



Highlights of [GAO-06-1031](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

A consolidated watch list managed by the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center (TSC) contains the names of known or suspected terrorists, both international and domestic. Various agencies whose missions require screening for links to terrorism use watch list records. For example, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) screens travelers at ports of entry. Because screening is based on names, it can result in misidentifications when persons not on the list have a name that resembles one on the list. Also, some names may be mistakenly included on the watch list. In either case, individuals can be negatively affected and may express concerns or seek agency action, or redress, to prevent future occurrences. This report addresses: (1) the extent to which the numbers of misidentified persons are known and how they could be affected, (2) the major reasons misidentifications occur and the actions agencies are taking to reduce them or minimize their effects, and (3) the opportunities for redress available to individuals with watch list-related concerns. In conducting work at TSC and the principal federal agencies that use watch list data, GAO reviewed standard operating procedures and other relevant documentation and interviewed responsible officials.

GAO makes no recommendations at this time because the agencies have ongoing initiatives to improve data quality, reduce the number of misidentifications or mitigate their effects, and enhance redress efforts.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-1031.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Eileen Larence at (202) 512-8777 or larencee@gao.gov.

TERRORIST WATCH LIST SCREENING

Efforts to Help Reduce Adverse Effects on the Public

What GAO Found

Annually, millions of individuals—from international travelers to visa applicants—are screened for terrorism links against the watch list. At times, a person is misidentified because of name similarities, although the exact number is unknown. In some cases, agencies can verify the person is not a match by comparing birth dates or other data with watch list records, but agencies do not track the number. In other cases, they ask TSC for help. From December 2003 (when TSC began operations) to January 2006, agencies sent tens of thousands of names to TSC, and about half were misidentifications, according to TSC. While the total number of people misidentified may be substantial, it likely represents a fraction of all people screened. Even so, misidentifications can lead to delays, intensive questioning and searches, missed flights, or denied entry at the border.

Misidentifications most commonly occur with names that are identical or similar to names on the watch list. To rapidly screen names against the watch list, agencies use computerized programs that account for differences due to misspellings and other variations. TSC has ongoing initiatives to improve computerized matching programs and the quality of watch list records. Also, CBP and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) have established procedures designed to expedite frequently misidentified persons through screening, after confirming they are not on the watch list.

Because security measures regrettably may cause personal inconveniences, TSA and CBP, with the support of TSC, provide opportunities for people who have been misidentified or mistakenly included on the watch list to seek redress. Most of these are misidentified persons who are not on the watch list but have a similar name and, therefore, may be repeatedly misidentified. Thus, TSA, for example, provides redress that relies heavily on efforts to expedite frequently misidentified persons through screening by allowing them to submit personal information that helps airlines more quickly determine that they are not on the watch list. If TSA and CBP cannot resolve questions from the public, they ask TSC for help. For 2005, TSC reported that it processed to completion 112 redress referrals and removed the names of 31 mistakenly listed persons from the watch list. To ensure that opportunities for redress are formally documented across agencies and that responsibilities are clear, the Justice Department is leading an effort to develop an interagency memorandum of understanding and expects a final draft to be ready for approval by fall 2006. TSC and frontline-screening-agency officials recognize that, after the agreement is finalized, the public needs to clearly understand how to express concerns and seek relief if negatively affected by screening. So, these officials have committed to making updated information on redress publicly available.

GAO provided a draft copy of this report to the departments of Justice, Homeland Security, and State. They provided technical clarifications that GAO incorporated where appropriate.