



Highlights of [GAO-08-110](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Terrorist Screening Center (TSC) maintains a consolidated watch list of known or appropriately suspected terrorists and sends records from the list to agencies to support terrorism-related screening. Because the list is an important tool for combating terrorism, GAO examined (1) standards for including individuals on the list, (2) the outcomes of encounters with individuals on the list, (3) potential vulnerabilities and efforts to address them, and (4) actions taken to promote effective terrorism-related screening.

To conduct this work, GAO reviewed documentation obtained from and interviewed officials at TSC, the FBI, the National Counterterrorism Center, the Department of Homeland Security, and other agencies that perform terrorism-related screening.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making recommendations to promote a comprehensive and coordinated approach to terrorist-related screening. Among them are actions to monitor and respond to vulnerabilities and to establish up-to-date guidelines, strategies, and plans to facilitate expanded and enhanced use of the list.

GAO provided a draft copy of this report to relevant departments and agencies. The departments that provided comments generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-110](#). For more information, contact Eileen Larence at (202) 512-8777 or [larencee@gao.gov](mailto:larencee@gao.gov).

# TERRORIST WATCH LIST SCREENING

## Opportunities Exist to Enhance Management Oversight, Reduce Vulnerabilities in Agency Screening Processes, and Expand Use of the List

### What GAO Found

The FBI and the intelligence community use standards of reasonableness to evaluate individuals for nomination to the consolidated watch list. In general, individuals who are reasonably suspected of having possible links to terrorism—in addition to individuals with known links—are to be nominated. As such, being on the list does not automatically prohibit, for example, the issuance of a visa or entry into the United States. Rather, when an individual on the list is encountered, agency officials are to assess the threat the person poses to determine what action to take, if any. As of May 2007, the consolidated watch list contained approximately 755,000 records.

From December 2003 through May 2007, screening and law enforcement agencies encountered individuals who were positively matched to watch list records approximately 53,000 times. Many individuals were matched multiple times. The outcomes of these encounters reflect an array of actions, such as arrests; denials of entry into the United States; and, most often, questioning and release. Within the federal community, there is general agreement that the watch list has helped to combat terrorism by (1) providing screening and law enforcement agencies with information to help them respond appropriately during encounters and (2) helping law enforcement and intelligence agencies track individuals on the watch list and collect information about them for use in conducting investigations and in assessing threats.

Regarding potential vulnerabilities, TSC sends records daily from the watch list to screening agencies. However, some records are not sent, partly because screening against them may not be needed to support the respective agency's mission or may not be possible due to the requirements of computer programs used to check individuals against watch list records. Also, some subjects of watch list records have passed undetected through agency screening processes and were not identified, for example, until after they had boarded and flew on an aircraft or were processed at a port of entry and admitted into the United States. TSC and other federal agencies have ongoing initiatives to help reduce these potential vulnerabilities, including efforts to improve computerized name-matching programs and the quality of watch list data.

Although the federal government has made progress in promoting effective terrorism-related screening, additional screening opportunities remain untapped—within the federal sector, as well as within critical infrastructure components of the private sector. This situation exists partly because the government lacks an up-to-date strategy and implementation plan for optimizing use of the terrorist watch list. Also lacking are clear lines of authority and responsibility. An up-to-date strategy and implementation plan, supported by a clearly defined leadership or governance structure, would provide a platform to establish governmentwide screening priorities, assess progress toward policy goals and intended outcomes, consider factors related to privacy and civil liberties, ensure that any needed changes are implemented, and respond to issues that hinder effectiveness.