

March 2009

DEPARTMENT OF
STATE

Undercover Tests
Reveal Significant
Vulnerabilities in
State's Passport
Issuance Process



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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-09-447](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

A genuine U.S. passport is a vital document, permitting its owner to travel freely in and out of the United States, prove U.S. citizenship, obtain further identification documents, and set up bank accounts, among other things. Unfortunately, a terrorist or other criminal could take advantage of these benefits by fraudulently obtaining a genuine U.S. passport from the Department of State (State).

There are many ways that malicious individuals could fraudulently obtain a genuine U.S. passport, including stealing an American citizen's identity and counterfeiting or fraudulently obtaining identification or citizenship documents to meet State requirements. GAO was asked to proactively test the effectiveness of State's passport issuance process to determine whether the process is vulnerable to fraud.

To do so, GAO designed four test scenarios that simulated the actions of a malicious individual who had access to an American citizen's personal identity information. GAO created counterfeit documents for four fictitious or deceased individuals using off-the-shelf, commercially available hardware, software, and materials. An undercover GAO investigator then applied for passports at three United States Postal Service (USPS) locations and a State-run passport office.

[View GAO-09-447](#) or [key components](#).
For more information, contact Gregory D. Kutz at (202) 512-6722 or kutzg@gao.gov.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Undercover Tests Reveal Significant Vulnerabilities in State's Passport Issuance Process

What GAO Found

GAO's investigation shows that terrorists or criminals could steal an American citizen's identity, use basic counterfeiting skills to create fraudulent documentation for that identity, and obtain a genuine U.S. passport from State. GAO conducted four tests simulating this approach and was successful in obtaining a genuine U.S. passport in each case. In the most egregious case, an undercover GAO investigator obtained a passport using counterfeit documents and the Social Security Number (SSN) of a man who died in 1965. In another case, the investigator obtained a passport using counterfeit documents and the genuine SSN of a fictitious 5-year-old child GAO created for a previous investigation—even though the investigator's counterfeit documents and application indicated he was 53 years old. All four passports were issued to the same GAO investigator, under four different names. In all four tests, GAO used counterfeit and/or fraudulently obtained documents. State and USPS employees did not identify GAO's documents as counterfeit.

Genuine U.S. Passports Obtained with Counterfeit or Fraudulently Obtained Documents



Source: GAO (presentation), and the U.S. State Department (image).

GAO's investigator later purchased an airline ticket under the name used on one of the four fraudulently obtained U.S. passports, and then used that passport as proof of identity to check in to his flight, get a boarding pass, and pass through the security checkpoint at a major metropolitan-area airport.

At a briefing on the results of GAO's investigation, State officials agreed with GAO that the investigation exposes a major vulnerability in State's passport issuance process. According to State officials, State's fraud detection efforts are hampered by limitations to its information sharing and data access with other federal and state agencies. After GAO's briefing, State officials notified GAO that they identified and revoked GAO's four fraudulently obtained U.S. passports, and were studying the matter to determine the appropriate steps for improving State's passport issuance process.

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Abbreviations

D.C.	District of Columbia
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
SSA	Social Security Administration
SSN	Social Security Number
USPS	United States Postal Service

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United States Government Accountability Office
Washington, DC 20548

March 13, 2009

The Honorable Jon Kyl
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Terrorism and Homeland Security
Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein
United States Senate

A U.S. passport not only allows an individual to travel freely in and out of the United States, but also can be used to obtain further identification documents, prove U.S. citizenship, and set up bank accounts, among other things. Because passports issued under a false identity help enable individuals to conceal their movements and activities, there is great concern that passport fraud could facilitate acts of terrorism. In fact, the 9/11 Commission stated that “for terrorists, travel documents are as important as weapons,” and further noted that terrorists need to travel “to meet, train, plan, case targets, and gain access to attack.”¹ Further, passport fraud facilitates other crimes such as illegal immigration, money laundering, drug trafficking, tax evasion, and alien smuggling.

