

# Coronavirus Monitoring Bracelets Flood the Market, Ready to Snitch on People Who Don't Distance

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Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

Global Research, May 27, 2020

[The Intercept](#) 25 May 2020

*Surveillance firms around the world are licking their lips at a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to cash in on the coronavirus by repositioning one of their most invasive products: the tracking bracelet.*

Body monitors are associated with criminality and guilt in the popular imagination, the accessories of Wall Street crooks under house arrest and menace-to-society parolees. Unlike smartphones, de facto tracking devices in their own right, strapped-on trackers are expressly designed to be attached to the body and exist solely to report the user's whereabouts and interactions to one or more third parties; they don't play podcasts or tell you how many steps you took that day to sweeten the surveillance.

But a climate of perpetual bio-anxiety has paved the way for broader acceptance of carceral technologies, with a [wave of companies](#) trying to sell tracking accessories to business owners eager to reopen under the aegis of responsible social distancing and to governments hoping to keep a closer eye on people under quarantine.

Take AiRISTA Flow, a Maryland-based outfit that helps corporations track their "[assets](#)," breathing or not. In an April 21 press release, the company announced it would begin selling Bluetooth and Wi-Fi trackers to be worn on an employee's wrist like a Fitbit — or around their neck like a cowbell. "When people come within six feet of each other for a period of time," the company wrote in a [press release](#), "the device makes an audible chirp and a record of the contact is made in the AiRISTA Flow software system." But the tracking goes far beyond audible chirps: AiRISTA's platform allows employers to continuously upload a record of close encounters to a corporate cloud, providing an up-to-date list of presumed social distancing violators that would double as a detailed record of workplace social interactions.

The company's marketing language is explicit in talking up the nonviral benefits of tracking your workers' every move: By helping companies "Locate people and things in real time" (the two are seemingly treated interchangeably), they can expect a "Reduction in unplanned downtime," "Improved asset utilization rates, [and a] reduced need for spares."

In a [press release](#) published just a day after AiRISTA Flow's, Boston-based Redpoint Positioning Corporation, another player in the business of tracking workers and inanimate objects, announced that it was taking its own "cutting-edge technology ... already used by leading companies worldwide in third-party logistics, auto manufacturing, mine operation" and repackaging it for social distancing. Like AiRISTA, Redpoint offers companies the ability to "tag" their equipment and employees using ultra-wideband radio signals, a wireless

positioning technology only recently added to the most advanced iPhones. Redpoint boasted in the announcement of its ability to use these tags to “track the location of people and equipment with extremely high accuracy, even in complex industrial environments,” now with a coronavirus-specific augmentation: “If social distancing parameters, such as a 1- or 2-meter radius, are violated between workers, the tag alarm will alert them to the hazard.” The company will also collect a history of employee interactions: “If an infection does occur, historical data from the system will allow for highly accurate contact tracing, as records can show the individuals who were near the infected party.”

A Redpoint spokesperson did not answer when asked if the company has any policies dictating or constraining how their technology can be used by clients.

While the AiRISTA and Redpoint trackers merely evoke the aesthetics of a police state in the workplace, Israeli surveillance outfit SuperCom is literally repackaging as a Covid-19 “solution” technology previously used on incarcerated or criminally convicted people. The security company has customers in 20 countries, including the U.S., and claims decades of experience with what it calls in a press release “secured boundaries projects,” like border crossings and home confinement. It’s the house arrest expertise that the company is now marketing as PureCare, [described](#) on the SuperCom website as a “state-of-the-art solution for quarantine and isolation monitoring to aid government efforts in containing and limiting the reach of infectious diseases” and, incredibly, as “a non-intrusive patient friendly system that constantly tracks patient location within buildings, vehicles and outside.”

SuperCom Americas President Ordan Trabelsi declined to tell The Intercept where the company’s ankle bracelets are currently being used for quarantine enforcement, but it named Central America as the location of one pilot deployment, and referenced a second pilot program in some other, unspecified region, in an April 6 press release announcing a “Coronavirus (COVID-19) citizen quarantine and containment tracking technology.” The company announced separately, on April 27, that it had begun selling tracking devices for prisoners released from an unnamed “United States of America correctional facility due to COVID-19.”

