



Highlights of [GAO-04-364](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Public safety concerns require that criminal history records be accurate, complete, and accessible. Among other purposes, such records are used by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) to ensure that prohibited persons do not purchase firearms.

Initiated in 1995, the National Criminal History Improvement Program represents a partnership among federal, state, and local agencies to build a national criminal records infrastructure. Under the program, the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) annually provides federal grants to states to improve the quality of records and their accessibility through NICS and other national systems maintained by the FBI.

GAO examined (1) how states have used program grant funds, particularly the extent to which such funds have been used for NICS-related purposes; (2) the progress—using program grants and other funding sources—that states have made in automating criminal history and other relevant records and making them accessible nationally; and (3) the various factors that are relevant considerations for policymakers in debating the future of the program.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-364.

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

NATIONAL CRIMINAL HISTORY IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

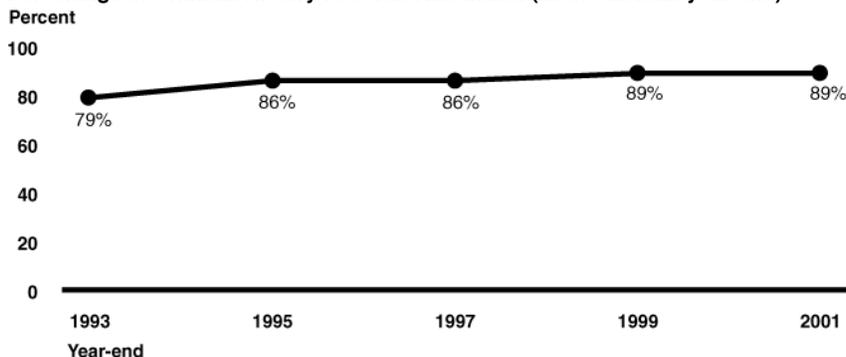
Federal Grants Have Contributed to Progress

What GAO Found

States have used program grants primarily to support NICS in conducting presale background checks of firearms' purchasers. BJS data show that over 75 percent of the total \$164.3 million in program grants awarded in fiscal years 2000 through 2003 was used for NICS-related purposes. These uses encompassed a broad range of activities, such as converting manual records to automated formats and purchasing equipment to implement computerized systems or upgrade existing systems. All other uses of program grants, according to BJS, also had either direct or indirect relevance to building an infrastructure of nationally accessible records.

Using their own funds, in addition to the program and other federal grants, states have made progress in automating criminal history records and making them accessible nationally. As the figure shows, the percentage of the nation's criminal history records that are automated increased from 79 percent in 1993 to 89 percent in 2001, according to BJS's most recent data. Also, the number of states participating in the Interstate Identification Index—a "pointer system" to locate criminal history records anywhere in the country—increased from 26 at year-end 1993 to 45 by May 2003. But, progress has been more limited for some NICS-related purposes. A national system for domestic violence misdemeanor records is not available. Also, as of May 2003, only 10 states had made mental health records available to NICS, and only 3 states had provided substance abuse records.

Percentage of Criminal History Records Automated (as of calendar year-end)



Source: BJS data.

One of the most relevant factors for policymakers to consider when debating the future of the program is the extent of cumulative progress (and shortfalls) to date in creating national, automated systems. While states have made progress, more work remains. Also, the demand for background checks is growing, and technology is not static, which necessitates periodic upgrades or replacements of automated systems. Continued progress toward establishing and sustaining a national infrastructure inherently will involve long-term commitments from all governmental levels. Justice commented that GAO's report fairly and accurately described the program and its accomplishments.