Malicious individuals may seek to exploit vulnerabilities in the Department of State’s (State) current passport issuance process, such as a lack of due diligence on the part of examiners who screen applications, by using counterfeit or fraudulently obtained documents as proof of identity and U.S. citizenship² to obtain genuine U.S. passports. For example, between July 2005 and August 2008, State and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) identified 112 individuals who had fraudulently obtained U.S. passports by using the birth certificates of deceased Americans. Individuals who fraudulently obtained passports included fugitives, sex offenders, and delinquent taxpayers, all of whom wanted to use a U.S.

¹ The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*, Government Printing Office (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 22, 2004).

² As required by State’s instructions on the Application for a U.S. Passport, form DS-11, applicants must provide proof of U.S. citizenship and proof of identity, along with two recent color photographs and funds to cover the passport application fees.

passport to conceal themselves from law enforcement authorities. State and the FBI identified these 112 individuals by matching State passport records against state-level death records.

In 2005, we reported that using the stolen identities and documentation of U.S. citizens is the primary tactic of those fraudulently applying for U.S. passports, and that passport fraud is often linked to other crimes.³ Our report mentioned a number of ways in which a person might fraudulently obtain a U.S. passport, including using an assumed identity that is supported by genuine but fraudulently obtained identification documents; submitting false claims of lost, stolen, or mutilated passports; using counterfeit citizenship documents; and using the identity of a deceased person. We also reported weaknesses in State's information sharing with other federal agencies. For example, we stated that the information that State received and used from the Social Security Administration (SSA) was limited and outdated. In the report, we stated that although State and SSA signed a memorandum in April 2004 that gave State access to SSA's main database to help verify passport applicants' identity, the memorandum had not been implemented as of March 2005. Moreover, we reported that the memorandum did not include access to SSA's death records, but that State officials said they were exploring the possibility of obtaining these records in the future.⁴

In 2007 we reported on the risk of fraud that exists in the lack of State's oversight of the more than 8,000 passport acceptance facilities nationwide that it designates to provide passport application services to the American public.⁵ Passport acceptance facilities are located at certain United States Postal Service (USPS) locations, courthouses, and other institutions, and do not employ State personnel. The passport acceptance agents at these facilities are responsible for, among other things, verifying whether an applicant's identification document (such as a driver's license) actually matches the applicant, and sending each applicant's proof of citizenship

³ See GAO, *State Department: Improvements Needed to Strengthen U.S. Passport Fraud Detection Efforts*, [GAO-05-477](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 20, 2005).

⁴ On June 29, 2005, a State official testified before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs that the initiative with SSA would be operational nationwide by early August 2005.

⁵ See GAO, *Border Security: Security of New Passports and Visas Enhanced, but More Needs to Be Done to Prevent Their Fraudulent Use*, [GAO-07-1006](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 31, 2007).

and passport application to State. Although we found that State had taken some steps to address weaknesses identified in the training of acceptance agents, we found that additional measures were needed to ensure adequate controls over the application acceptance process.

This report responds to your request that we proactively test the effectiveness of the current passport issuance process to determine whether malicious individuals could use counterfeit or fraudulently obtained documents to obtain a genuine U.S. passport. To perform this work, we designed four test scenarios that would simulate the actions of a malicious individual who had access to another person's identity information (a practice commonly known as identity theft). We then attempted to obtain four genuine U.S. passports by using counterfeit or fraudulently obtained documents, such as birth certificates and drivers' licenses, and the Social Security Numbers (SSN) of fictitious or deceased individuals. We created all of these counterfeit documents with off-the-shelf, commercially available hardware, software, and materials. In addition, we used some of these counterfeit documents to obtain a genuine District of Columbia (D.C.) identification card, which we subsequently used to obtain a U.S. passport in one test.

