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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-881](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Several state and local government agencies and financial institutions accept consular identification (CID) cards, which are issued by foreign governments to their citizens living abroad. Mexico issued more than 2.2 million CID cards in 2002-2003 and Guatemala issued approximately 89,000 from mid-2002 to 2003. Critics of CID cards say their acceptance facilitates the unlawful stay within the United States of undocumented aliens and may provide opportunities for terrorists to remain undetected in this country.

GAO examined (1) the purpose of a CID card and how Mexican and Guatemalan CID cards are being used in the United States, (2) steps Mexico and Guatemala have taken to verify the identities of CID card applicants and incorporate security features in CID cards now used in the United States, and (3) the positions and policies of federal agencies regarding CID cards.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Homeland Security Council direct its task force to issue consistent guidance that would enable state and local governments and other institutions to assess the authenticity of foreign-issued CID cards. The Homeland Security Council declined to comment on this report. The Department of Homeland Security generally agreed with the report but offered some suggestions for clarifying the administration's position and practice.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-881.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Laurie Ekstrand at (202) 512-2758 or ekstrandl@gao.gov.

BORDER SECURITY

Consular Identification Cards Accepted within United States, but Consistent Federal Guidance Needed

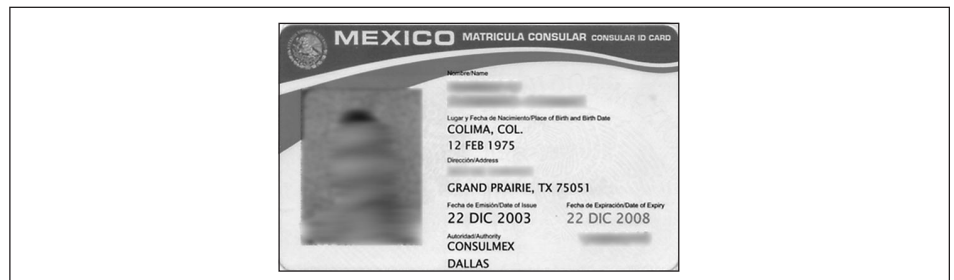
What GAO Found

Consular identification cards are issued by some governments to help identify their citizens living in a foreign country. The cards do not certify legal residence within a country; thus, cardholders may be either legal or undocumented aliens. CID cards benefit the bearers by enabling them, in some instances, to use this form of identification to obtain driver's licenses, open bank accounts, show proof of identity to police, and gain access to other services.

Mexico and Guatemala each take multiple steps to help ensure that the process for qualifying applicants seeking to obtain CID cards verifies the applicants' identities. After receiving criticism about the reliability of its CID card, Mexico took steps to improve identity verification procedures for its CID card issuance process. However, the Mexican issuance policy still relies on visual, rather than computer-based, verification of some documents used to obtain CID cards, including birth certificates that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) says may be fraudulently obtained. Both Mexico and Guatemala incorporate a variety of security features in their CID cards, such as holographic imagery. However, officials of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement warn that incorporating technical security features into identification documents such as CID cards does not guarantee their authenticity.

Federal agencies hold different and, in some cases, conflicting views on the usage and acceptance of CID cards, and no executive branch guidance is yet available. A Homeland Security Council task force of executive branch agencies is reviewing identification document security but had not issued its findings at the time of GAO's review. The Department of the Treasury adopted a regulation in 2003 that, in effect, allows CID card acceptance, while an FBI official has stated that the Mexican CID card, in particular, is not a reliable form of identification and that its acceptance could support false identities. DHS expressed security concerns as well. The State Department has publicly expressed concerns about the impact restricting CID card use might have on U.S. citizens abroad, for example, if the United States had to issue its own CID cards in an emergency.

Sample of Mexican CID Card



Source: Mexican government.