



Civics Essay Contest 2026:

Does the Fourth Amendment Protect a Cellphone User's Location Data?

The Fourth Amendment to the Constitution protects people against unreasonable searches and seizures by law enforcement. The Supreme Court has long recognized that this Amendment serves to safeguard the privacy and security of individuals against arbitrary invasion by government officials.

But how does the Fourth Amendment's protection against unreasonable search and seizure apply in the digital age? Most of us walk around with a cellphone, which may transmit its location to a service provider when the phone connects to a cell site, through an app, or if a setting like location history is enabled on the phone. Do cellphone users have a reasonable expectation of privacy in that location data? And does it matter that the data is transmitted to a third party, such as Google, T-Mobile, or Life360?

The U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee, Chattanooga Division, and the Chattanooga Chapter of the Federal Bar Association invite local middle and high school students to share their thoughts on this issue in the 8th Annual Civics Essay Contest.

Three middle school essays and three high school essays will be selected, with the authors receiving \$500 for First Place, \$250 for Second Place, and \$100 for Third Place.

Submission deadline: March 27, 2026



Framing the Question

In *Chatrrie v. United States*, law enforcement obtained and served a “geofence warrant” on Google. A geofence warrant requires a service provider like Google to produce location data from cellphone users who were nearby when a crime occurred. The government in *Chatrrie* sought anonymized location data for every phone that was within 150 meters of a bank robbery within one hour of that robbery. Using the location data, law enforcement narrowed its focus to three devices, one of which belonged to Okello Chatrrie. Unlike traditional warrants targeting a known suspect, geofence warrants begin by collecting data on *everyone* in a defined area, then narrow the search. Here, law enforcement narrowed its search twice but did not get a new warrant for the additional information, triggering legal questions about the Fourth Amendment.

The Fourth Amendment protects individuals against “arbitrary invasions by government officials,” specifically including unreasonable searches and seizures by law enforcement officers, into areas in which a person has a reasonable expectation of privacy. Though law enforcement typically must obtain a warrant signed by a judge and supported by probable cause before conducting a search, courts are divided on how to treat location data stored by cellphone providers. The Fourth Circuit upheld the use of a geofence warrant in this case, finding that collecting location data from a service provider is not a Fourth Amendment search at all because users have no reasonable expectation of privacy in it.

A much more skeptical Fifth Circuit held that obtaining information through a geofence warrant *is* a search because cellphone users do not voluntarily give up their reasonable expectation of privacy when they sign up with a service provider. The U.S. Supreme Court has not yet decided the issue, but the *Chatrrie* case presents it with the opportunity to do so.

What Do You Think?

- Do you have a reasonable expectation of privacy in the location of your phone?
- Have you waived your Fourth Amendment protection by allowing apps or service providers to access your location?
- What if you are unaware that you turned on your location services?
- If the data provided by the service provider is anonymized, is that really a search?

Essay Contest Rules & Requirements:

Content

Your essay should discuss the question “Does the Fourth Amendment Protect a Cellphone User’s Location Data?”

Your essay should:

1. Present your best arguments in support of your position;
2. Cite relevant sources, statutes, cases, or historical events that support your position; and
3. Not exceed 1,500 words.

Your essay must be your own original work; it may not include AI-generated content. Essays will be checked for AI-generated content and disqualified if found to contain such content.

Submission

Please submit your essay to chattcivicsessay@gmail.com. You must include the submission form attached to this flyer.

You may also mail your essay and cover sheet to Civics Essay Contest, Attn: Kelly L. Walsh, U.S. Courthouse, 900 Georgia Avenue, Chattanooga, TN 37402.

Deadline

Essays must be emailed or postmarked by **March 27, 2026**.

Eligibility

The contest is open to public, private, and home school students in grades 6 to 12 from Bedford, Bledsoe, Bradley, Coffee, Franklin, Grundy, Hamilton, Lincoln, McMinn, Marion, Meigs, Moore, Polk, Rhea, Sequatchie, Warren, and Van Buren County, Tennessee, and Dade, Catoosa, and Walker County, Georgia.

FBA National Contest

High school students are encouraged to submit their essays to the Federal Bar Association’s national civics essay contest, which addresses the same topic. The same essay may be submitted to both contests. Contest information, rules, and other materials for the national contest are available at <https://www.fedbar.org/about-us/outreach/civics-essay-contest/>.

Source Acknowledgement: The essay contest prompt and additional resources are derived from the FBA’s national contest resources, available at <https://www.fedbar.org/about-us/outreach/civics-essay-contest/> (accessed March 3, 2026).

Additional Resources→ An Overview of the Geofence Warrant Issue in *Chatrie*

Federal and state courts have come to different conclusions about whether geofence warrants violate the Fourth Amendment of the United States Constitution. These cases grapple with two basic questions: (1) When the government obtains Google users' location-history data, has the government conducted a "search" within the meaning of the Fourth Amendment? (2) If it is a "search," has the Fourth Amendment's warrant requirement been satisfied?

In upholding the use of a geofence warrant in the *Chatrie* case, the Fourth Circuit found that collecting location data from a service provider is not a Fourth Amendment search at all because users voluntarily expose location data to the service provider(s) and thus have no expectation of privacy in the information. *United States v. Chatrie*, 136 F.4th 100 (4th Cir. 2025). It also found that a multi-step, anonymized process to obtain the information limits intrusion. In contrast, the Fifth Circuit has found that geofence warrants are so broad and nonspecific that they resemble unconstitutional "general warrants," which violate the Fourth Amendment and fail to satisfy the probable cause requirement.

