

PUBLIC HEALTH? THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

Have you ever downloaded a new app and hit “accept” on the privacy policy without reading it all the way through? Perhaps you’ve downloaded a weather tracker and provided access to your location. Despite our fear of privacy invasions, mobility data gathered from smartphones could prove beneficial in tracking the spread of infectious diseases, as demonstrated in a recent research series on data mobility from Dr. Martin Andersen, an associate professor at the Bryan School.

When cases of COVID-19 in America began to tick upward in March 2020, Andersen began studying how your phone’s location services play a role in depicting people’s responses to the pandemic. Andersen analyzed mobility data from SafeGraph – a company that provides location information from apps like WeatherBug and OpenTable – and searched for patterns in location.

He determined that the percentage of people leaving their houses in late March to early April of 2020 decreased between 40 to 90 percent compared to 2019. “Basically, we’ve been trying to understand how people are moving around and how that can spread disease,” Andersen said.

Mobility data may also provide evidence of whether procedures and policies implemented to mitigate the spread of disease are effective.

Andersen, who has worked in the Bryan School’s Department of Economics since 2014, has dedicated a large portion of his research to studying health and human behavior and its impact on the economy. “My future research is oriented around using mobility data to essentially understand the world,” he said. “I think a big part of being a microeconomist is that I care a lot about understanding what’s driving human behavior.”



Dr. Martin Andersen
Associate Professor

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