

## Why GAO Did This Study

Previous attempted and successful terrorist attacks against the United States have raised questions about the security of the U.S. government's process for adjudicating NIVs, which are issued to foreign nationals, such as tourists, business visitors, and students, seeking temporary admission into the United States. For example, the December 2015 shootings in San Bernardino, California, led to concerns about NIV screening and vetting processes because one of the attackers was admitted into the United States under a NIV. In 2017, the President issued executive actions directing agencies to improve visa screening and vetting, and establishing nationality-based visa entry restrictions, which the Supreme Court upheld in June 2018.

GAO was asked to review NIV screening and vetting. This report examines (1) outcomes and characteristics of adjudicated NIV applications from fiscal years 2012 through 2017, and (2) key changes made to the NIV adjudication process in response to executive actions taken in 2017.

GAO analyzed State NIV adjudication data for fiscal years 2012 through 2017, the most recent and complete data available. GAO visited seven consular posts selected based on visa workload and other factors. GAO reviewed relevant executive orders and proclamations, and documents related to implementing these actions.

This is a public version of a sensitive report issued in June 2018. Information that DHS, State, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence deemed sensitive has been removed.

View [GAO-18-608](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or [GamblerR@gao.gov](mailto:GamblerR@gao.gov).

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## NONIMMIGRANT VISAS

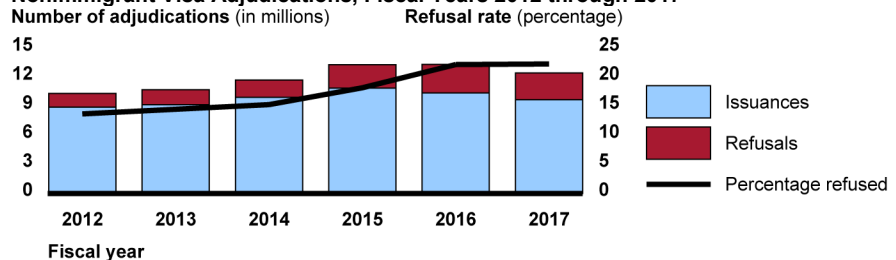
### Outcomes of Applications and Changes in Response to 2017 Executive Actions

## What GAO Found

The total number of nonimmigrant visa (NIV) applications that Department of State (State) consular officers adjudicated annually peaked at about 13.4 million in fiscal year 2016, and decreased by about 880,000 adjudications in fiscal year 2017. NIV adjudications varied by visa group, country of nationality, and refusal reason:

- **Visa group.** From fiscal years 2012 through 2017, about 80 percent of NIV adjudications were for tourists and business visitors. During this time, adjudications for temporary workers increased by about 50 percent and decreased for students and exchange visitors by about 2 percent.
- **Country of nationality.** In fiscal year 2017, more than half of all NIV adjudications were for applicants of six countries of nationality: China (2.02 million, or 16 percent), Mexico (1.75 million, or 14 percent), India (1.28 million, or 10 percent), Brazil (670,000, or 5 percent), Colombia (460,000, or 4 percent), and Argentina (370,000, or 3 percent).
- **Refusal reason.** State data indicate that over this time period, 18 percent of adjudicated applications were refused; more than 90 percent were because the applicant did not qualify for the visa sought, and a small percentage (0.05 percent) were due to terrorism and security-related concerns.

Nonimmigrant Visa Adjudications, Fiscal Years 2012 through 2017



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-18-608

In 2017, two executive orders and a proclamation issued by the President required, among other actions, visa entry restrictions for nationals of certain listed countries of concern, the development of uniform baseline screening and vetting standards, and changes to NIV screening and vetting procedures.

- GAO's analysis of State data indicates that, out of the nearly 2.8 million NIV applications refused in fiscal year 2017, 1,338 applications were refused due to visa entry restrictions implemented per the executive actions.
- State, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and others developed standards for screening and vetting by the U.S. government for all immigration benefits, such as for the requirement for applicants to undergo certain security checks.
- Further, State sought and received emergency approval from the Office of Management and Budget in May 2017 to develop a new form to collect additional information from some visa applicants, such as email addresses and social media handles.