What GAO Found

GAO’s investigation shows that terrorists or criminals could steal an American citizen’s identity, use basic counterfeiting skills to create fraudulent documentation for that identity, and obtain a genuine U.S. passport from State. GAO conducted four tests simulating this approach and was successful in obtaining a genuine U.S. passport in each case. In the most egregious case, an undercover GAO investigator obtained a passport using counterfeit documents and the Social Security Number (SSN) of a man who died in 1965. In another case, the investigator obtained a passport using counterfeit documents and the genuine SSN of a fictitious 5-year-old child GAO created for a previous investigation—even though the investigator’s counterfeit documents and application indicated he was 53 years old. All four passports were issued to the same GAO investigator, under four different names. In all four tests, GAO used counterfeit and/or fraudulently obtained documents. State and USPS employees did not identify GAO’s documents as counterfeit.

Genuine U.S. Passports Obtained with Counterfeit or Fraudulently Obtained Documents

Source: GAO (presentation), and the U.S. State Department (image).

GAO’s investigator later purchased an airline ticket under the name used on one of the four fraudulently obtained U.S. passports, and then used that passport as proof of identity to check in to his flight, get a boarding pass, and pass through the security checkpoint at a major metropolitan-area airport.

At a briefing on the results of GAO’s investigation, State officials agreed with GAO that the investigation exposes a major vulnerability in State’s passport issuance process. According to State officials, State’s fraud detection efforts are hampered by limitations to its information sharing and data access with other federal and state agencies. After GAO’s briefing, State officials notified GAO that they identified and revoked GAO’s four fraudulently obtained U.S. passports, and were studying the matter to determine the appropriate steps for improving State’s passport issuance process.