

GAO-26-108650

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A report to congressional requesters.

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#### What GAO Found

Nonfederal law enforcement officers query encountered individuals against the terrorist watchlist during routine police interactions, such as traffic stops. After encountering a potentially terrorist watchlisted individual, nonfederal law enforcement officers receive instructions, via the National Crime Information Center (NCIC), to contact the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Threat Screening Center to determine whether the individual is a positive or negative match to the terrorist watchlist.

GAO found that almost half of the law enforcement entities GAO interviewed in four states (12 of 26 entities, including police and sheriff's departments) reported that officers were not consistently reporting encounters with potentially terrorist watchlisted individuals in instances where it is warranted. Seeking information to understand the extent to which nonfederal law enforcement entities are consistently reporting terrorist watchlist encounters could improve the accuracy of watchlist records.

#### Nonfederal Law Enforcement Steps When Responding To Terrorist Watchlist Encounters



Source: GAO review of Federal Bureau of Investigation documents; Good Studio/adobestock.com; GAO (icons). | GAO-26-108650

<sup>a</sup>Dispatchers may be used by police departments to query the National Crime Information Center instead of the responding officer.

The Threat Screening Center uses outreach efforts to communicate terrorist watchlisting policies to nonfederal law enforcement entities that use the terrorist watchlist. However, GAO found that FBI has not ensured nonfederal law enforcement entities are aware of terrorist watchlist policies and has not taken steps to develop a communication plan for its outreach efforts. Developing a communication plan with goals and measures as well as periodic assessments of progress would help accomplish this. Additionally, FBI's Criminal Justice Information Services does not ensure states train NCIC users on terrorist watchlist policies. Without developing a process to review states' efforts to do so, FBI cannot ensure that state training programs instruct nonfederal law enforcement to properly protect and respond to terrorist watchlist information.

#### Why GAO Did This Study

The Threat Screening Center, administered by FBI, is responsible for managing the terrorist watchlist. In recent years, Members of Congress have raised questions about how nonfederal entities use the terrorist watchlist.

GAO was asked to examine the use of the terrorist watchlist by nonfederal law enforcement entities. This report examines (1) nonfederal entities' reporting of terrorist watchlist encounters to FBI and opportunities for improvement and (2) steps FBI has taken to ensure nonfederal entities' awareness of watchlist policies through outreach and state-led trainings.

GAO reviewed watchlist policies and training resources for nonfederal entities and collected encounter data for fiscal years 2019 through 2024. GAO interviewed nonfederal law enforcement officials in four states selected based on the number of encounters and other factors. While not generalizable, these interviews provided insights into officials' awareness of policies and training.

This is the public version of a sensitive report GAO issued in August 2025. Information on encounter data and official FBI instructions on handling watchlist encounters that FBI deemed sensitive has been omitted.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FBI (1) seek information to understand the extent to which nonfederal law enforcement entities are consistently reporting terrorist watchlist encounters, (2) develop a communication plan to improve its outreach efforts, and (3) develop a process to review state efforts to instruct NCIC users about watchlist policies. FBI concurred with the recommendations.