The fictitious identities we used in our first two tests were based on information and SSNs we had previously obtained from SSA for the purpose of conducting undercover tests. These tests were meant to simulate a malicious individual stealing another person's identity and using it to obtain a passport. On our third test, we used the genuine SSN of a fictitious 5-year-old child we created for a previous investigation⁶ to simulate a malicious individual stealing the identity of a real child to get a passport. Finally, on our fourth test, we used the SSN of an individual who died in 1965 to simulate a malicious individual using a deceased person's identity to obtain a passport.⁷ For three of our four tests, we submitted our passport applications and supporting materials at USPS locations that

⁶ See GAO, *Social Security Administration: Actions Taken to Strengthen Procedures for Issuing Social Security Numbers to Noncitizens, but Some Weaknesses Remain*, [GAO-04-12](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 15, 2003).

⁷ We did not design a test scenario to simulate a malicious individual attempting to obtain a passport by using the identity and SSN of a person who already had a current U.S. passport, as this scenario was beyond the scope of our investigation. According to information provided to us by State for a previous report, about 28 percent of the U.S. population has a passport. See GAO, *State Department: Comprehensive Strategy Needed to Improve Passport Operations*, [GAO-08-891](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 25, 2008).

accept passport applications. For one of our four tests, we submitted our application and materials at State’s regional Washington, D.C., passport-issuing office.⁸

We conducted the work for this investigation from May 2008 through March 2009 in accordance with quality standards for investigations as set forth by the President’s Council on Integrity and Efficiency.

Undercover Investigator Obtained Four Genuine U.S. Passports Using Counterfeit or Fraudulently Obtained Documents

Our investigator was easily able to obtain four genuine U.S. passports using counterfeit or fraudulently obtained documents. In the most egregious case, our investigator obtained a U.S. passport using counterfeit documents and the SSN of a man who died in 1965. In another case, our undercover investigator obtained a U.S. passport using counterfeit documents and the genuine SSN of a fictitious 5-year-old child—even though his counterfeit documents and application indicated he was 53 years old. State and USPS employees did not identify our documents as counterfeit in any of our four tests. Although we do not know what checks, if any, State performed when approving our fraudulent applications, it issued a genuine U.S. passport in each case. All four passports were issued to the same GAO investigator, under four different names.

Our tests show a variety of ways that malicious individuals with even minimal counterfeiting capabilities and access to another person’s identity could obtain genuine U.S. passports using counterfeit or fraudulently obtained documents. Table 1 below shows the month of passport application, type of counterfeit or fraudulently obtained documents used, and the number of days that passed between passport application and passport issuance for each of our four tests.

⁸ State operates 17 domestic passport-issuing offices, where most passports are issued each year. These offices are located in Aurora, Colorado; Boston; Charleston, South Carolina; Chicago; Honolulu; Houston; Los Angeles; Miami; New Orleans; New York; Norwalk, Connecticut; Philadelphia; Portsmouth, New Hampshire; San Francisco; Seattle; and 2 offices in Washington, D.C.—a regional passport agency and a special issuance agency that handles official U.S. government and diplomatic passports. Fifteen of these offices are regional passport agencies that process in-person applications in addition to applications received by mail. The remaining 2 facilities—Charleston, South Carolina, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire—are mega-processing centers with no access to the public.

Table 1: Counterfeit or Fraudulently Obtained Documents Used to Obtain Genuine U.S. Passports

Test number	Month of application	Documents submitted as part of passport application process	Number of days between application and issuance
1	July 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Counterfeit West Virginia driver's license• Counterfeit New York birth certificate• Passport application form	8 days
2	August 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Genuine District of Columbia identification card obtained with fraudulent documentation• Counterfeit New York birth certificate• Passport application form	Same day (passport issued the date of application)
3	October 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Counterfeit West Virginia driver's license• Counterfeit New York birth certificate• Passport application form containing SSN of a fictitious 5-year-old child, which we obtained on a previous investigation	7 days
4	December 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Counterfeit Florida driver's license• Counterfeit New York birth certificate• Passport application form containing SSN of a deceased individual	4 days

Source: GAO.

Note: In all four tests, our investigator also submitted two color photographs and a passport application fee. For the second test, the investigator also submitted an e-ticket for an August 2008 flight to Germany.

