheading—where most Uber and Lyft drivers spend a significant portion of time operating without a passenger as they travel from drop-off to pick-up points—all contribute to increased roadway congestion and vehicle tailpipe emissions.

"This has potentially profound impact on climate change and greenhouse gas emission policies," Atkinson-Palombo said. "Especially if you're thinking about the amount of emissions that would be incurred if everybody was moving by Uber and Lyft, because they're lower occupancy."

While Atkinson-Palombo said the study was preliminary work, she said it represented "a really good starting point for asking questions" about the impact of increased ridesharing usage, particularly in areas that are not as densely populated as Manhattan. She said that regulators in New York and in other cities, including Chicago, are starting to tighten up reporting requirements for ridesharing companies because they understand the need for better data and transparency in the industry.

The researchers intend to more closely examine the advertising and marketing being used by ridesharing companies to determine if the surge in outer borough usage can be attributed to business strategies targeting so-called "transit deserts."

"Uber and Lyft, they don't break even," Atkinson-Palombo said. "They're subsidized trips, and so they might be really massively marketing their services at a really heavy discount, but we don't know because we can't see any of the pricing data. But we'll be able to find out from people."

She said her research group is also working to partner with an advocacy organization, the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, to conduct interviews and focus groups in outer borough neighborhoods -starting in the Bronx and then moving to Queens—to learn directly from ridesharing drivers and users why and under what circumstances riders choose to use the services and how policymakers might best meet their mobility needs.

"These patterns have revealed that there's demand in this particular corridor," Atkinson-Palombo said. "Now, can we either do something that's kind of a partnership with transit, or can transit come in and see whether they want to fill that gap."

More information: Carol Atkinson-Palombo et al, Understanding the

Surprising and Oversized Use of Ridesourcing Services in Poor Neighborhoods in New York City, *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board* (2019). DOI: 10.1177/0361198119835809

Provided by University of Connecticut

Citation: Surprising NYC ridesharing study findings have implications for policymakers (2019, July 8) retrieved 2 May 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2019-07-nyc-ridesharing-implications-policymakers.html

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