GAO
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Highlights

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Terrorist Watch Lists Should Be Consolidated to Promote Better Integration and Sharing

Why GAO Did This Study

Terrorist and criminal watch list systems—sometimes referred to as watchout, lookout, target, or tip-off systems—are important tools in controlling and protecting our nation's borders. The events of September 11, 2001, and other incidents since then, have highlighted the need to share these watch lists. In light of the importance of border security, GAO was asked to identify federal databases and systems that contain watch lists, the agencies that maintain and use them in protecting our nation's borders, the kind of data they contain, whether federal agencies are sharing information from these lists with each other and with state and local governments and private organizations, the structural characteristics of those lists that are automated, and whether opportunities exist to consolidate these watch lists.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of DHS, in collaboration with the heads of the other departments and agencies that have and use watch lists, lead an effort to consolidate and standardize the federal government's watch list structures and policies. DHS and other departments involved in this study generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

What GAO Found

Generally, the federal government's approach to using watch lists in performing its border security mission is decentralized and nonstandard, largely because these lists were developed in response to individual agencies' unique missions, including their respective legal, cultural, and systems environments. Specifically, as shown in the figure below, nine federal agencies—which prior to the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) spanned the Departments of Defense, Justice, State, Transportation, and the Treasury—develop and maintain 12 watch lists.

These lists include overlapping but not identical sets of data, and different policies and procedures govern whether and how these data are shared with others. As a general rule, this sharing is more likely to occur among federal agencies than between federal agencies and either state and local government agencies or private entities. Further, the extent to which such sharing is accomplished electronically is constrained by fundamental differences in the watch lists' systems architecture (that is, the hardware, software, network, and data characteristics of the systems).

Two agencies identified opportunities to standardize and consolidate these lists, which GAO believes would improve information sharing. The President's homeland security strategy further recognizes the need to address the proliferation of these lists. While the Office of Homeland Security was reportedly pursuing consolidation as part of an effort to develop a border and transportation security blueprint, referred to as an enterprise architecture, the DHS Chief Information Officer told us that the department had recently taken responsibility for the blueprint. However, we were not provided enough information to evaluate these efforts.

Simplified Diagram of Border Security Process and the Departments and Agencies That Use Watch Lists
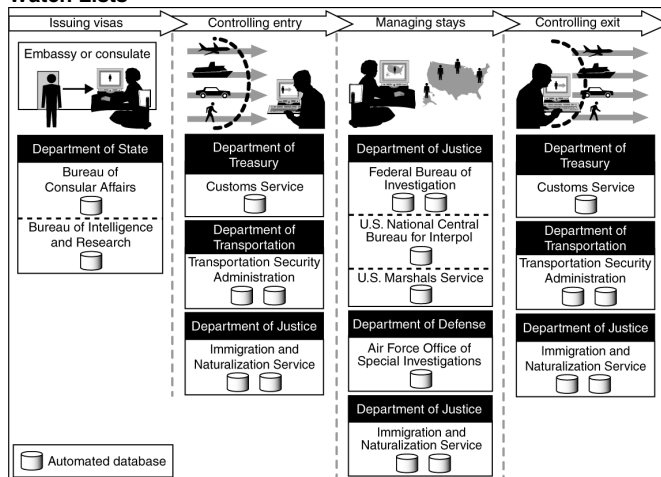
Sources: GAO (data), Nova Development Corp. (images).
Note: The Transportation Security Administration, Customs, and Immigration and Naturalization Service and their associated databases appear multiple times because watch lists that are used in more than one phase of the process are shown in each phase.

United States General Accounting Office