

Contact tracing apps could be a gateway to human rights abuses, new report reveals

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Contact tracing apps and other technologies introduced to stem the spread of COVID-19 could be a gateway for violence and human rights violations, reveals new report from LSE IDEAS.

According to the report from LSE IDEAS, The London School of Economics' foreign policy think tank, in the hands of countries with histories of mass human rights abuse, new technologies designed to curb the spread of COVID-19 could be used to further violent conflict and human rights abuses.

Within the report it's revealed that there are already numerous examples of countries having implemented COVID-19 tracing technologies without proper privacy protections and where these tools pose a risk for human security.

One example given is China's mandatory smartphone app which is being used to track the movements of huge numbers of people. It can also impose restrictions on movement, and appears to send information to the police. According to the report, this is particularly risky because of China's track record of using facial recognition surveillance and other technologies to target ethnic minorities.

Alongside this, the report reveals that while COVID-19 tracing apps raise issues around privacy, more worrying concerns arise around their uses to cause or intensify violence. These tools can easily be weaponized to further repression, surveillance, discrimination, and violence, and fit within a larger problem of the weaponisation of technology and lack of regulation more generally.

According to the report, despite this issue becoming a concern for many civil society organisations, there is little public accountability for the actions of tech companies large or small who contribute to violence and abuse. This is because relevant domestic and international regulatory landscapes are fragmented and ill-equipped to respond in effective and systematic ways.

Jennifer Easterday, executive director of JustPeace Labs and author of the report, says:

"Contact tracing apps have a great potential to help stem the tide of COVID-19 infections. But at the same time, we need to ensure that this technology is not used to further human rights violations or abuse. That is why governments, companies, and communities need to work together during the pandemic to reduce the risk of exacerbating conflict while maximizing the benefits of technology."

Link to report: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/updates/technology-in-conflict>

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