

U.K. Public Attitudes to Tracking and Immunity Passports



The overwhelming majority of people in the UK support the use of co-location tracking technologies and introduction of immunity passports by the authorities to contain the spread of COVID-19, a new study shows (Lewandowsky et al. 2021) .

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A team of researchers from the University of Bristol conducted two large-scale online surveys to study the attitudes among the U.K. public towards various privacy-encroaching technologies, such as co-location tracing through mobile Wi-Fi, GPS and Bluetooth, which allows for contact monitoring, and the so-called immunity passports, which are seen as a promising tool in the broader spectrum of anti-pandemic policies.

The researchers conducted two survey waves in March and April 2020 attracting about 3,500 participants in total. The first wave included two different hypothetical scenarios of a tracking app use, with one ('mild') scenario implying voluntary download of the app (opt-in) and the other ('severe') scenario including the compulsory download of the app and thorough tracking and punishment of violations by the authorities. A third ('Bluetooth') scenario was introduced in the second survey wave allowing for people's phones exchange messages anonymously whenever they were in proximity and creating alerts if there was a contact with an infected individual. Here, the information was not shared with the authorities and the use of the app was voluntary (opt-out). Questions about immunity passports were available in the second wave only.

In both cases, the results were similar, with an overwhelming majority being in favour of using the technologies. Specifically, around 70% of respondents accepted the 'mild' scenario, and about 65%, the 'severe' one. Interestingly, with the introduction of a sunset clause (all data being deleted after two weeks) the number rose to over 75% for both scenarios, and this share increased further, to more than 85%, if an opt-out clause was provided in addition.

On the other hand, the authors note the gap between the reported results for hypothetical scenarios and the real-life uptake of the government's contact-tracing app in the U.K., where the number of people who downloaded it as of late October 2020 was still half of that needed for the app to effectively halt the spread of the virus.

In their attitudes towards immunity passports, over 60% of respondents viewed the idea positively while 20% strongly opposed it.

While acknowledging some limitations to their research, the authors outline some implications for policy:

- The majority of people support both the use of tracking technologies and the introduction of immunity passports.
- While the fundamentals of the policy ('mild' vs. 'severe') mattered relatively little, other aspects, such as availability of the sunset clause, may sway public attitudes considerably.
- People are ready to engage in the trade-off between perceived risks of the disease and potential harm from the technology to their privacy.
- People's political beliefs have almost no impact on the attitudes assessed in the study.

For policymakers involved in implementation of co-location tracking technologies, the authors therefore highlight the importance of having time limitations for personal data storage and the significance of clear communication to public of all the aspects pertinent to any technology, as this may increase the levels of acceptance. They also note that the situation is "more nuanced" when it comes to immunity passports. With one in five respondents strongly opposing the idea, deploying this initiative on a broad scale might be politically challenging, they conclude.

It is noted that the study has been carried as part of a larger, international project that involved data collection in another six countries, i.e. Australia, the U.S., Germany, Taiwan, Spain and Switzerland. More information about the project can be found [here](#).

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