

# Ankle monitors could stigmatize wearers, research says

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Electronic ankle monitors—increasingly used as an alternative to incarceration—are bulky and difficult to conceal, displaying their wearers' potential involvement with the justice system for all to see, according to a new article by a Cornell researcher.

Though these monitors have been widely used since the 1980s, their design has not significantly changed in 30 years, suggesting that the stigma of wearing them and the difficulty of hiding them could be intended as part of the punishment, said Lauren Kilgour, doctoral student in the field of information science.

"With something like an Apple Watch or a Fitbit, or other types of broadly available commercial wearable technology, the goal has been to make it less conspicuous, smaller, sleeker," said Kilgour, author of "The Ethics of Aesthetics: Stigma, Information and the Politics of Electronic Ankle Monitor Design," which published May 15 in the journal *The Information Society*.

"But because that same type of visual work hasn't been done [with ankle monitors], it raises the important question: Why does this object continue to look like this?" she said. "Why are questions about aesthetics not more central in conversations about ankle monitor design?"

Ankle monitors are a multimillion-dollar industry that has emerged as criminal justice systems seek alternatives to incarceration. From 2005 to 2015, the use of ankle monitors for people on parole, probation or

pretrial supervision increased 140% in the United States, according to a study by the Pew Charitable Trusts. Monitors use GPS and Wi-Fi to track wearers' locations, enforcing house arrest, for example, or to keep them within a certain radius.

Though the monitors are associated with criminal offenders, they've also been used for people involved with the immigration system—and have recently been proposed or ordered for people exposed to COVID-19 in states including Kentucky and West Virginia.

But whatever the monitors' actual purpose, their wearers are often presumed to be dangerous criminals, Kilgour said.

"Whether you are a high-risk or low-risk offender, whether you are involved with the [justice system](#) or immigration, and now even in the context of COVID-19, there is no differentiation in the aesthetics of the different types of models used," she said. "It creates conditions to invite prejudice."

Criminal records are generally available to the public but usually require steps such as searching for or requesting them from the appropriate agencies. By contrast, ankle monitors make this information freely available to anyone who notices them.

"Wearing an ankle monitor is a little bit like being required to wear a criminal record on your body," Kilgour said. "Its potential to compromise or complicate privacy may jeopardize opportunities to form strong social bonds within communities, or maybe to obtain or maintain employment, among other things."

Though some wearers might try to hide the monitors by wearing long pants, it's not always easy or possible, Kilgour said. The article included a 2015 quote from one wearer: "When I go to school, I worry my friends

will spot it and leave me. I push it up into my jeans, hoping they won't see. But the higher up I push it, the more it starts to hurt: most days, my feet go numb. I try wearing bell-bottoms."

Kilgour links the monitors to a centuries-old tradition of shaming people, from the metal masks medieval women convicted of being "nags" or "scolds" were forced to wear to the yellow armbands employed by the Nazis.

"There's a long, broad and profoundly prejudiced history of taking people and marking them in ways that are meant to effectively act as a type of punishment," she said.

They also deputize members of the public into keeping an eye on the people wearing them, she said.

Kilgour said more attention must be paid to privacy issues caused by the data collected by [ankle](#) monitors, as well as to their physical forms.

"If you solve one problem, such as changing the monitor's appearance, the other one—invasive location and time data collection—is still on the table," she said. "Unless you holistically revisit the overarching ethos and dynamics of carceral surveillance, which are frequently power-laden and discriminatory, which animate these types of [monitoring](#) practices, you're not going to resolve the broader social politics that impact people's lives as a result of being required to wear this monitor."

**More information:** Lauren Kilgour. The ethics of aesthetics: Stigma, information, and the politics of electronic ankle monitor design, *The Information Society* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/01972243.2020.1737606](https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2020.1737606)

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