

Research Findings

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College of Communication

Boston University

With Liberty and Surveillance for All:

Person-to-person Surveillance Gets Green Light from Public

Survey research from Boston University graduate students shows that Americans are more willing to engage in surveillance of loved ones than one might expect given our love for independence. Half of Americans are comfortable with being electronically monitored by a loved one for safety or health reasons. Nearly a third – 32% – say it is likely they will use a tracking device to monitor a loved one in the future.

Privacy advocates have long kept an eye on rapidly proliferating technologies that make it possible for governments and businesses to keep an eye on citizens and customers. Meanwhile, a barely-noticed use for these same technologies has been quietly making a name for itself. We call it Person-to-Person (P2P) surveillance.

P2P surveillance occurs when regular people use sophisticated tracking devices to monitor a loved one. This includes when children of an aging parent outfit the parent with a medical alert device or when parents track teenage children's driving patterns with technology installed in the family car or when a GPS-enabled child's shoe provides Web-based tracking for a parent.

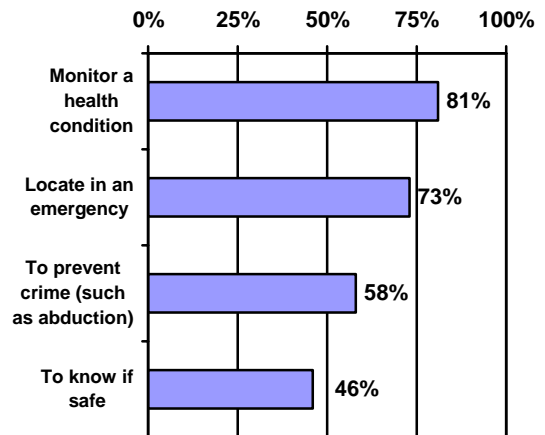
Because the fear of government abuse of power or corporate manipulation does not hang over P2P surveillance, little attention has been focused on it. This benign neglect has allowed a host of new companies to raise money, develop business plans, and pitch new products with scant attention from regulators, the media or even privacy groups. Will it all come crashing down the moment the light of attention shines on it?

The answer, according to a recent national survey research effort by graduate students at Boston University's College of Communication, is simple: No. Americans, despite their penchant for liberty and individual freedom, appear to be willing to

allow these technologies out of Pandora's Box. In fact, nearly a third of them say they are likely to use such devices themselves.

The study – an online survey conducted in the last week of October, 2005 among 523 online adults from across the country – revealed that 70% have heard about such devices, mostly from news reports, though 1 in 10 have actually seen a device of this type before. The top reasons Americans believed it was valid to use tracking devices to monitor other adults were to watch an existing health condition or to locate them in an emergency (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Top valid reasons cited for adult-to-adult personal surveillance

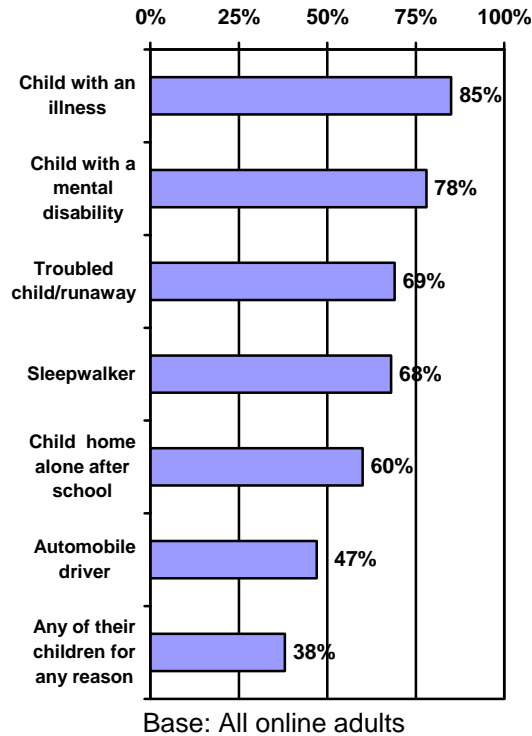


Base: All online adults

People are even more willing to allow P2P surveillance when it comes to parenting.

Though only 38% believe parents should be free to track their children for any reason, when specific circumstances like health or safety are invoked, a majority of adults endorse child tracking (see Figure 2). Interestingly, 60% believe it is appropriate for parents whose latchkey children come home from school to an empty house can be monitored. For their own safety, one presumes.

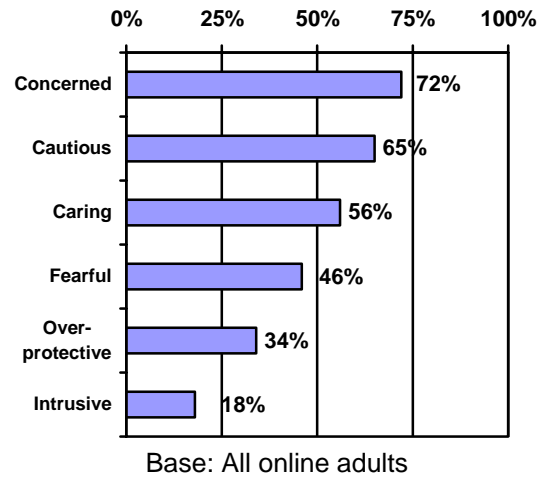
Figure 2. Reasons people think are valid for parents to track children



People say parents should have the right to engage in P2P surveillance, but what will they say about those parents behind their backs? Will the gossip fly? Here again, the study's results suggest that most will sympathize. More than half of Americans

agree that parents who use these technologies are "concerned," "cautious," and "caring" while only 34% considered such parents "over-protective" (see Figure 3). Among people who actually have children at home, the positive attributions rise.

Figure 3. Words that describe parents who track their children



When asked if the government should have a role in regulating such technologies, only 28% want government involvement when it comes to children. However, 56% agreed to a government role when these devices are used to keep tabs on other adults, largely because 88% of people believe that such devices shouldn't be used on adults without their express permission.

The greatest endorsement of P2P surveillance is that 66% of Americans are comfortable being monitored by concerned loved ones in case of emergency. That's an awfully large market waiting to be tapped by companies like GTX Corporation who debuts its first GPS-based tracking shoe for children this week.

About the survey: The Fall 2005 Person-to-person Surveillance Survey was conducted by graduate students at Boston University's College of Communication, supervised by Professor James McQuivey, a former vice president at technology research firm Forrester Research. The survey was fielded to an online sample of 523 adults from across the country during the last week of October, 2005. The sample as well as the online survey capability were generously donated by Global Market Insite, Inc., a Seattle, WA-based provider of research tools and services, including the NetMR online survey system. Research based on a random sample of this size has a +/-5% margin of error, although this sample was not randomly derived. The GTX Corporation did not sponsor this research; for more about its groundbreaking shoe, see www.gtxc.biz.



Contact: James McQuivey, Assistant Professor
617.358.1305 - mcquivey@bu.edu
640 Commonwealth Ave, Boston, MA 02215