INTERNATIONAL MAIL SECURITY
Costs and Benefits of Using Electronic Data to Screen Mail Need to Be Assessed

Why GAO Did This Study
Expanding international use of e-commerce has increased the volume of global trade, potentially increasing threats sent to the United States via international mail and express cargo. Some in Congress have called for additional measures to identify prohibited items, such as increased collection of EAD that may provide CBP with information to better focus its screening efforts by targeting mail for inspection. GAO was asked to review the security of inbound international mail.

In this report, GAO addresses, among other objectives, (1) how inbound international items are inspected as they arrive in the United States; and (2) what options exist to collect EAD and the costs and benefits of using it to target mail for inspection. GAO reviewed documentation and interviewed officials from CBP, USPS, the U.S. Department of State, and, based on 2015 inbound international volume, the three largest express consignment operators. GAO also conducted site visits to all of USPS’s International Service Centers and two express consignment operators’ facilities, to observe screening operations and interview officials.

What GAO Found
Express consignment operators (like FedEx and DHL) and the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) work with U.S. Customs and Border Protection to inspect inbound international express cargo and mail. Express consignment operators are required to provide “electronic advance data” (EAD)—such as the shipper’s and recipient’s name and address—for all inbound express cargo. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) uses this information to target inspections. USPS is not required to provide this information to CBP. Nonetheless, as of March 2017, advance data are unavailable for roughly half of inbound international mail. Although USPS and CBP have two pilot programs under way to target mail for inspection based on EAD, they have not established specific and measureable goals and therefore lack the performance targets needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilots. Without these performance targets, USPS and CBP are unable to make well-informed decisions about the possible expansion of these pilots in the future. While USPS officials reported in November of 2016 that they planned to expand one of the pilots, CBP officials stated that the pilot was not ready for expansion because of USPS’s inability to provide 100 percent of targeted mail to CBP for inspection. USPS stated that it is working to address challenges related to identifying targeted mail within sacks containing hundreds of individual pieces of mail (see figure).

What GAO Recommends
GAO recommends that CBP, in coordination with USPS: (1) establish measureable performance goals to assess pilot programs and (2) evaluate the costs and benefits of using EAD to target mail for inspection compared with other targeting methods. CBP and USPS agreed with these recommendations.

View GAO-17-606. For more information, contact Lori Rectanus at (202) 512-2834 or rectanusl@gao.gov