

Phone location data being used to track Americans amid coronavirus outbreak

Government officials are reportedly using phone location data to track the movements of Americans during the coronavirus pandemic in an attempt to understand the spread of the virus and plan a response.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention along with state and local officials are receiving reports about the "presence and movement of people in certain areas of geographic interest" based on phone data, according to a report from The Wall Street Journal.

The phone data, which has been stripped of personally identifiable information, is largely coming from tech companies and data providers in the mobile ad industry, the Journal reported on Saturday, citing "people familiar with the matter." The goal is reportedly to create a portal for government officials that holds location data for as many as 500 cities to plan COVID-19 response.

In an emailed statement Monday, CDC spokesman Benjamin Haynes said the agency isn't currently participating in an effort to use "phone application data." He added that the CDC uses public health surveillance data available from official sources, such as the World Health Organization, to track the spread of infectious diseases, including COVID-19.



The White House didn't respond to a request for comment.

Governments in China, Singapore and South Korea have reportedly used phone location data to track coronavirus patients. While some say similar measures could be a helpful tool for health authorities in the US, others have expressed concerns. In a letter to the White House earlier this month, Sen. Ed Markey cautioned that "unless carefully circumscribed, location data can reveal deeply sensitive information about people's private lives.

"The administration must take extreme care not to implement location data-use policies that run the risk of violating Americans' privacy," the Massachusetts Democrat said.

COVID-19, the disease caused by a newly identified coronavirus, has rapidly spread across the globe. The World Health Organization on March 11 declared the outbreak a pandemic, saying it expected to see the number of cases and deaths continue climbing. As of Monday, there were more than 140,000 reported coronavirus cases in the US.

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