Historical Background

Federal claims regarding unlawful searches by local and federal law enforcement officers are based on the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution. Containing the first 10 amendments to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights protects various rights of every American in relation to the United States government, including but not limited to:

- Freedom from unreasonable searches
- Protection from self-incrimination
- Protection from cruel and unusual punishment
- Right to due process

U.S. Const. amend. I-X.

The Fourth Amendment guarantees that "[t]he right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, . . . and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized." U.S. Const. amend. IV. The Supreme Court has long recognized that the "basic purpose of this Amendment . . . is to safeguard the privacy and security of individuals against arbitrary invasions by government officials." *Camara v. Mun. Court of City and Cnty. of San Francisco*, 387 U.S. 523, 528 (1967).

To trigger Fourth Amendment protection, the government must conduct a "search" (or "seizure") covered by it. The Fourth Amendment was partly a reaction to "writs of assistance" or "general warrants" that were used by the British to conduct searches of private property in the Colonies without specifying the person or property to be searched, why they were under suspicion, or the

limits of the search. See *Stanford v. State of Tex.*, 379 U.S. 476 (1965). Over the last 235 years, the Supreme Court has considered many cases that question whether an action by the government is a “search” that would be protected by the Fourth Amendment, when a warrant is necessary, and what “particularly describing” means. For much of the United States’ history, the Fourth Amendment search doctrine was tied to common-law trespass and focused on whether the government obtains information by physically intruding on a constitutionally protected area, such as an individual’s home.

In *Katz v. United States*, 389 U.S. 347, 351 (1967), the Supreme Court recognized that “the Fourth Amendment protects people, not places” and established that a “search” occurs when the government invades an individual’s reasonable expectation of privacy. Applying this reasonable-expectation framework, the Court held that the government conducted a “search” within the meaning of the Fourth Amendment when it intercepted the contents of a telephone conversation by attaching an electronic listening device to the outside of a public phone booth. *Katz*, 389 U.S. at 351-53.

One important limit to Fourth Amendment protection is the “third-party doctrine,” which says that a person has no legitimate expectation of privacy in information he or she voluntarily turned over to a third party. In *United States v. Miller*, 425 U.S. 435, 443 (1976), the Supreme Court held that the government did not conduct a “search” when it obtained an individual’s bank records from his bank, because he voluntarily exposed those records to the bank in the ordinary course of business. Similarly, in *Smith v. Maryland*, 442 U.S. 735, 742-33 (1979), the Court held that the government did not conduct a “search” when it used a pen register (a phone line surveillance tool) to record outgoing phone numbers dialed from a person’s telephone, because he voluntarily conveyed those numbers to his phone company when placing calls.

The application of the third-party doctrine is not always straightforward in the digital age. In *Carpenter v. United States*, 585 U.S. 296, 300-01 (2018), the government obtained from wireless carriers an individual’s historical cell-site location information (“CSLI”)—a time-stamped location record that is automatically generated every time any cellphone connects to a cell site. The lower courts in *Carpenter* held that the individual lacked a reasonable expectation of privacy in the CSLI because he had “shared” that information with his wireless carriers. *Id.* at 303. The Supreme Court disagreed, noting that “the fact that the information is held by a third party does not by itself overcome the [individual’s] claim to Fourth Amendment protection.” *Id.* at 309. Rather, the Court considered “the nature of the particular documents sought” and found that, unlike the bank records in *Miller* and the pen register in *Smith*, CSLI implicated more significant privacy concerns as it provided “a detailed chronicle of a person’s physical presence compiled every day, every moment, over several years.” *Id.* at 314-15. The Court also rejected the notion that the individual “voluntarily” shared its location information with the wireless carriers, noting that “a cell phone logs a cell-site record by dint of its operation, without any affirmative act on the part of the user beyond powering up.” *Id.* Based on these observations, the Court held that the government’s acquisition of CSLI constituted a “search” within the meaning of the Fourth Amendment.

**Federal Court Civics Essay Contest
2026 Submission Form**

Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____

Email Address: _____

Telephone Number: _____

School: _____

Grade Level: _____

By signing this form, I certify that the essay I am submitting is my own original work and none of the content of the essay is AI-generated.

I understand that if my essay appears to include AI-generated content, it will be run through an AI detection program and will be disqualified if it is found to include such content.

I certify that I have followed all applicable copyright laws and fair use practices.

I further certify that I am currently in grade 6 to 12 and a public, private, or home school student from Bedford, Bledsoe, Bradley, Coffee, Franklin, Grundy, Hamilton, Lincoln, McMinn, Marion, Meigs, Moore, Polk, Rhea, Sequatchie, Warren, or Van Buren County, Tennessee, or Dade, Catoosa, or Walker County, Georgia.

I agree that the contest sponsors (the District Court for the Eastern District of Tennessee, Chattanooga Division and the Chattanooga Chapter of the Federal Bar Association) may publish all or excerpts of my essay on their websites and in other print publications, with appropriate credit to me as the author.

Signature: _____

Date: _____