



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on May 4, 2022

CDC Bought Cellphone Tracking Data to Monitor Lockdown Compliance — and Much More

If you thought Covid-19 was used as an excuse to let the government monitor your every move, you may just be right. [Vice](#) reports that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) purchased tracking data from the cellphones of millions of Americans to use for analysis of Covid-19-related trends — but also for purposes extending far beyond the pandemic such as determining whether people are getting sufficient exercise or experiencing violence.

According to CDC documents that [Vice](#) obtained via a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, last year the agency entered into a contract with [controversial data broker SafeGraph](#), paying the company \$420,000 for access to one year's worth of cellphone location data "derived from at least 20 million active cellphone users per day across the United States." The contract's expiration date was March 31, 2021.

"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,'" writes [Vice](#).

One document lists 21 "potential CDC use cases for data." Some are related to Covid-19; some are not. All are concerning.

Among those related to the pandemic are ones examining "implementation and cancellation of community mitigation measures and its impact on case and fatality rates," "comparing gathering density in 2019 and 2020," trying to correlate bar and restaurant closures with "COVID-19 incidence and death rates," "project[ing] how much worse things would have been without" shelter-in-place orders, detecting and predicting "hot spots," and "track[ing] patterns of those visiting K-12 schools."

Those would be bad enough. Worse still is the fact that the CDC clearly intended to use the data for purposes unrelated to the pandemic.

"CDC also plans to use mobility data and services acquired through this acquisition to support non-COVID-19 programmatic areas and public health priorities across the agency, including but not limited to travel to parks and green spaces, physical activity and mode of travel, and population migration before, during, and after natural disasters," a document reads. "The mobility data obtained under this contract will be available for CDC agency-wide use and will support numerous CDC priorities."



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Other use cases include “research[ing] points of interest such as visits to pharmacies in a vaccine distribution plan or grocery stores,” analyzing areas with “place-based environmental exposures” such as air pollution, and investigating “exposure to certain building types, urban areas, and violence.”

“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,’” cybersecurity researcher Zach Edwards told *Vice*.

Supposedly, the data the CDC bought was aggregated; that is, it could not be used to identify specific individuals. However, in reviewing some SafeGraph data that *Vice* bought in 2020, Edwards said, “In my opinion, the SafeGraph data is way beyond any safe thresholds [around anonymity],” noting that some of the data was so location-specific that it could theoretically be used to determine particular cellphone users.

The CDC itself found SafeGraph’s data to be pleasingly specific, writing, “SafeGraph offers visitor data at the Census Block Group level that allows for extremely accurate insights related to age, gender, race, citizenship status, income, and more.”

The agency is also known to have bought location data from at least one other company.

“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,” observes *Vice*. “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.”

“Against that inflamed backdrop,” the article adds, “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.”

And why not? Today’s “conspiracy theory,” after all, frequently turns into tomorrow’s conventional wisdom.



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