Our investigator used a genuine U.S. passport obtained by using counterfeit or fraudulently obtained documents to pass through airport security. In January 2009, our investigator purchased an airline ticket for a domestic flight using the fictitious name from one of our test scenarios. He then used the fraudulently obtained passport from that test as proof of identity to check in to his flight, get a boarding pass, and pass through the security checkpoint at a major metropolitan-area airport. Figure 1 below shows the boarding pass. After our investigator successfully passed through the checkpoint, he left the airport and cancelled his airline ticket.

Figure 1: Boarding Pass Used to Pass through Airport Security



Source: GAO (presentation), and Delta Airlines (image).

Test One: Investigator Obtained Passport Using Counterfeit Identification Documents

Our first test found that USPS did not detect the counterfeit West Virginia driver's license our undercover investigator presented as proof of his identity during the passport application process. Further, State issued our investigator a genuine U.S. passport despite the counterfeit New York birth certificate he used as proof of his U.S. citizenship. In July 2008, our investigator entered a USPS office in Virginia and approached a USPS employee to apply for a passport. The USPS employee greeted the investigator and took his application form, counterfeit New York birth certificate, and counterfeit West Virginia driver's license. On these documents, we used a fictitious identity and a SSN that we had previously obtained from SSA for the purpose of conducting undercover tests. The USPS employee reviewed the application materials line by line to make sure that the information on the application form matched the information on the birth certificate and driver's license. After she completed her review of the application materials, the USPS employee took the investigator's

birth certificate and funds to pay for the application fee. She administered an oath, and then told the investigator that he should receive the passport within 1 to 4 weeks.

State issued a genuine U.S. passport to our undercover investigator 8 days after he submitted his application. About a week after State issued the passport, it arrived at the mailing address indicated on the application materials.

Test Two: Investigator Obtained Passport Using a Genuine but Fraudulently Obtained State Identification Card

Our second test found that State did not detect a counterfeit New York birth certificate our undercover investigator presented to prove his U.S. citizenship in support of a passport application. In July 2008, our investigator—the same investigator as in the first test above—obtained a genuine identification card from the Washington, D.C., Department of Motor Vehicles using counterfeit documents, which he then used to apply for a U.S. passport.

In August 2008, the same investigator entered State's regional Washington, D.C., passport-issuing office with a completed passport application form, a counterfeit New York birth certificate, the genuine D.C. identification card, two passport photographs, sufficient funds to pay for the application fee, and an electronic ticket (e-ticket) confirming that he had a flight to Germany.⁹ For this test, we used a fictitious identity and SSN that we had previously obtained from SSA for the purpose of conducting undercover investigations. The investigator presented his application form and materials to a State employee, who went line by line through the application form matching the information to the accompanying documents. The State employee provided the investigator with a number and instructed him to wait until his number was called. After his number was called, the investigator proceeded to a window to speak with another State employee. The second employee looked over his materials to make sure that he had all of the necessary documentation, took his birth certificate and money, and administered an oath.

A few days later, the investigator returned to the same passport facility and picked up his passport. State issued the passport on the same day that

⁹ We chose this office because it offers an expedited service—passports are usually issued within 1-2 days—for travelers who present a confirmed airline reservation to prove that they will be traveling out of the United States within 14 days.

the investigator submitted his application, in the fictitious name presented on the fraudulently obtained and counterfeit documents.

Test Three: Investigator Obtained Passport Using Social Security Number for a Fictitious 5-Year-Old Child

As with our first test, our third test found that USPS did not detect the counterfeit West Virginia driver's license our undercover investigator presented as proof of his identity during the passport application process. Further, State issued our investigator a genuine U.S. passport based on a counterfeit New York birth certificate as proof of U.S. citizenship. In October 2008, our investigator—the same investigator as in the first two tests mentioned above—entered a USPS office in Maryland to apply for a U.S. passport. A USPS employee greeted the investigator and took his application form, as well as his counterfeit New York birth certificate and counterfeit West Virginia driver's license. The application materials used the name and genuine SSN of a fictitious 5-year-old child, which we obtained from a previous investigation. However, our investigator listed his age as 53 on the application materials, which clearly did not match the date of birth associated with the SSN used in this test. The USPS employee reviewed the application materials, including meticulously matching the information on the application form to the birth certificate and driver's license. After she completed her review of the application materials, the USPS employee took the investigator's birth certificate and payment for the application fee, administered an oath, and told the investigator that he should receive the passport within 2 to 4 weeks.

