

Public concern about smartphone location tracking to combat COVID-19

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Public concern over the use of smartphone location tracking (SLT) could jeopardize governments' efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 using surveillance technologies.

University of St Andrews Professor Kirstie Ball, one of the lead authors of major research which found that fewer than 60% of European citizens would use the technology, said that governments have an ethical mountain to climb if 80% of the public are to participate in SLT to counter the coronavirus.

Part of a Europe-wide study involving nine European countries, the research found that only 58% of European citizens were in favor of SLT. A further 25% were opposed to it and 17% undecided; 56% of citizens wanted to know more about how to protect their privacy in the face of SLT and 18% would actively campaign against its use.

The research, involving 1800 people in nine countries in a series of [citizen](#) summits, revealed that these views were influenced by perceptions of government trustworthiness. A government was seen as trustworthy not only when it is operationally competent in the short term, but when it embodies two features over time: when it is benevolent, demonstrating concern for collective community interests; and when it shows moral integrity by being accountable, transparent and not abusing its power.

Professor Ball, co-director and founder of the Centre for Research into Information, Surveillance and Privacy (CRISP), said: "There are a number of implications for SLT surveillance to counter the pandemic. Governments need to be very clear about whose interests are being prioritized in an SLT program.

"Public health and the NHS are one set of interests, tech start-ups and social media platforms are quite another. Any doubts here will have a disastrous effect on uptake.

"Assurances that 'it works' and that '[government](#) knows what it's doing' may be convincing for those already in favor of surveillance, but this is

not true for all. The one in four of the population who are skeptics will need to hear guarantees about the moral integrity of SLT.

"The security of the incredibly [sensitive data](#) that will be collected needs to be guaranteed. Data protection principles such as clear purpose limitation are crucial so that the data are not used for unauthorised purposes. Above all, citizens need to be left feeling empowered and in control of their data.

"In order to address the range of public concerns about smartphone tracking apps, governments need to place substantial privacy and human rights assurances at the heart of their [surveillance](#) programs."

Provided by University of St Andrews

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