



Highlights of [GAO-08-361](#), a report to the Chairman and Ranking Member, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology (US-VISIT) program's goals are to enhance the security of U.S. citizens and visitors, facilitate legitimate travel and trade, ensure the integrity of the U.S. immigration system, and protect the privacy of visitors. It is to use biometric and biographic information to control and monitor the pre-entry, entry, status, and exit of foreign visitors. GAO was asked to determine (1) whether DHS has defined and economically justified a strategic solution for meeting US-VISIT goals; (2) the biometric technology options DHS has considered and the basis for the selected options; and (3) DHS's efforts to define, manage, and coordinate the relationships between US-VISIT and other immigration and border management programs. To accomplish this, GAO assessed key program documentation against relevant criteria and examined available biometric research.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Secretary of Homeland Security ensure that the strategic solution components are well-defined and economically justified before investing large sums of money and that they are effectively coordinated with related programs. DHS concurred with GAO's recommendations and stated that it has initiated actions to implement them.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-361](#). For more information, contact Joel C. Willemssen at (202) 512-6222 or willemssenj@gao.gov.

HOMELAND SECURITY

Strategic Solution for US-VISIT Program Needs to Be Better Defined, Justified, and Coordinated

What GAO Found

DHS has partially defined a strategic solution for meeting US-VISIT's goals. In particular, the US-VISIT program office has defined and begun to develop a key capability known as "Unique Identity," which is to establish a single identity for all individuals who interact with any immigration and border management organization by capturing the individual's biometrics, including 10 fingerprints and a digital image, at the earliest possible interaction. However, the program office has yet to define and economically justify a comprehensive strategic solution for controlling and monitoring the exit of foreign visitors, which is critical to accomplishing the program's goals. Further, the department did not economically justify its ongoing investment in Unique Identity in a timely fashion. Specifically, the program office did not justify its investment until about 14 months after selecting and pursuing an alternative solution and obligating about \$65 million. The absence of a fully defined strategic solution and timely economic justification hinders informed decision making about the best course of action for accomplishing strategic program goals and inhibits the ability to measure performance and promote accountability.

DHS considered various biometric technologies, including fingerprints, facial, and iris technologies, and continues to use fingerprints as its foundational biometric technology. The focus on fingerprint technology is appropriate, given the opportunity to leverage existing DHS and Federal Bureau of Investigation identification systems and databases and to establish a single identity mechanism for all immigration and border management programs. In addition, research into fingerprints and other forms of biometric identification, such as facial recognition and iris scanning, show that fingerprints continue to be the most accurate biometric for identification purposes.

DHS is taking a range of evolving actions, primarily at the department level, to coordinate relationships among US-VISIT and other immigration and border management programs. Thus far, this evolution has yet to progress to the point of reflecting the full scope of key practices that GAO has previously identified as essential to enhancing and sustaining collaborative efforts that span multiple organizations. To its credit, the department has defined common outcomes through its strategic plan and enterprise architecture and has taken steps to implement other collaboration practices, such as leveraging resources across its screening programs and developing screening performance indicators. However, the US-VISIT program office has yet to fully define its relationships with other immigration and border management programs. As a result, the department is at increased risk of introducing the inefficiencies and reduced effectiveness that result from suboptimizing how these programs collectively support its immigration and border management goals and objectives.