



Highlights of [GAO-08-542T](#), a report to Subcommittee on Homeland Security, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Since September 11, 2001, the need to secure U.S. borders has increased in importance and attracted greater public and Congressional attention. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has spent billions of dollars to prevent the illegal entry of individuals and contraband between ports of entry—government designated locations where DHS inspects persons and goods to determine whether they may be lawfully admitted into the country. Yet, while DHS apprehends hundreds of thousands of such individuals each year, several hundreds of thousands more enter the country illegally and undetected. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), a component of DHS, is the lead federal agency in charge of securing our nation's borders.

This testimony summarizes GAO's work on DHS's efforts on selected border security operations and programs related to (1) inspecting travelers at U.S. ports of entry, (2) detecting individuals attempting to enter the country illegally between ports of entry, and (3) screening of international travelers before they arrive at U.S. ports and challenges remaining in these areas. GAO's observations are based on products issued from May 2006 through February 2008. In prior reports, GAO recommended various actions to DHS to, among other things, help address weaknesses in the traveler inspection programs and processes. DHS has generally agreed with our recommendations and has taken various actions to address them.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-542T](#). For more information, contact Rich Stana at (202) 512-8816 or StanaR@gao.gov.

HOMELAND SECURITY

DHS Has Taken Actions to Strengthen Border Security Programs and Operations, but Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

CBP has taken actions to improve traveler inspections at U.S. ports of entry, but challenges remain. First, CBP has stressed the importance of effective inspections and trained CBP supervisors and officers in interviewing travelers. Yet, weaknesses in travel inspection procedures and lack of physical infrastructure and staff have hampered CBP's ability to inspect travelers thoroughly and detect fraudulent documents. Second, CBP is implementing an initiative requiring citizens of the United States, Bermuda, Canada, and Mexico to present certain identification documents when entering the United States. As of December 2007, actions taken to meet the initiative's requirements include selecting technology to be used at land ports of entry and developing plans to train officers to use it. Finally, DHS has developed a program to collect, maintain, and share data on selected foreign nationals entering and exiting the country. As of October 2007, DHS has invested more than \$1.5 billion on the program since 2003 and biometrically-enabled entry capabilities now operate at more than 300 ports of entry. However, though allocating about \$250 million since 2003 to exit-related efforts, DHS has not yet detailed how it will verify when travelers exit the country.

In November 2005, DHS announced the launch of a multiyear, multibillion-dollar program aimed at securing U.S. borders and reducing immigration of individuals who enter the United States illegally and undetected between ports of entry. One component of this program, which DHS accepted as complete in February 2008, was an effort to secure 28 miles along the southwest border using, among other means, improved cameras and radars. DHS plans to apply the lessons learned to future projects. Another program component, 370 miles of pedestrian fence and 300 miles of vehicle fence, has not yet been completed and DHS will be challenged to do so by its December 2008 deadline due to various factors, such as acquiring rights to border lands. Additionally, DHS is unable to estimate the total cost of this component because various factors are not yet known such as the type of terrain where the fencing is to be constructed. Finally, CBP has experienced unprecedented growth in the number of its Border Patrol agents. While initial training at the academy is being provided, Border Patrol officials expressed concerns about the agency's ability to provide sufficient field training.

To screen international travelers before they arrive in the United States, the federal government has implemented new policies and programs, including enhancing visa security and providing counterterrorism training to overseas consular officials. As GAO previously recommended, DHS needs to better manage risks posed by a program that allows nationals from 27 countries to travel to the United States without a visa for certain durations and purposes. Regarding the prescreening of international passengers bound for the United States, CBP has a pilot program that provides additional scrutiny of passengers and their travel documents at foreign airports prior to their departure. CBP has reported several successes through the pilot but has not yet determined whether to make the program permanent.