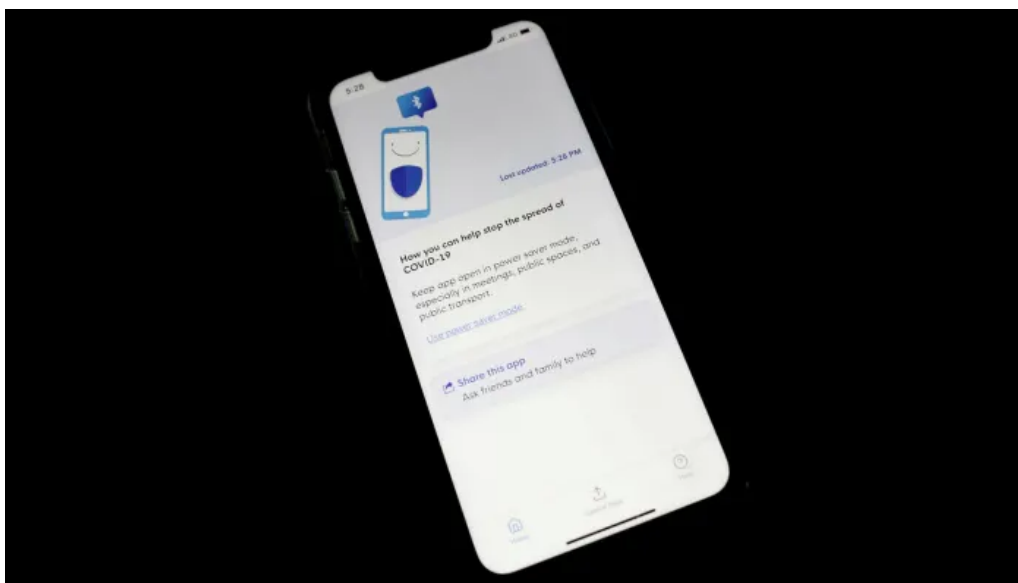


Opinion **Lex**

## Contact tracing: closer encounters

Any apps to contain the spread of Covid-19 will require high uptake and regular testing



Singapore's voluntary TraceTogether app has only been used by about one in five people. © REUTERS

APRIL 25 2020

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In the absence of a coronavirus vaccine, governments around the world believe contact tracing apps on smartphones can be used to help suppress a virus resurgence when lockdowns are lifted. To be effective, however, uptake will need to be extremely high.

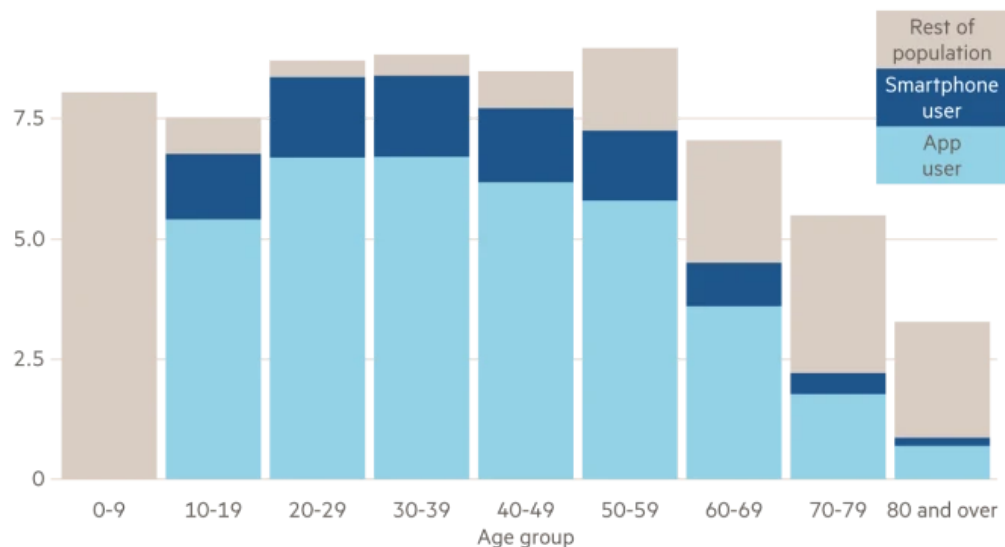
Privacy concerns, data accuracy and ensuring people have the right tech all pose serious challenges to digital contact tracing in [the UK](#).

