

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-599T](#), a testimony before the Task Force on Denying Terrorists Entry into the United States, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

DHS seeks to identify and interdict travelers who are potential security threats to the United States, such as foreign fighters and potential terrorists, human traffickers, drug smugglers and otherwise inadmissible persons, at the earliest possible point in time. DHS also adjudicates petitions for certain visa categories and has certain responsibilities for strengthening the security of the visa process, including oversight of VSP and VWP. State manages the visa adjudication process for foreign nationals seeking admission to the United States.

This statement addresses (1) CBP programs aimed at preventing high-risk travelers from boarding U.S.-bound flights; (2) ICE's management of VSP; and (3) DHS's oversight of VWP. This statement is based on prior products GAO issued from March 2011 through January 2017, along with selected updates conducted in April 2017 to obtain information from DHS on actions it has taken to address prior GAO recommendations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO previously made recommendations to improve evaluation of CBP's predeparture programs' performance and strengthen DHS's oversight of VSP and VWP. DHS agreed with GAO's recommendations related to CBP's predeparture programs and VWP. DHS did not agree with some of GAO's recommendations related to VSP. GAO has ongoing work related to, among other things, DHS's management and oversight of VSP and plans to report later this year on the results of this work.

View [GAO-17-599T](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gambler@gao.gov.

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BORDER SECURITY

Progress and Challenges in DHS's Efforts to Address High-Risk Travelers and Strengthen Visa Security

What GAO Found

In January 2017, GAO reported that the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) operates predeparture programs to help identify and interdict high-risk travelers before they board U.S.-bound flights. CBP officers inspect all U.S.-bound travelers on precleared flights at the 15 Preclearance locations and, if deemed inadmissible, a traveler will not be permitted to board the aircraft. CBP also operates nine Immigration Advisory Program and two Joint Security Program locations, as well as three Regional Carrier Liaison Groups, through which CBP may recommend that air carriers not permit identified high-risk travelers to board U.S.-bound flights. CBP data showed that it identified and interdicted over 22,000 high-risk air travelers through these programs in fiscal year 2015 (the most recent data available at the time of GAO's report). However, CBP had not fully evaluated the overall effectiveness of these programs using performance measures and baselines. CBP tracked some data, such as the number of travelers deemed inadmissible, but had not set baselines to determine if predeparture programs are achieving goals, consistent with best practices for performance measurement. GAO recommended that CBP develop and implement a system of performance measures and baselines to better position CBP to assess if the programs are achieving their goals. CBP concurred and has established a working group to develop such measures and baselines.

In March 2011, GAO reported on the Visa Security Program (VSP) through which DHS's U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deploys personnel to certain U.S. overseas posts to review visa applications. Among other things, GAO found that ICE did not collect comprehensive data on all VSP performance measures or track the time officials spent on visa security activities. DHS did not concur with GAO's recommendations to address these limitations, stating that ICE collected data on all the required performance measures and tracked VSP case investigation hours. However, GAO continues to believe DHS needs to address these limitations. GAO has ongoing work assessing U.S. agencies' efforts to strengthen the security of the visa process, including oversight of VSP, in which GAO plans to follow up on the findings and recommendations from its March 2011 report related to ICE's efforts to enhance VSP performance measurement.

In May 2016, GAO reported on DHS's oversight of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which allows nationals from 38 countries to travel visa-free to the United States for business or pleasure for 90 days or less. GAO reported, among other things, that all 38 countries entered into required agreements, or their equivalents, to (1) report lost and stolen passports, (2) share identity information about known or suspected terrorists, and (3) share criminal history information. However, not all countries shared such information. In August 2015, DHS established a new requirement for VWP countries to implement the latter two agreements; however, DHS did not establish time frames for instituting the amended requirements. GAO recommended that DHS work with VWP countries to implement these agreements and DHS concurred. As of April 2017, DHS reported that officials are continuing to work with VWP countries on time frames for implementing program requirements.