In the same press release, SuperCom claimed to see a spike in interest from “government agencies looking to restrict the spread of COVID-19 among their general population” and envisioned “additional potential industry demand for electronic monitoring services coming from the incarcerated American population.”

One might think that a company like SuperCom would shy away from proposing that those exposed to the novel coronavirus be in any way treated like literal criminals. But in a recent [promotional YouTube interview](#), Trabelsi makes a point of stressing that it’s precisely the company’s work with criminal elements that makes its Covid-19 “solution” superior. “In the past, we have spent a lot of our time focusing on very accurate and state of the art tracking of offenders,” he said in the video. “Many customers and potential customers around the world asked us if we could use that same platform to do, you know, Covid-19 home quarantine tracking and compliance. And we thought, of course we can because it’s exactly what we do in the offender tracking space. But now we’ll just be tracking people that are not essentially offenders but unluckily were exposed to the virus.”

When asked in the YouTube interview about the privacy implications of SuperCom’s ankle bracelets, Trabelsi demurred — though he did note that the hardware is “very comfortable and goes underneath their sock.” He went on to say that how the company’s customers use

the technology is their call, not his. “We leave it to them to make their decisions on rules and privacy,” he stated.

In an interview with The Intercept, Trabelsi said interest in SuperCom’s coronavirus product has been “mostly government” so far. Should any of these intrigued governments decide to use SuperCom bracelets to enforce quarantines, Trabelsi said it’s up to them to do so responsibly. “Everyone has their own rules,” he told me. “Some countries share that they want to put everyone who comes into the country into quarantine for 14 days, some want to put it onto people who are sick, or who have a confirmed case; it depends what [that government’s] regulations are. They define the rules exactly as they want. We just provide them with technology to track people.”

A laissez-faire approach to privacy and accountability will do little to persuade those who see SuperCom’s strategy as a cynical attempt to push lucrative police technology into the civilian world during a period of widespread social crisis. Leonard Rubenstein, a human rights attorney and bioethicist at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, told The Intercept that SuperCom’s stance has the distinction of being both dangerous and useless. “I found the ankle monitor and other tracking methods described [by SuperCom] highly inappropriate and detrimental to a public health response in being unreasonably and unnecessarily coercive,” he said, “a serious invasion of privacy without any safeguards, and promoting an adversarial relationship to public health authorities when the relationship should be built on trust.”

Rubenstein, who is affiliated with the school’s department of epidemiology, said that an invasive technology like a tracking bracelet imposes “limitations on human rights to serve public health ends” and must be held to particularly high standards to determine if it’s worth the trade-off.

Jennifer Granick, an attorney specializing in surveillance and cybersecurity technologies at the American Civil Liberties Union, told The Intercept that SuperCom’s Covid-19 marketing efforts put a public health gloss on a police technology and thus helps it to “be normalized among the general population for medical reasons. ... This should trouble us all.”

To Rubenstein, even SuperCom’s most humane use case for tracking bracelets, allowing temporary release of incarcerated people to spare them from a coronavirus prison outbreak, doesn’t pass muster. “In the case of released prisoners, less restrictive means are also available,” he said. An always-on surveillance bracelet might be defensible only “where there was an individualized determination that the person poses a high public safety risk upon release in the absence of monitoring/tracking,” he added.

Responding to these concerns, Trabelsi told The Intercept that despite the company’s own emphasis on monitoring criminals, its products shouldn’t be understood as intended only for that purpose. “The product vision [is] to track the location of people to verify they are following the rules in order to protect themselves and our society,” Trabelsi wrote via email. “The product wasn’t necessarily developed for offenders. The technology also tracks patients with Alzheimer’s disease and other issues that require monitoring for their own safety.” Trabelsi argued that tracking bracelets could allow people to avoid being confined to a hospital or “government controlled facility” while under quarantine. “This technology would give these individuals the option to be at their homes instead and be monitored to reduce the risk of causing harm to others,” he added.

When asked if SuperCom had consulted with any public health experts during the design or sale of its tracking hardware, Trabelsi was unsure — “In the past we probably have, I’m not certain.” But he also seemed to push back on the notion, perfectly framing Granick’s worry, that this is even a public health technology to begin with: “The technology is essentially for tracking people. It’s not a health solution. It can just tell you where people are. It’s not going to keep you from getting sick. It’s not going to heal you.”

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