



CDC Tracked Millions Of Phones To Surveil COVID Lockdown Orders

Description

Why should a private company be allowed to collect information related to your cell phone and your travel? And worse, to sell that data to government entities who are bound by legal constraints from collecting such information directly? Wherever data flows, you can be sure that there is a group of unprincipled and lawless Technocrats at the other end. ? TN Editor

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) bought access to location data harvested from tens of millions of phones in the United States to perform analysis of compliance with curfews, track patterns of people visiting K-12 schools, and specifically monitor the effectiveness of policy in the Navajo Nation, according to CDC documents obtained by Motherboard. The documents also show that although the CDC used COVID-19 as a reason to buy access to the data more quickly, it intended to use it for more-general CDC purposes.

Location data is information on a device's location sourced from the phone, which can then show where a person lives, works, and where they went. The sort of data the CDC bought was aggregated—meaning it was designed to follow trends that emerge from the movements of groups of people—but researchers have repeatedly raised concerns with how location data can be deanonymized and used to track specific people.

The documents reveal the expansive plan the CDC had last year to use location data from a highly controversial data broker. SafeGraph, the company the CDC paid \$420,000 for access to one year of data, includes Peter Thiel and the former head of Saudi intelligence among its investors. Google [banned the company from the Play Store](#) in June.

The CDC used the data for monitoring curfews, with the documents saying that SafeGraph's data "has been critical for ongoing response efforts, such as hourly monitoring of activity in curfew zones or detailed counts of visits to participating pharmacies for vaccine monitoring." The documents date from 2021.

Zach Edwards, a cybersecurity researcher who closely follows the data marketplace, told Motherboard in an online chat after reviewing the documents: "The CDC seems to have purposefully created an

open-ended list of use cases, which included monitoring curfews, neighbor-to-neighbor visits, visits to churches, schools and pharmacies, and also a variety of analysis with this data specifically focused on ‘violence.’” (The document doesn’t stop at churches; it mentions “places of worship.”)

Motherboard obtained the documents through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with the CDC.

The documents contain a long list of what the CDC describes as 21 different “potential CDC use cases for data.” They include:

- “Track patterns of those visiting K-12 schools by the school and compare to 2019; compare with epi metrics [Environmental Performance Index] if possible.”
- “Examination of the correlation of mobility patterns data and rise in COVID-19 cases [...] Movement restrictions (Border closures, inter-regional and night curfews) to show compliance.”
- “Examination of the effectiveness of public policy on [the] Navajo Nation.”

At the start of the pandemic, cellphone location data was seen as a potentially useful tool. Multiple media organizations, including the *New York Times*, used location data provided by companies in the industry to show [where people were traveling to once lockdowns started to lift](#), or highlight that [poorer communities were unable to shelter in place as much as richer ones](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic as a whole has been a flashpoint in a broader culture war, with conservatives and anti-vaccine groups protesting government mask and vaccine mandates. They’ve also expressed a specific paranoia that vaccine passports would be used as a tracking or surveillance tool, framing vaccine refusal as a civil liberties issue. Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s Children’s Health Defense, one of the more influential and monied anti-vaccine groups in the U.S., has promoted fears that digital vaccine certificates could be used to surveil citizens. QAnon promoter Dustin Nemos wrote on Telegram in December that vaccine passports are “a Trojan horse being used to create a completely new type of controlled and surveilled society in which the freedom we enjoy today will be a distant memory.”

Against that inflamed backdrop, the use of cellphone location data for such a wide variety of tracking measures, even if effective for becoming better informed on the pandemic’s spread or for informing policy, is likely to be controversial. It’s also likely to give anti-vaccine groups a real-world data point on which to pin their darkest warnings.

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Posted By: Joseph Cox via VICE

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Date Created

05/06/2022