

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-645](#), a report to the Honorable Harry Reid, Minority Leader, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

FGM/C comprises all procedures that involve partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other harm to the female genitals for non-medical reasons. The rationale for FGM/C often includes cultural, religious, and social factors in families and communities. In the United States, women and girls believed to be most at risk of FGM/C are those from immigrant families from countries where FGM/C is practiced.

GAO was asked to review the federal response to address FGM/C in the United States. In this report, GAO examines (1) what is known about the number of women and girls at risk of or subjected to FGM/C, (2) the protections available and actions taken to protect women and girls, and (3) the extent to which actions are taken to educate and assist immigrant communities and key stakeholders. GAO analyzed documents and spoke to officials from five relevant federal agencies; spoke with officials from local law enforcement, health care, education, and social services sectors; and assessed agency actions against federal internal control standards.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State provide information to additional visa recipients and that each federal agency document its domestic FGM/C awareness efforts. The agencies generally agreed with the recommendations; however, State disagreed with documenting its awareness efforts, noting that it is not responsible for domestic outreach and education. GAO maintains that the recommendation is valid as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-16-645](#). For more information, contact Marcia Crosse at (202) 512-7114 or crossem@gao.gov, or contact Gretta L. Goodwin at (202) 512-8777 or goodwing@gao.gov.

June 2016

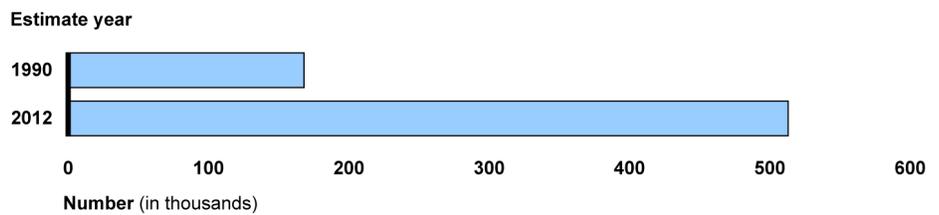
FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION/CUTTING

Existing Federal Efforts to Increase Awareness Should Be Improved

What GAO Found

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated that 513,000 women and girls in the United States were at risk of or had been subjected to female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) in 2012, a threefold increase from its 1990 estimate. CDC attributes this change primarily to increased immigration from countries where FGM/C is practiced, rather than an increase in the occurrence of FGM/C. Agency estimates were not able to distinguish between those who have already been subjected to FGM/C and those who are at risk.

CDC Estimates of the Number of Women and Girls in the United States at Risk of or Who Have Been Subjected to Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting, 1990 and 2012



Source: GAO analysis of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) documents. | GAO-16-645

Women and girls at risk of or who have been subjected to FGM/C in their home country may seek federal protection in the United States through different avenues of the immigration process, and GAO found that there have been few U.S. investigations and prosecutions. According to Department of Homeland Security officials, protection is most commonly provided through the asylum process, where individuals must demonstrate that they have been persecuted or fear persecution in their home country on account of protected grounds such as religion or nationality. While FGM/C is a crime under federal and many state laws, law enforcement officials identified few investigations and prosecutions related to FGM/C. Officials said that this may be due, in part, to underreporting.

Federal agencies and others provide education and assistance regarding FGM/C, but gaps exist and agencies lack documented plans for future efforts. The Department of State (State) directly provides information on FGM/C in a fact sheet only to certain types of visa recipients who apply in countries where FGM/C is practiced. State does not provide the fact sheet to nonimmigrant visa recipients as these visas are for temporary stays; however, some of these visas permit stays in the United States for multiple years. In addition, State does not directly provide the fact sheet to visa recipients who are nationals of countries where FGM/C is common, but apply at posts in other countries. Visa recipients who do not directly receive the fact sheet may be unaware of the health and U.S. legal consequences of FGM/C. Federal agencies have made efforts to increase awareness of FGM/C among stakeholder groups, including hosting roundtables and developing educational materials. However, the agencies lack documented plans for future efforts. Internal controls state that agencies should establish plans and document activities. Absent this, the federal government may be unable to ensure that its activities meet the needs of and that it communicates effectively with external parties, such as key stakeholder groups.