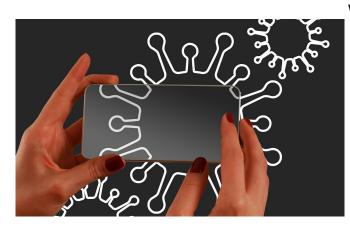# Why people are reluctant to use COVID-19 contact-tracing apps

18 December 2020, by Farkhondeh Hassandoust

Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

This week's announcement of two new [COVID-19 vaccine pre-purchase deals](#) is encouraging, but doesn't mean New Zealanders should become complacent about using the [NZ COVID Tracer app](#) during the summer holidays.

The immunization rollout won't start until the [second quarter](#) of 2021, and the government is encouraging New Zealanders to continue using the app, including the recently upgraded [bluetooth function](#), as part of its plan to [manage the pandemic](#) during the holiday period.

During the past weeks, the number of daily scans has [dropped significantly](#), down from just over 900,000 scans per day at the end of November to fewer than 400,000 in mid-December.

With no active cases of COVID-19 in the commmunity, complacency might be part of the issue in New Zealand, but as our [research](#) in the US shows, worries about [privacy](#) and trust continue to make people reluctant to use contact-tracing apps.

Concerns about privacy and surveillance

We surveyed 853 people from every state in the US to identify the factors promoting or inhibiting their use of contact-tracing applications. Our survey reveals two seemingly contradictory findings.

Individuals are highly motivated to use contact-tracing apps, for the sake of their own health and that of society as a whole. But the study also found people are concerned about privacy, social disapproval and surveillance.

The findings suggest people's trust in the data collectors is dependent on the technology features of these apps (for example, information sensitivity and anonymity) and the privacy protection initiatives instigated by the authorities.

With the [holiday season](#) just around the corner—and even though New Zealand is currently free of community transmission—our findings are pertinent. New Zealanders will travel more during the summer period, and it is more important than ever to use contact-tracing apps to improve our chances of getting on top of any potential outbreaks as quickly as possible.

How, then, to overcome concerns about privacy and trust and make sure New Zealanders [use the upgraded app](#) during summer?

The benefits of adopting contact-tracing apps are mainly in shared [public health](#), and it is important these societal health benefits are emphasized. In order to quell concerns, data collectors (government and businesses) must also offer assurance that people's real [identity will be concealed](#).

It is the responsibility of the government and the office of the Privacy Commissioner to ensure all personal information is managed appropriately.

Transparency and data security

Our study also found that factors such as peer and social influence, regulatory pressures and previous experiences with privacy loss underlie people's readiness to adopt contact-tracing apps.

The findings reveal that people expect regulatory protection if they are to use contact-tracing apps. This confirms the need for laws and regulations with strict penalties for those who collect, use, disclose or decrypt collected data for any purpose other than contact tracing.

The New Zealand government is working with third-party developers to complete the integration of other apps by the end of December to enable the exchange of digital contact-tracing information from different apps and technologies.

The Privacy Commissioner has already endorsed the bluetooth upgrade of the official NZ COVID Tracer app because of its focus on users' privacy. And the Ministry of Health aims to release the source code for the app so New Zealanders can see how their personal data has been managed.

Throughout the summer, the government and ministry should emphasize the importance of using the contact-tracing app and assure New Zealanders about the security and privacy of their personal data.

Adoption of contact-tracing apps is no silver bullet in the battle against COVID-19, but it is a crucial element in New Zealand's collective public health response to the global pandemic.

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