

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-107](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Certain Afghan or Iraqi nationals who worked for the U.S. government and may have experienced serious threats due to this work may qualify for an SIV. An SIV allows them and eligible family members to resettle in the United States, and since 2008 over 60,000 SIV holders (principal holder and family members) have done so. Upon arrival, they are eligible for resettlement assistance from State and HHS. GAO was asked to review SIV holders' resettlement outcomes and challenges.

This report examines (1) available data on SIV holders' employment and other outcomes, (2) challenges affecting their resettlement, and (3) federal efforts to help address challenges. GAO analyzed the most recent federal data (State: 2010-2016; and HHS: 2016) on SIV holders' outcomes; interviewed officials from nine national resettlement agencies; and visited three states (CA, TX, and VA) where over half of SIV holders resettled. In these states, GAO interviewed the states' refugee coordinators and, for two local areas with relatively high levels of SIV resettlement, interviewed local resettlement agency officials and conducted focus groups with SIV holders. GAO also reviewed relevant federal laws and policies and interviewed federal officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that 1) HHS consider including SIV holders in its annual survey on refugees' longer-term outcomes, and that 2) State provide more detailed information on key issues to prospective SIV holders. Both agencies agreed with our recommendations.

View [GAO-18-107](#). For more information, contact Kathryn Larin at (202) 512-7215 or larink@gao.gov.

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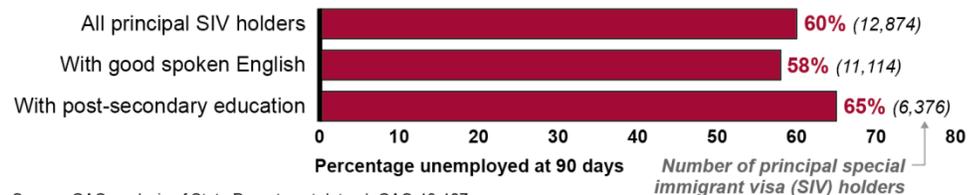
AFGHAN AND IRAQI SPECIAL IMMIGRANTS

More Information on Their Resettlement Outcomes Would Be Beneficial

What GAO Found

Since fiscal year 2011, about 13,000 Afghan and Iraqi nationals (excluding family members) have resettled in the United States under special immigrant visas (SIV), but limited data on their outcomes are available from the Department of State (State) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). State collects data on SIV holders' resettlement outcomes once—90 days after they arrive. GAO's analysis of State's data from October 2010 through December 2016 showed that the majority of principal SIV holders—those who worked for the U.S. government—were unemployed at 90 days, including those reporting high levels of education and spoken English. Separately, HHS collects data on about one-third of resettled SIV holders (those in one HHS grant program). According to HHS's fiscal year 2016 data (the only year available), most of these SIV holders were employed and not receiving cash assistance 6 months after arrival; however, these data are not representative of all SIV holders. GAO did not identify any outcome data for SIV holders beyond 6 months after arrival. HHS annually surveys refugees up to 5 years after arrival, but does not do so for SIV holders. However, it has occasionally used its survey of refugees to analyze selected groups at no additional reported cost. Such analysis could provide valuable information on whether SIV holders have achieved longer-term assimilation, consistent with HHS' mission and program goals.

Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Holders Who Were Unemployed 90 Days After Arrival, October 2010-December 2016



Source: GAO analysis of State Department data. | GAO-18-107

Stakeholders GAO interviewed reported several resettlement challenges, including capacity issues in handling large numbers of SIV holders, difficulties finding skilled employment, and SIV holders' high expectations. Officials from local resettlement agencies in Northern Virginia reported capacity challenges for their agencies and the community due to the large increase of SIV holders. In almost all of GAO's focus groups with principal SIV holders, participants expressed frustration at the need to take low-skilled jobs because they expected that their education and prior work experience would lead to skilled work.

State and HHS have taken steps to address some resettlement challenges. For example, in 2017 State placed restrictions on where SIV holders could resettle and HHS announced a new grant to support career development programs for SIV holders, refugees, and others. In addition, State provides information to prospective SIV holders about resettlement. However, the information is general, and lacks detail on key issues such as housing affordability, employment, and available government assistance. Providing such specifics could lead to more informed decisions by SIV holders on where to resettle and help them more quickly adapt to potential challenges once in the United States.