

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-518](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Federal agencies that employ law enforcement officers can use facial recognition technology to assist criminal investigations, among other activities. For example, the technology can help identify an unknown individual in a photo or video surveillance.

GAO was asked to review federal law enforcement use of facial recognition technology. This report examines the 1) ownership and use of facial recognition technology by federal agencies that employ law enforcement officers, 2) types of activities these agencies use the technology to support, and 3) the extent that these agencies track employee use of facial recognition technology owned by non-federal entities.

GAO administered a survey questionnaire to 42 federal agencies that employ law enforcement officers regarding their use of the technology. GAO also reviewed documents (e.g., system descriptions) and interviewed officials from selected agencies (e.g., agencies that owned facial recognition technology). This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in April 2021. Information that agencies deemed sensitive has been omitted.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations to each of 13 federal agencies to implement a mechanism to track what non-federal systems are used by employees, and assess the risks of using these systems. Twelve agencies concurred with both recommendations. U.S. Postal Service concurred with one and partially concurred with the other. GAO continues to believe the recommendation is valid, as described in the report.

View [GAO-21-518](#). For more information, contact Gretta L. Goodwin at (202) 512-8777 or goodwing@gao.gov.

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FACIAL RECOGNITION TECHNOLOGY

Federal Law Enforcement Agencies Should Better Assess Privacy and Other Risks

What GAO Found

GAO surveyed 42 federal agencies that employ law enforcement officers about their use of facial recognition technology. Twenty reported owning systems with facial recognition technology or using systems owned by other entities, such as other federal, state, local, and non-government entities (see figure).

Ownership and Use of Facial Recognition Technology Reported by Federal Agencies that Employ Law Enforcement Officers



Source: GAO analysis of survey data. | GAO-21-518
 Note: For more details, see figure 2 in GAO-21-518.

Agencies reported using the technology to support several activities (e.g., criminal investigations) and in response to COVID-19 (e.g., verify an individual's identity remotely). Six agencies reported using the technology on images of the unrest, riots, or protests following the death of George Floyd in May 2020. Three agencies reported using it on images of the events at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Agencies said the searches used images of suspected criminal activity.

All fourteen agencies that reported using the technology to support criminal investigations also reported using systems owned by non-federal entities. However, only one has awareness of what non-federal systems are used by employees. By having a mechanism to track what non-federal systems are used by employees and assessing related risks (e.g., privacy and accuracy-related risks), agencies can better mitigate risks to themselves and the public.