

Highlights of [GAO-19-477T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittees on Border Security, Facilitation, and Operations, and Intelligence and Counterterrorism, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

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 screening and vetting processes for NIVs. State manages the visa adjudication process. DHS seeks to identify and interdict travelers who are potential security threats to the United States, such as foreign fighters and potential terrorists, human traffickers, drug smugglers and otherwise inadmissible persons, at the earliest possible point in time. DHS also has certain responsibilities for strengthening the security of the visa process. 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.

This statement addresses (1) data and information on NIV adjudications and (2) CBP programs aimed at preventing high-risk travelers from boarding U.S.-bound flights. This statement is based on prior products GAO issued in January 2017 and August 2018, along with selected updates conducted in December 2018 to obtain information from DHS on actions it has taken to address a prior GAO recommendation.

What GAO Recommends

GAO previously recommended that CBP evaluate the effectiveness of its predeparture programs. DHS agreed with GAO's recommendation and CBP has actions under way to address it.

View [GAO-19-477T](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or GamblerR@gao.gov.

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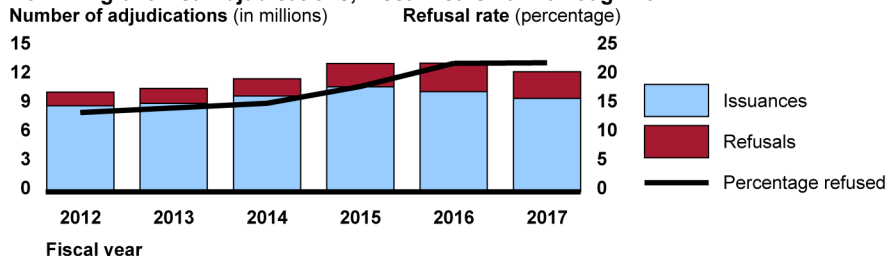
BORDER SECURITY

U.S. Government Efforts to Strengthen Nonimmigrant Visa Security and Address High-Risk Air Travelers

What GAO Found

In August 2018, GAO reported that the total number of nonimmigrant visa (NIV) applications that Department of State (State) consular officers adjudicated annually increased from fiscal years 2012 through 2016, but decreased in fiscal year 2017 (the most recent data available at the time of GAO's report). NIVs are issued to foreign nationals, such as tourists, business visitors, and students, seeking temporary admission into the United States. The number of adjudications peaked at about 13.4 million in fiscal year 2016, and decreased by about 880,000 adjudications in fiscal year 2017. State refused about 18 percent of adjudicated applications during this time period, of which more than 90 percent were because the applicant did not qualify for the visa sought and 0.05 percent were due to terrorism and security-related concerns. 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. GAO's analysis indicates that, out of the nearly 2.8 million NIV applications refused in fiscal year 2017, 1,338 applications were refused specifically due to visa entry restrictions implemented per the executive actions.

Nonimmigrant Visa Adjudications, Fiscal Years 2012 through 2017



Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | [GAO-19-477T](#)

In January 2017, GAO reported that the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) operates predeparture programs to help identify and interdict high-risk travelers before they board U.S.-bound flights. CBP officers inspect all U.S.-bound travelers on those flights that are precleared at the 15 Preclearance locations at foreign airports—which serve as U.S. ports of entry—and, if deemed inadmissible, a traveler will not be permitted to board the aircraft. CBP also operates nine Immigration Advisory Program and two Joint Security Program locations, as well as three Regional Carrier Liaison Groups, through which CBP may recommend that air carriers not permit identified high-risk travelers to board U.S.-bound flights. CBP data showed that it identified and interdicted over 22,000 high-risk air travelers through these programs in fiscal year 2015 (the most recent data available at the time of GAO's report). While CBP tracked some data, such as the number of travelers deemed inadmissible, it had not fully evaluated the overall effectiveness of these programs. GAO recommended that CBP develop a system of performance measures and baselines to better position CBP to assess program performance. As of December 2018, CBP set preliminary performance targets for fiscal year 2019, and plans to set targets for future fiscal years by October 31, 2019. GAO will continue to review CBP's actions to address this recommendation.