BORDER SECURITY

Actions Needed by DHS to Address Long-Standing Challenges in Planning for a Biometric Exit System

Why GAO Did This Study

Each year, millions of visitors come to the United States legally on a temporary basis. Overstays are individuals who were admitted legally on a temporary basis but then overstayed their authorized periods of admission. The Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004 required the Secretary of Homeland Security to develop a plan to accelerate implementation of a biometric entry and exit data system that matches information provided by foreign nationals upon their arrival and departure. Since 2004, DHS has tracked foreign nationals' entries into the United States, and since December 2006, a biometric entry capability has been fully operational at all ports of entry. However, GAO has identified a range of challenges that DHS has faced in its efforts to deploy a corresponding biometric exit capability. DHS's CBP is primarily responsible for implementing a biometric exit program.

This statement discusses the extent to which DHS has made progress in developing a biometric exit system and reporting overstay estimates. This statement is based on a report GAO issued in July 2013 (GAO-13-683), with selected updates conducted in January 2016 to obtain information from DHS on actions it has taken to address prior recommendations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO previously made recommendations to DHS to establish time frames and milestones for a biometric air exit evaluation framework and assess the reliability of its overstay data. DHS concurred with the recommendations, and has actions underway to address them.

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What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) faces long-standing challenges in developing a biometric exit system and reporting reliable overstay data. In July 2013, GAO reported that DHS had not fulfilled statutory requirements to implement a biometric exit capability and report data on overstays. As of January 2016, DHS has planning efforts underway but has not yet met these statutory requirements. Specifically, in May 2012, DHS internally reported recommendations to support planning for a biometric exit capability at airports. However, as of January 2016, the department has not yet fully addressed those recommendations. For example, DHS has not completed an evaluation framework that, among other things, assesses the value of collecting biometric data in addition to biographic data, as it recommended in May 2012. In July 2013, GAO recommended that DHS establish time frames and milestones for a biometric air exit evaluation framework to help guide its assessment efforts. DHS concurred with the recommendation, and has actions planned or underway to address it. Specifically, in January 2016, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials stated that they were continuing to develop an evaluation framework by developing metrics for measuring the performance and effectiveness of biometric air exit technologies.

Moreover, in July 2013, GAO reported that, according to DHS officials, the department's goal was to develop information about options for biometric air exit and report to Congress in time for the fiscal year 2016 budget cycle regarding the benefits and costs associated with a biometric air exit system. GAO found that, without robust planning that includes time frames and milestones to develop and implement an evaluation framework, DHS lacked reasonable assurance that it would be able to provide an assessment to Congress as planned. As of January 2016, DHS is working to develop this report for Congress, and CBP officials told GAO they were unable to estimate when it would be completed. Since GAO's 2013 report, DHS has also implemented several projects to test and evaluate biometric air exit technologies. For example, in July 2015, CBP began testing a handheld mobile device to collect biographic and biometric exit data from randomly-selected, foreign national travelers at 10 selected airports. Finalizing the evaluation framework consistent with GAO's recommendation would help guide DHS's efforts to assess the benefits and costs of various air exit options.

GAO also reported in July 2013 that challenges in developing a biometric exit system, as well as weaknesses in departure data, have affected the reliability of DHS's data on overstays. Because of concerns about the reliability of the department's overstay data, neither DHS nor its predecessor has regularly reported annual overstay data to Congress since 1994. In July 2013, GAO found that, although DHS had taken action to strengthen its overstay data, DHS had not validated or tested the reliability of those actions and challenges to reporting reliable overstay data remained. GAO recommended that DHS assess and document the reliability of its overstay data, and DHS concurred with the recommendation. However, as of January 2016, DHS has not yet reported overstay data or documented its reliability, and DHS officials could not provide a time frame for when they would address GAO's recommendation.

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