Reports from Singapore suggest the project will not be easy. The city state's voluntary TraceTogether app has only been used by about one in five people.

Like Singapore, the [UK](#) plans to use low-energy Bluetooth signals to keep a record of devices nearby. If someone using the app tests positive, their data could be used to notify those whose devices were recently in range. Apple and Google have [joined forces](#) to build tools so that apps can collect data without being open at all times.

Even with an 80% uptake rate among smartphone users, just 56% of the UK population would be covered by a contact tracing app

UK contact tracing app usage assuming 80% uptake rate by smartphone users (m, by age group)

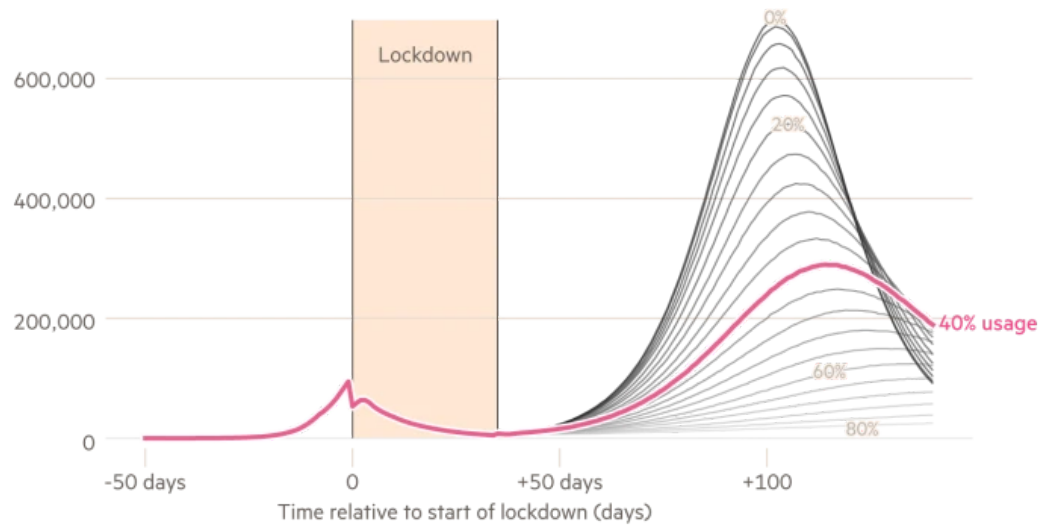


Source: Fraser Group, Oxford university's Big Data Institute, Nuffield Department of Medicine  
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Research by scientists at [Oxford university](#) has found that the uptake required for effective contact tracing is 80 per cent of mobile phone users — equal to 56 per cent of the British population — even if all those over the age of 70 remain in lockdown.

## Post-lockdown infection levels would be highly sensitive to uptake of a contact tracing app

Number of new daily infections, UK, by rate of app usage among smartphone users\*



\* Assuming an epidemic doubling time of 3.5 days, under a "release after testing" scenario  
Source: Fraser Group, Oxford university's Big Data Institute, Nuffield Department of Medicine  
© FT

With this level of use and high levels of testing, the epidemic can be suppressed. Failure to convince people to download and use a contact tracing app means infections would rise quickly.

If usage is similar to Singapore's, the UK's daily infection could be as high as 300,000 within a few months of lockdown coming to an end. Tech can fix many problems. Coronavirus may not be one of them.

*Lex Data Points are short articles on non-corporate topics.*