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CYBER SECURITY

# Despite UIDAI denial, leaked Aadhaar demographic data is a goldmine for criminals, say experts

The Unique Identification Authority of India, which manages the Aadhaar database, has claimed that the data cannot be misused.

by *Abhishek Dey*

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Hours after a news **report** on January 4 exposed how the Aadhaar-related demographic data of more than one billion Indian residents had been leaked, the Unique Identification Authority of India, which manages the Aadhaar database, **responded** that the “mere display” of this information could not “be misused without biometrics”.

Aadhaar is a massive project by the Indian government to provide every resident with a 12-digit unique identity number attached to their biometric data.

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However, cyber security experts and lawyers say that the Unique Identification Authority of India's response was an "incompetent claim", which indicated that the body was not treating the security breach with the seriousness it warranted.

These experts said that any breach of security of Aadhaar-related demographic data not only violates an individual's right to **privacy**, which was upheld by the Supreme Court last year as a fundamental right protected under Article 21 of the Constitution, but also subjects them to threats ranging from financial fraud to the misuse of their identity.

The news report in *The Tribune* newspaper that exposed the security breach said that it took a reporter only Rs 500 and 10 minutes to access the entire Aadhaar database and its trove of demographic details – such as names, addresses, postal codes, phone numbers, photographs and e-mail addresses of people enrolled in the programme. The Unique Identification Authority of India went on to **file** a police complaint against the **reporter** for impersonation, cheating and forgery, among other charges, a move that the Editors Guild of India has condemned as an attack on **press freedom**.

## Resource for criminals

Despite the Unique Identification Authority of India claim that individual security could not be compromised by unauthorised access of the sort reported by the *Tribune*, Pavan Duggal, a lawyer who specialises in cyber security, disagreed. “Demographic data is largely private data and there is a tremendous amount of risk associated with the unauthorised access of such data,” he said. “It is a goldmine for criminals, in both physical and virtual spaces, who can target any individual through such private data.”

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Duggal added: “The availability of demographic data eventually leads to the violation of the right to privacy. It can also act as fodder for groups indulging in financial frauds.”

Kislay Chaudhary, a cyber security expert and consultant to police departments in several states, concurred.

Chaudhary explained that criminals usually initiate financial fraud via a tactic known as social engineering in which they attempt to manipulate people on the phone or online to reveal confidential information such as passwords or bank details. One of the forms social engineering takes is phishing, a process in which criminals phone their targets pretending to be credible persons like bank officials and get them to reveal confidential information. Another form of phishing is when criminals send their targets emails or text messages disguised to look like they are from a reliable source, but which include links to malicious websites designed to

give the criminal access to the victim's electronic devices and the security-related data they contain.

“If demographic information of such a massive scale has been exposed, imagine the sample size of data that such criminals can [now] use to evaluate the behaviour of their targets as part of the social engineering process,” said Chaudhary.

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## High accuracy, high crime

Vineet Kumar, president of Cyber Peace Foundation, an advisory group involved in the set up of a cyber security system in the Union Ministry of Women and Child

Development said that the exposure of such kind of demographic data made life easier for criminals.

“Denial of Aadhaar is a major step in the direction of a digital India,” Congress removes its app from Google Play Store after BJP accuses it of sharing user data



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Kumar said that there has been a surge in spear phishing in which potential





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