

# U.S. public skeptical of sharing digital data for COVID-19 control

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Even in the midst of a pandemic, most U.S. consumers would not look favorably upon the use of their digital data for public health purposes, according to a new *JAMA Network Open* study by LDI Fellows David Grande, Nandita Mitra, Raina Merchant, David Asch, and Carolyn Cannuscio. These findings reveal some of the challenges in using social

media and smartphone strategies, such as the contact tracing apps launched by Google and Apple, to curb the spread of COVID-19.

The authors presented nine different scenarios for data sharing in a [national survey](#) of 3,547 adults conducted in July 2020. The scenarios differed on the source of the digital data ([social media](#), "smart" thermometer, or smartphone), whether the data would be shared with [public health officials](#), and how the data would be used. None of the tested scenarios received [majority support](#), though some scenarios showed promise. Scenarios that had the most support were use of smartphones for digital contract tracing and for enforcement of quarantines.

The study shows that personal or familial COVID experience and local COVID rates were not associated with support, but political ideology was. Conservatives were less likely than liberals to support digital data usage for COVID-19 response.

Across nearly all scenarios, racial and ethnic minorities expressed stronger support than white and non-Hispanic populations. Although earlier research showed that in certain circumstances Black and Hispanic adults have [more concerns](#) around online privacy than white individuals, this increased support could reflect the [inequitable impact](#) of COVID-19 on racial/[ethnic minority](#) groups.

This study underscores the immense challenge public health departments face to convince the U.S. public to participate in digital efforts to trace and slow the spread of COVID-19 and future public health threats. Other countries have used digital contact tracing to combat the pandemic with some success; for example, [South Korea](#) used digital surveillance and testing to curb the spread of COVID-19, though such tactics come with costs to privacy and security concerns. Public health entities that seek to use such techniques in the U.S. should use advertising, trusted

messengers, and other behavioral nudges to foster buy-in from the public. Legislation might be needed to provide updated and enhanced [protections](#) for digital consumers and reassure a wary public.

**More information:** David Grande et al, Consumer Views on Using Digital Data for COVID-19 Control in the United States, *JAMA Network Open* (2021). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.10918](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.10918)

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