

# Apps against sexual violence have been tried before. They don't work

March 19 2021, by Kathryn Henne, Jenna Imad Harb and Renee M. Shelby

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Yesterday, New South Wales Police Commissioner Mick Fuller [suggested](#) technology should be part of the solution to growing concerns

around sexual assault. He encouraged serious discussion about using a digital app to record positive sexual consent.

In our research, we have studied a wide range of mobile applications and artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots used in attempts to counter sexual violence over the past decade. We found these apps have many limitations and unexpected consequences.

## **How apps are being used to address sexual abuse**

Apps aimed at responding to sexual harassment and assault have circulated for at least a decade. With support from government initiatives, such as the Obama administration's 2011 [Apps Against Abuse](#) challenge, and global organizations, such as UN Women, they have been implemented in corporate environments, universities and mental health services.

These apps are not limited to documenting consent. Many are designed to offer emergency assistance, information and a means for survivors of sexual violence to report and build evidence against perpetrators. Proponents often [frame](#) these technologies as empowering tools that support women through the accessible and anonymous processing of data.

In the case of the proposed consent app, critics have noted that efforts to time-stamp consent [fail to recognize](#) consent can always be withdrawn. In addition, a person may consent out of pressure, fear of repercussions or intoxication.

If a person does indicate consent at some point but circumstances change, the record could be used to discredit their claims.

This is *\*not\** how consent works—it's an ongoing process & can

be withdrawn, renegotiated etc. Not to mention the perp could force someone to sign the app, or do it for them.

Sounds like the NSW police commissioner could do with some consent education. <https://t.co/jCV7lpLcfN>

— Dr. Bianca Fileborn (@snappyalligator) [March 17, 2021](#)

## How digital apps fail to address sexual violence

The use of apps will not address many longstanding problems with common responses to sexual violence. Research indicates safety apps often [reinforce rape myths](#), such as the idea that [sexual assault](#) is most often perpetrated by strangers. In reality, the vast majority of rapes are committed by people the victims already know.

Usually marketed to women, these apps collect data from users through surveillance using persistent cookies and geolocational tracking. Even "anonymised" data can often be identifiable.

Digital tools can also enable violence. Abusive partners can use them for [cyberstalking](#), giving them constant access to victims. Apps designed to encourage survivors to report violence raise similar concerns, because they fail to address the power imbalances that lead to authorities discrediting survivors' accounts of violence.

## Apps don't change the bigger picture

The introduction of an app does not itself change the wider landscape in which sexual violence cases are handled.

The high-profile sex abuse scandal involving [Larry Nassar](#), a former

U.S. Gymnastics and Michigan State University doctor convicted of a range of sex offenses after being accused by more than 350 young women and girls, led to [reforms](#) that included the SafeSport app.

This resulted in 1,800 reports of sexual misconduct or abuse within a year of the app's introduction. However, a [lack of funding](#) meant the reports could not be properly investigated, undermining organizational promises to enforce sanctions for sexual misconduct.

Poor implementation and cost-saving measures compromise users' safety. In Canada and the United States, the hospitality industry is rolling out smart panic buttons to 1.2 million hotel and casino staff. This is a response to widespread sexual violence: a [union survey](#) found 58% of employees had been sexually harassed by a guest and 65% of casino workers experienced unwanted touching.

Employers are now required by law to provide panic buttons, but they are turning to cheap and inferior devices, raising [security concerns](#). Legislation does not prevent them using these devices to monitor the movements of their employees.

## **Who owns the data?**

Even if implemented as intended, apps raise questions about data protection. They collect vast amounts of sensitive data, which is stored on digital databases and cloud servers that are [vulnerable to cyberattacks](#).

The data may be owned by private companies who can sell it on to other organizations, allowing authorities to circumvent privacy laws. Last month, it was revealed US Immigration and Customs Enforcement [purchased access](#) to the [Reuters CLEAR database](#) containing information about 400 million people whose data they could not legally collect on their own.

In short, apps don't protect victims or their data.

## Why we need to take this 'bad idea' seriously

Fuller, the NSW police commissioner, admitted his recommendation might be a bad idea. His idea was built on the premise that the important issue to address is making sure consent is clearly communicated. It misunderstands the nature of [sexual violence](#), which is grounded in unequal power relations.

In practice, a consent app would be unlikely to protect victims. Research shows [data collected](#) through new forms of investigation often result in evidence that is used against victims' wishes.

There are other reasons why the [consent](#) app is a bad idea. It perpetuates misguided assumptions about technology's ability to "fix" societal harms. Consent, [violence](#) and accountability are not data problems. These complex issues require strong cultural and structural responses, not simply quantifiable and time-stamped data.

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