

Report says AI is embedded across Home Office immigration tasks in near-total secrecy

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AI is being trialled in near-total secrecy, with officials routinely invoking national security to stonewall FoI requests, the report says. Photograph: Gary E Perkin/Alamy

View image in fullscreen AI is being trialled in near-total secrecy, with officials routinely invoking national security to stonewall FoI requests, the report says. Photograph: Gary E Perkin/Alamy

'Digital hostile environment': AI secretly being embedded across Home Office, report claims

Tasks from determining asylum seekers' ages to border surveillance now involve AI, says Open Rights Group

AI has been embedded across the Home Office in near-total secrecy, reinforcing the so-called hostile environment for immigration, according to research. Tasks from the detection of potential sham marriages to determining the age of asylum seekers and checking through the contents of phones of new arrivals now involve use of the technology, according to a report by Open Rights Group (ORG).

It is also being used to conduct surveillance of borders, through live facial recognition and AI-powered drones and satellites; to summarise asylum interviews and country policy information used as evidence in those interviews; and to prioritise and assess cases through the opaque Identify and Prioritise Immigration Cases (Ipic) tool. Information for the report has been gathered from a mix of limited information published by the Home Office, freedom of information requests and questions from MPs. The report has cross-party support from Labour's Bell Ribeiro-Addy, the Scottish National party's Pete Wishart and the Green party's Siân Berry. The report, titled Automated Discrimination: Unpacking the Digital Hostile Environment, raises concerns about the use of AI in immigration, saying it is not neutral or accurate and can replicate bias and discrimination within society, particularly when a key driver for its use is anti-immigration policies and rhetoric. It says AI is being trialled and tested in near-total secrecy, with officials routinely invoking national security to stonewall freedom of information requests and redact disclosures. Successive governments are criticised for pushing an ideology that reduces complex human cases to a technical problem that can be fixed. The report raises concerns about "reducing people to data points" and replicating the hostile environment first envisaged by Theresa May as home secretary in 2012. "Relying on AI to decide who gets to stay here and who gets thrown back into danger is a deeply alarming move," it states. Open Rights Group is calling on the government to regulate AI and ban uses that are undemocratic and risk human rights violations, such as the use of ChatGPT tools in asylum applications. It also wants more transparency and stronger freedom of information laws, a narrower definition of national security and a robust public register of government AI tools. Ribeiro-Addy said: "In spite of questions and requests, the Home Office has been reluctant to publish the documents that would explain how AI is used in asylum processing, what the problems are and how they are being addressed. The department has not explained how it will ensure there is accountability when they fail or justified why some of the most vulnerable people, with the least power, should bear the greatest risks." Sara Alsherif, a programme manager at Open Rights Group, said: "Migration is a human phenomenon and experience, not a technical problem that can be fixed by artificial intelligence. We urgently need transparency, accountability and strict regulation to restrict how AI is used and to prevent its wider rollout." skip past newsletter promotion

after newsletter promotion A Home Office spokesperson said: "Use of artificial intelligence is just one of the tools at our disposal to protect our borders and does not replace or automate the role of human decision-makers. "Asylum decisions are made by trained caseworkers, with AI tools used only to assist in navigating interview records and policy information. They cannot be used in isolation and do not make decisions on claims. "We regularly monitor the performance of these tools alongside our established quality-assurance processes and have already committed to publishing updated evaluations on their rollout."

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