

Sexual predators pose as Uber and Lyft drivers and attack women leaving bars and clubs, police say

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Winton | By RICHARD WINTON

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A Lyft logo is installed on a driver's car in Pittsburgh. (Gene J. Puskar / Associated Press)

In January of last year, a woman climbed into what she thought was an Uber outside a Hollywood nightclub on a bustling stretch of Cahuenga Boulevard.

But instead of driving her home, authorities allege the man behind the wheel took her to a secluded area and repeatedly sexually assaulted her.

Los Angeles County prosecutors on Tuesday charged Nicolas Morales, 44, with raping seven women while posing as a ride-hailing service driver. Authorities allege he struck across the region, including Alhambra, Beverly Hills and West Hollywood, between October 2016 and January 2018.

Authorities said they are dealing with a string of sexual assault cases in which attackers pretend to be drivers to lure women into their vehicles. When customers call for an Uber or Lyft, they might not pay attention to the type of vehicle the service is sending and end up jumping into the first car that pulls over for them, they said.

"These predators drive in areas where there are nightclubs and they prey on intoxicated victims or people they perceived to be intoxicated." Los Angeles police Homicide Capt. Bill Hayes said. "Did they call an Uber? the predator will ask. And when the victim jumps into the vehicle, they don't realize that is not the one they called."

This has become an issue in cities across the nation. In the L.A. area, some predators have preyed on areas with nightclubs and bars.

Beverly Hills police arrested Carlos Pichinte, 40, of Los Angeles for allegedly posing as a driver for a ride-hailing company. Authorities accuse him of posing as an Uber driver. He picked up a woman in West Hollywood and drove her to Beverly Hills,

where he raped her, police said. Pichinte now faces charges of kidnapping and rape.

Sexual predators "are exploiting a new mode of travel," said Gail Abarbanel, founder and director of the Santa Monica Rape Treatment Center at Santa Monica-UCLA Medical Center. Ridesharing Ride-hailing companies make this easier, she said, because victims are expecting a regular car, not a yellow taxi or black livery car.

She urged ride-hailing customers to check the vehicle license plate against their app and the driver's identity before getting in the car.

Alhambra police investigators said it is possible that other victims will come forward in connection with Morales now that he has been identified as a suspect.

Morales was taken into custody after a multi-agency investigation that included police in Alhambra, Los Angeles and Burbank as well as the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. Authorities allege he lured women into his vehicle and then attacked them, armed with a knife. Neither Morales nor his attorney could be reached for comment. Authorities said they linked the cases in part through DNA evidence.

Morales is charged with 27 felony counts related to the attacks, which stretch back to at least October 2016.

He faces nine counts of forcible oral copulation, six counts of rape, five counts of sodomy by use of force and four counts of sexual penetration by foreign object. He also faces one count each of assault with intent to commit a felony, attempted sodomy by use of force and attempted kidnapping to commit another crime.

If convicted on all charges, Morales could face as many as 300 years in prison.

Order An UBER and Get Raped In the Butt. Man posing as ridesharing driver raped at least 7 women, police allege



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This LAPD sketch was part of an investigation that resulted in Friday's arrest of a Santa Clarita man who police allege posed as a rideshare driver and raped seven women.

A Santa Clarita man who pretended to be a rideshare driver has been charged with raping seven women in a span of 15 months,

and authorities suspect he may have attacked others, authorities said Tuesday.

Nicolas Morales, 44, was arrested Friday by Alhambra police. He is accused of raping and sexually assaulting seven women in areas throughout Los Angeles County, including Alhambra, Beverly Hills and West Hollywood, between October 2016 and January 2018, prosecutors revealed Tuesday.

Morales is charged with 27 felony counts related to the attacks. Officials say he lured women into his vehicle and then attacked them while using a knife.

In May 2017, the LAPD appealed to the public for help in identifying a fake rideshare driver who sexually assaulted a woman after he picked her up outside a Hollywood club on Jan. 7, 2017. That attack is among the crimes Morales has been charged with.

LAPD detectives at the time said the woman got into the man's car because she believed it was the Uber car she ordered. The driver took the woman to a secluded location and sexually assaulted her. Detectives seeking leads released a police sketch created with the victim's help and said the suspect drove a four-door sedan.

Morales faces nine counts of forcible oral copulation, six counts of rape, five counts of sodomy by use of force and four counts of sexual penetration by foreign object. He also faces one count each of assault with intent to commit a felony, attempted sodomy by use of force and attempted kidnapping to commit another crime.

If convicted on all charges, Morales could face up to 300 years in prison. He is scheduled to appear in an Alhambra courtroom Tuesday, where prosecutors are asking that he be held on \$10.3-million bail.

Morales was taken into custody following a multi-agency investigation by the Alhambra and Los Angeles police departments and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

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