

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-483](#), a report to congressional requesters.

Why GAO Did This Study

Nearly 1 million people and \$1.5 billion of trade entered the United States through 328 POEs on an average day in fiscal year 2013. CBP, within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has four trusted traveler programs—Global Entry, NEXUS, SENTRI, and Free and Secure Trade (FAST)—to provide for expedited travel through dedicated lanes and kiosks at POEs. GAO was asked to review these programs. This report addresses (1) trends in enrollment and program use over the past 5 fiscal years, (2) the extent to which CBP has designed and implemented processes to help ensure consistent and efficient enrollment of applicants, and (3) the impacts of the programs on travelers and CBP. GAO analyzed data on enrollment and POE operations from fiscal years 2009 through 2013, reviewed documents, and visited nine POEs selected based on traveler volume and location. While information from these POEs cannot be generalized, the visits provided insights on program operations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that CBP assess the feasibility of practices to improve application processing times, establish a mechanism to document types of interview questions asked, and document information on foreign countries' procedures. DHS concurred with all recommendations but one to establish a mechanism to document interview questions asked because, among other reasons, DHS does not believe it should use scripted interview questions. As discussed in this report, GAO continues to believe in the need for such a mechanism.

View [GAO-14-483](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gambler@gao.gov.

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TRUSTED TRAVELERS

Programs Provide Benefits, but Enrollment Processes Could Be Strengthened

What GAO Found

As of January 2014, there were about 2.5 million people enrolled in U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) four trusted traveler programs—which provide expedited travel for preapproved, low-risk travelers and cargo—and enrollments more than quadrupled over the past 5 fiscal years. About 43 percent of trusted travelers were enrolled in Global Entry, operating at select air ports of entry (POE) and about 38 percent were enrolled in NEXUS, operating at northern border POEs. Trusted traveler entries into the United States increased from fiscal years 2009 through 2013. For example, entries through lanes for the Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection (SENTRI) program, operating at southern border POEs, increased from 5.9 million to 12.6 million vehicles.

CBP has designed and implemented trusted traveler enrollment processes, but could improve key areas to enhance and assess consistency and efficiency in those processes. U.S. citizens and foreign nationals seek to enroll in CBP's trusted traveler programs through an application vetted by CBP and an in-person interview. CBP has taken steps to improve the efficiency of the application-vetting process by, for example, automating background checks. However, CBP has not assessed the feasibility of various other practices for improving efficiency in enrollment processes, such as conducting group briefings for applicants on the programs. As of August 2013, CBP had a backlog of pending applications, as there were about 90,000 applications pending CBP vetting, and another 33,000 applicants who had not scheduled an interview. Assessing the feasibility of various practices, consistent with program management standards, could better position CBP to improve application-processing times. Further, CBP has designed some processes for the trusted traveler applicant interview process to help ensure consistency across enrollment centers; however, GAO identified variations in interviews and application denial rates, indicating that interviews may not be conducted consistently across enrollment centers. For example, GAO observed interviews that did not consistently follow procedures laid out in CBP guidance at 2 of the 3 centers where GAO observed interviews. Establishing a mechanism for CBP officers to document the kinds of questions asked and the nature of the applicants' responses could better position CBP to help ensure that interviews are conducted consistently. In addition, CBP has implemented trusted traveler programs that allow participating low-risk citizens from nine countries to use Global Entry kiosks at select air POEs. CBP has discussed information about other countries' operational procedures for sharing applicant-vetting results, but has not documented this information for seven of the countries, consistent with internal control standards. Without such documentation, there is no institutional record that those countries' procedures for vetting applicants help to ensure that only low-risk applicants are enrolled.

Trusted travelers generally experience shorter wait times than regular travelers, and CBP spends less time inspecting trusted travelers at POEs than regular travelers. GAO's analysis of CBP data showed that primary inspections took about twice as long or longer on average for regular travelers than for trusted travelers at 11 of 14 SENTRI crossings and 12 of 18 NEXUS crossings in fiscal year 2013. GAO's analysis of CBP data also indicates that trusted travelers commit fewer border violations, such as smuggling, than regular travelers.