

# State Should Consistently Conduct Global Staffing Needs Assessments to Help Balance Workloads and Address Long Wait Times

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A report to congressional committees.

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## What GAO Found

Visitor visa adjudications, which account for most nonimmigrant visas (NIV), have surpassed pre-COVID numbers. The Department of State adjudicated 9.2 million visitor visas pre-COVID in fiscal year (FY) 2019. That number dropped to 1.5 million in FY 2021. By FY 2025, the number of adjudications surpassed pre-pandemic levels, reaching 11.7 million. The average wait time to obtain an interview for a visitor visa was almost 8 times higher than before the pandemic, increasing from 26 days in FY 2019 to 201 days in FY 2025. In addition, the number of consular officers working on NIVs almost recovered from a COVID-era low of 1,104 in FY 2021 to pre-pandemic levels in FY 2024, reaching 1,342, but dropped to 904 in FY 2025 due to hiring freezes and attrition.

State officials in Brazil, China, India, and Mexico—the countries GAO selected for more in-depth analysis—identified low staffing levels relative to demand for visitor visas as the main factor, among others, contributing to wait times to obtain an interview. According to data provided by State, wait times to obtain an interview in Mexico and India are longer than in China and Brazil, in part because they have fewer staff working on NIVs relative to the number of applications they receive (see table).

**Nonimmigrant Visa (NIV) Applications, CA Officers working on NIVs, NIV Applications per CA Officer, and Weighted Average Interview Wait Times to Obtain an Interview by Selected Countries, Fiscal Year 2025**

| Country | NIV applications | CA officers working on NIVs | NIV applications per CA officer | Weighted average wait times, in days |
|---------|------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Brazil  | 1,141,235        | 87                          | 13,118                          | 32                                   |
| China   | 1,206,011        | 119                         | 10,135                          | 34                                   |
| India   | 1,455,255        | 68                          | 21,401                          | 346                                  |
| Mexico  | 2,658,627        | 124                         | 21,441                          | 283                                  |

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State data. | GAO-26-107902

Since FY 2019, State has conducted and implemented one Global Repositioning Exercise (GREX), which provides information used to bring consular staffing levels into alignment with workloads, according to State officials. Although the GREX is not required by policy, State officials said that the exercise is designed to be conducted annually. However, officials said they did not conduct the exercise in FY 2021 and FY 2022 because of issues related to COVID and in FY 2024 and FY 2025 because of changing policy priorities. Having a mechanism to require the exercise would help ensure State consistently and fully assesses workloads and NIV demand at posts and adequately addresses its staffing needs, particularly in years when significant changes are affecting workload.

## Why GAO Did This Study

Millions of travelers to the U.S. apply for NIVs each year, which include visitor visas for tourism and business purposes, as well as visas for foreign students, diplomats, and temporary workers. According to the U.S. Travel Association, international travel and tourism contributed \$176 billion to the U.S. economy in 2025. In adjudicating visas, State must balance speed and efficiency with national security concerns. One key issue that can affect efficiency is long wait times for an interview, which is required in most cases to obtain a visa.

A House Committee on Appropriations report and the explanatory statement accompanying legislation that became the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024 includes a provision for GAO to examine the efficiency of consular operations, including visa processing times. This report examines (1) trends in the number of applications and adjudications for NIVs, associated wait times to obtain an interview, and staffing levels from FY 2019 through FY 2025; and (2) how staffing levels affect wait times and to what extent State determines posts' staffing needs; among other objectives. GAO analyzed State's data for NIVs and interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C. GAO also conducted interviews and discussion groups with consular officers and management in Brazil, China, India, and Mexico, the countries with the highest demand for NIVs in FY 2025.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that State establish a mechanism, such as a policy or guidance, requiring it to consistently conduct its GREX. State neither agreed nor disagreed. GAO maintains the recommendation is valid, as discussed in the report.