

Less than half of residents agreeable to phone tracking to fight virus

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Singaporeans are willing to give up some privacy in the fight against Covid-19.

But the type of technology and how it is used also matters.

A study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) released on Sunday revealed that less than half, or 49 per cent, of Singapore residents are agreeable to having their mobile phone data tracked without their consent.

When it comes to the use of closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage to monitor people's movements during the circuit breaker period, nearly six in 10, or 58 per cent, were agreeable to the idea.

Senior research fellow and IPS Social Lab head Mathew Mathews said CCTVs symbolise safety and people see it as devices to stop crimes.

"When you think about mobile phones, you think of something personal and private... the thought that this device that is so much part of your life is also tracking your movements can be unnerving," he said.

The IPS report, co-authored by IPS Social Lab researchers Dr Mathews, Dr Alex Tan and Mr Syafiq Suhaini, examined attitudes towards the use of surveillance technologies in the fight against Covid-19.

The study is based on an online survey of 1,537 Singapore residents aged 21 years and older.

The online study was conducted by marketing research company Toluna between April 22 and May 19.

It asked respondents about the extent of their agreement or disagreement with a series of measures the Government could possibly take to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

These include stricter lockdowns with roadblocks, severe penalties for infringement of policies as well as the use of surveillance technology.

Of the 1,537 people surveyed, about 87 per cent supported strict surveillance of those who need to be quarantined.

Nearly eight in 10 said it is important to report those who breach social distancing measures during the circuit breaker period to the authorities.

The study also found that certain groups, like those satisfied with the Government's handling of the pandemic, and those whose mental well-being was affected during the pandemic, were more open to the use of surveillance technologies.

The report said these respondents possibly hoped that by expanding surveillance, the pandemic can be quickly tackled.

It also noted that part of the reason for the slow adoption of the TraceTogether app, which aids in contact-tracing efforts, was its heavy toll on the users' phone battery.

COMPULSORY

About 60 per cent of 520 respondents surveyed said TraceTogether or something similar should be made compulsory for entry into public places, if it is fine-tuned or developed with better technical performance.

An update on the TraceTogether website last month reported a 20 per cent adoption rate since its launch, far below the 75 per cent required for it to be effective.

National Development Minister Lawrence Wong said at a multi-ministry task force press conference earlier this month that the use of TraceTogether and SafeEntry needs to be in place before June 1, when the circuit breaker ends.

He later told Parliament that the team in charge of TraceTogether is working with Apple and Google to make it more effective.

Ms Teo Yi-Ling, a senior fellow at the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, said the concern about functionality is practical.

"Use must not be onerous or difficult, because that's a market fail right there," she added.

Dr Tan, an IPS senior research fellow who co-authored the report, said the idea of contact tracing using digital technologies is foreign to most.

He said: "It does make people wonder how much information should be kept private in the face of this Covid-19 crisis.

"The Government can do better to explain and communicate more how the whole process of contact tracing works to assure the public - where does the technology part come in, who gets to see and handle the data, where does it go, and how it is stored and protected."