

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-515](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

Every year, more than 600,000 people are reported missing, and hundreds of human remains go unidentified. Two primary federal databases supported by DOJ—NCIC and NamUs—contain data related to missing and unidentified persons to help solve these cases. NCIC contains criminal justice information accessed by authorized agencies to assist with daily investigations. NamUs information can be used by law enforcement, medical examiners, coroners, and the general public to help with long-term missing and unidentified persons cases.

Senate Report 113-181 (accompanying the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act of 2015) includes a provision for GAO to review NCIC and NamUs. This report describes the access to and use of missing and unidentified persons information contained in NCIC and NamUs, and the extent to which there are opportunities to improve the use of this information. GAO reviewed NCIC and NamUs data, and relevant state and federal statutes. GAO also conducted nongeneralizable interviews with stakeholders in three states, selected in part on state laws.

## What GAO Recommends

To allow for more efficient use of missing and unidentified persons information, GAO recommends that DOJ evaluate options to share information between NCIC and NamUs. DOJ disagreed because it believes it lacks the necessary legal authority. GAO believes DOJ can study options for sharing information within the confines of its legal framework, and therefore believes the recommendation remains valid.

View [GAO-16-515](#). For more information, contact Diana C. Maurer, (202) 512-9627 or [maurerd@gao.gov](mailto:maurerd@gao.gov)

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# MISSING PERSONS AND UNIDENTIFIED REMAINS

## Opportunities May Exist to Share Information More Efficiently

### What GAO Found

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Crime Information Center (NCIC) database includes criminal justice agency information and access to such data is restricted to authorized users. In contrast, the Department of Justice's (DOJ) National Institute of Justice (NIJ) funds and oversees the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), a database for which the public may register to access published case information. Because many users of NamUs are not authorized to access NCIC, there are no direct links between the systems. As a result, while both NCIC and NamUs contain information on long-term missing and unidentified persons, they remain separate systems.

DOJ could facilitate more efficient sharing of information on missing persons and unidentified remains (referred to as missing and unidentified persons cases) contained in these systems. GAO found, in part, that the following three key characteristics of NCIC and NamUs are fragmented or overlapping, creating the risk of duplication.

- **Database Records:** NCIC and NamUs contain fragmented information associated with long-term missing and unidentified persons (cases open for more than 30 days). For example, in fiscal year 2015, 3,170 long-term missing persons cases were reported to NamUs while 84,401 missing persons records reported to NCIC became long-term cases. NamUs also accepts and maintains records of missing and unidentified persons cases that may not be found in NCIC because, for example, they have not yet been filed with law enforcement. As a result, users relying on only one system may miss information that could be instrumental in solving these types of cases.
- **Registered Users:** The NCIC user base is significantly larger than the NamUs user base, and the types of users vary, which may contribute to the discrepancies in each system's data. For instance, almost all law enforcement agencies use NCIC, with only a small fraction registered to use NamUs. Additionally, members of the public do not have access to NCIC, but can report missing persons cases to NamUs.
- **Data Validation Efforts:** In part to minimize fragmentation, NamUs uses a case validation process and other ad hoc efforts to help ensure that data on missing and unidentified persons contained in NCIC is captured by NamUs. However, these processes introduce additional inefficiencies because they require officials to manually review and enter case data into both systems, resulting in duplicative data entry.

Inefficiencies exist in the use of information on missing and unidentified persons primarily because there is no mechanism to share information between the systems, such as a notifier to inform NCIC users if related case data were present in NamUs. According to FBI officials, federal law precludes full integration of NCIC and NamUs; however, opportunities to share information may exist within the legal framework to address fragmentation and overlap without full system integration. By evaluating the technical and legal feasibility of options to share information, documenting the results, and implementing feasible options, DOJ could better inform those who are helping solve missing and unidentified persons cases and increase the efficiency of solving such cases.