State issued a genuine U.S. passport to our investigator, in the fictitious name based on the counterfeit documents, 7 days after he submitted his application. The passport arrived at the mailing address indicated by our investigator on the application materials a few days after its issuance.

Test Four: Investigator Obtained Passport Using Social Security Number of a Deceased Individual

As with our first and third tests, our fourth test found that USPS did not detect the counterfeit identification document—a bogus Florida driver's license—our undercover investigator presented to support his passport application. Further, State issued our investigator a genuine U.S. passport based on a counterfeit New York birth certificate as proof of U.S. citizenship. In December 2008, our investigator—the same investigator as in the three tests mentioned above—entered a USPS office in Maryland to apply for a U.S. passport. A USPS employee greeted the investigator and took his application form, as well as his counterfeit New York birth certificate and counterfeit Florida driver's license. His application materials used a name and SSN that was issued to a person who died in 1965, and who would have been 59 years old at the time of our test had he

still been alive.¹⁰ The USPS employee reviewed the application materials, matching the information on the application form to the birth certificate and driver's license. After completing the review of application materials, the USPS employee took the investigator's birth certificate and funds to pay for the application fee. The USPS employee administered an oath then told the investigator that he should receive the passport within 4 to 6 weeks.

Four days after our investigator submitted his application, State issued a genuine U.S. passport in the fictitious name presented on the counterfeit documents. The passport arrived at the mailing address indicated by our investigator on the application materials.

Corrective Action Briefing

We briefed State officials on the results of our investigation. They agreed that our findings expose a major vulnerability in State's passport issuance process. According to State officials, the department's ability to verify the information submitted as part of a passport application is hampered by limitations to its information sharing and data access with other agencies at the federal and state levels. They said that some federal agencies limit State's access to their records due to privacy concerns or the fact that State is not a law enforcement agency. In addition, they said that State does not currently have the ability to conduct real-time verification of the authenticity of birth certificates presented by passport applicants. They added that birth certificates present an exceptional challenge to fraud detection efforts, as there are currently thousands of different acceptable formats for birth certificates. Further, they indicated that there are difficulties with verifying the authenticity of drivers' licenses. Moreover, they said that although State attempts to verify SSN information submitted on passport applications on a daily basis with SSA, the results of this data-sharing process are imperfect. For example, State officials said that many of the mismatches identified through this verification process are actually due to typos or other common errors. However, they said that while these data checks may not identify all cases in which an applicant's data do not match the information in SSA's records, in some instances—such as cases in which an SSN is tied to a deceased individual—investigators from the Passport Fraud Branch of State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security will attempt to check publicly available databases to resolve the mismatch.

¹⁰ We used SSA's Death Master File to obtain the identity of the deceased individual.

State officials acknowledged that they have issued other fraudulently obtained passports but did not offer an estimate of the magnitude of the problem. In order to improve State's current passport fraud detection capabilities, officials said that State would need greater cooperation from other agencies at both the federal and state levels, and the ability to access other agencies' records in real time. Subsequent to our briefing, State officials informed us that they identified and revoked our four fraudulently obtained U.S. passports, and that they would study the matter further to determine what steps would be appropriate to improve passport issuance procedures. We did not verify the accuracy of these State officials' statements. We also briefed a representative of USPS on the results of our investigation, who did not offer any comments at the time of our briefing.

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of State and other interested parties. The report will also be available at no charge on the GAO Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>. If you or your staff have any questions concerning this report, please contact me at (202) 512-6722 or kutzg@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gregory D. Kutz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gregory D. Kutz
Managing Director
Forensic Audits and Special Investigations

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