



The U.S. government isn't allowed to wiretap American citizens without a warrant from a judge. But there are plenty of legal ways for law enforcement, from the local sheriff to the FBI, to snoop on the digital trails you create every day. Authorities can often obtain your emails and texts by going to Google or AT&T with a simple subpoena.

Usually you won't even be notified. The Senate last week took a step toward updating privacy protection for emails, but it's likely the issue will be kicked to the next Congress. Meantime, here's how police can track you without a warrant now:

How They Get It

Listening to your phone calls without a judge's warrant is illegal if you're a U.S. citizen. But police don't need a warrant — which requires showing "probable cause" of a crime — to get just the numbers you called and when you called them, as well as incoming calls, from phone carriers. Instead, police can get courts to sign off on a subpoena, which only requires that the data they're after is relevant to an investigation — a lesser standard of evidence.

Many cell phone carriers provide authorities with a phone's location and may charge a fee for doing so. Cell towers track where your phone is at any moment; so can the GPS features in some smartphones. The major cell carriers, including Verizon and AT&T, responded to at least 1.3 million law enforcement requests for cell phone locations, text messages and other data in 2011. Internet service providers can also provide location data that tracks users via their computer's IP address — a unique number assigned to each computer.

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