

As Easy As Hailing A Taxi

Black men trying to get a taxi at the Los Angeles International Airport, known to many as LAX, may have a one-in-five chance of not getting one. At least that's what two black Los Angeles police officers discovered during a recent undercover operation.

Because of these findings, the Los Angeles City Council may decide to levy stiffer penalties on taxi drivers accused of racially discriminating against airport passengers. A vote may happen as early as this week.

"The last thing we want is for our city to have any part in discrimination," said Los Angeles City Councilman Bob Blumenfield.

Blumenfield, who represents the part of Los Angeles known as the San Fernando Valley, not only proposed the stiffer penalties but wants to see the undercover operation continue for another year. One of the penalties being considered is banning guilty drivers from working the airport for a year. Taxi drivers discriminating against black men – described by some as "hailing while black" – is neither unique to Los Angeles nor a new phenomenon. In 1999, actor Danny Glover (the "Lethal Weapon" movies, "Beloved", "The Color Purple") alleged that five taxis in New York failed to stop for him, his daughter and her college roommate. Glover also filed a complaint with the city's Taxi and Limousine Commission, accusing another taxi driver with racial discrimination because the driver didn't allow Glover to ride in the front.

Ten years after Glover's allegations, ABC's Good Morning America show conducted its own "hailing while black" investigation. The show recruited attorney Christopher Darden, famous for his work as a prosecutor in the O.J. Simpson murder trial, to hail cabs in New York. Darden had no problem getting a taxi during the day. At night, it was another story.

Two cabs passed Darden by, according to Good Morning America. A third, driven by a black man, stopped and picked him up.

"I guess it's true what they say, 'After dark, it's hard to catch a cab to Harlem,'" Darden said on the show.

GMA continued its experiment by having two other men – one white, one black – try to hail a taxi at the same time. The results were similar to Darden's efforts: Both were successful during the day, but at night the black man was less likely to get a cab to stop for him.

"Unfortunately, the problem of taxicab drivers prejudging certain fares still exists, though to a lesser extent than in years past," read a statement from the New York City Taxi Commission in response to the GMA report.

The commission also indicated that training had been instituted for New York cab drivers in an effort to reduce driver discrimination.

The undercover police operation in Los Angeles was triggered by the experience of ESPN's Doug Glanville. The baseball analyst, who is black, wrote an essay for *The Atlantic* last year in which he described being discriminated against by a taxi driver at LAX. According to Glanville, a white colleague with whom he was traveling had successfully hailed a cab but when the driver realized that Glanville was also a passenger, the driver rejected both men as fares.

"Go across the street!" Glanville recalled the driver shouting at them. "You take the bus! It is \$19!"

After a fruitless exchange, Glanville and his colleague walked away, only to

see the same driver accept another – white – passenger. Eventually, the two ESPN employees found a taxi who would accept them as fares. Before they left, Glanville said a black woman who worked at LAX approached them. “You need to file a complaint,” Glanville said she told them. “This is the third time this has happened to a black man on my shift tonight.” An interesting twist: Glanville noted in his essay that white drivers weren’t the ones who “most blatantly refused” to accept him as a passenger. It was non-white drivers.