

What is a Reverse Warrant?

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A reverse warrant is a type of search warrant that allows law enforcement to gather data from a broad set of individuals in order to identify potential suspects. Unlike traditional warrants, which target a specific person, reverse warrants cast a wide net over large amounts of personal data to find someone who might have been involved in a crime. The 2 most common types are reverse location warrants and reverse keyword warrants.

- ▶ **Reverse Location Warrants (Geofence Warrants):** Require service providers like Google to provide location data on all devices within a specified geographic area during a certain time frame. For example, law enforcement may seek to identify anyone who was near an abortion clinic during a particular time.
- ▶ **Reverse Keyword Warrants:** Require search engine providers to reveal the identities of users who searched for specific terms within a set period. For instance, law enforcement might request data on all users who searched for “abortion pill” or related terms within a particular jurisdiction.

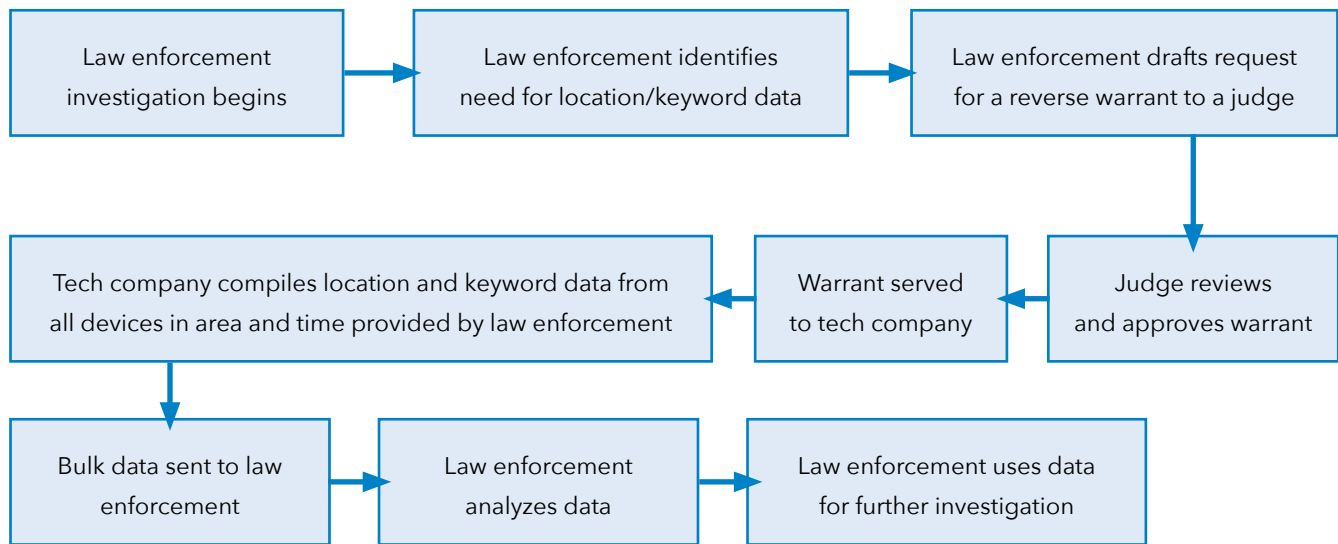


Figure. Illustration of the multiple stages between law enforcement beginning an investigation and its use of data obtained through a reverse warrant.

CONSTITUTIONAL CONCERNS

Reverse warrants raise significant 4th Amendment concerns due to their broad, invasive nature, often lacking probable cause against specific individuals. Recent federal court decisions have begun to reflect these concerns. In [United States v. Chatrie](#), a federal judge in Virginia ruled that a geofence warrant was overly broad and lacked probable cause for much of the data obtained by the police. This was reinforced in August 2024 when the US Court of Appeals for the 5th Circuit, covering Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas, [found geofence warrants unconstitutional](#). These rulings underscore the urgency and importance of implementing robust privacy protections at the local level, to safeguard citizens' sensitive data even as the legal landscape continues to evolve.

Alarming Trends

- ▶ [California leads](#) the nation in reverse warrant requests.
- ▶ Google received [11,554 geofence warrant requests in 2020](#), up from 982 in 2018.
- ▶ Geofence warrants now make up over [25% of Google's total U.S. warrant requests](#).
- ▶ Facebook gave investigators information in about [88% of the 59,996 times](#) when law enforcement requested data in the second half of 2021.
- ▶ Between 2018 and 2020, [Google alone received over 5,700 reverse warrants from states with anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQI legislation](#).

PRIVACY CONCERNS

Reverse warrants are controversial because they allow law enforcement to access personal information without an individual's knowledge or consent. While proponents argue that they are necessary for investigating certain crimes, these warrants can be seen as a violation of privacy, especially when used in contexts as sensitive as reproductive rights.

REVERSE WARRANTS IN THE CONTEXT OF REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

As political polarization in the United States deepens on issues like abortion rights and LGBTQI protections, the use of reverse warrants is expected to rise, particularly in states with restrictive laws. Since the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, about [22 million women and girls of reproductive age](#) now live in states where abortion access is heavily restricted or entirely inaccessible. In tandem, over [500 anti-LGBTQI bills](#) have been introduced in the United States, with more than [30 enacted in 2024 alone](#).

IMPACT ON VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

[Reverse warrants disproportionately affect marginalized communities, including low-income women, people of color, and LGBTQI individuals.](#) They create an atmosphere of fear and mistrust, further limiting access to essential healthcare services. [A 2022 Nebraska case](#) illustrates the dangers: a mother and daughter were charged with violating abortion laws after authorities accessed their Facebook messages through a reverse keyword warrant. This showcases how digital surveillance can be weaponized against vulnerable individuals seeking healthcare information online.

LEGISLATIVE ACTION

In California, Assemblymember Mia Bonta introduced [AB 793](#), which would prohibit law enforcement from using reverse warrants to obtain information about individuals seeking, providing, or assisting with reproductive or gender affirming healthcare.

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