

Why GAO Did This Study

The collection of biometrics data, including fingerprints and iris patterns, enables U.S. counterinsurgency operations to identify enemy combatants and link individuals to events such as improvised explosive device detonations. GAO was asked to examine the extent to which (1) DOD's biometrics training supports warfighter use of biometrics, (2) DOD is effectively collecting and transmitting biometrics data, and (3) DOD has developed a process to collect and disseminate biometrics lessons learned. To address these objectives, GAO focused on the Army and to a lesser extent on the Marine Corps and U.S. Special Operations Command, since the Army collected about 86 percent of the biometrics enrollments in Afghanistan. GAO visited training sites in the United States, observed biometrics collection and transmission operations at locations in Afghanistan, reviewed relevant policies and guidance, and interviewed knowledgeable officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD take several actions to: expand leadership training to improve employment of biometrics collection, help ensure the completeness and accuracy of transmitted biometrics data, determine the viability and cost-effectiveness of reducing transmission times, and assess the merits of disseminating biometrics lessons learned across DOD for the purposes of informing relevant policies and practices. GAO requested comments from DOD on the draft report, but none were provided.

View GAO-12-442. For more information, contact Brian Lepore, 202-512-4523, leporeb@gao.gov.

DEFENSE BIOMETRICS

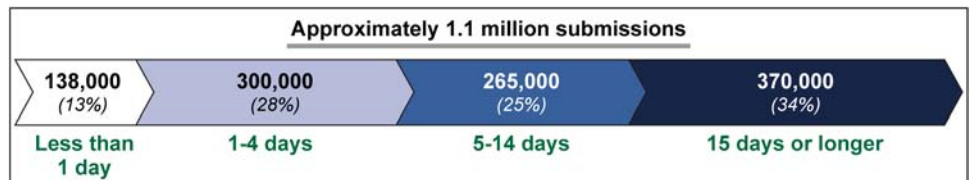
Additional Training for Leaders and More Timely Transmission of Data Could Enhance the Use of Biometrics in Afghanistan

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) has trained thousands of personnel on the use of biometrics since 2004, but biometrics training for leaders does not provide detailed instructions on how to effectively use and manage biometrics collection tools. The Office of the Secretary of Defense, the military services, and U.S. Central Command each has emphasized in key documents the importance of training. Additionally, the Army, Marine Corps, and U.S. Special Operations Command have trained personnel prior to deployment to Afghanistan in addition to offering training resources in Afghanistan. DOD's draft instruction for biometrics emphasizes the importance of training leaders in the effective employment of biometrics collection, but existing training does not instruct military leaders on (1) the effective use of biometrics, (2) selecting the appropriate personnel for biometrics collection training, and (3) tracking personnel who have been trained in biometrics collection to effectively staff biometrics operations. Absent this training, military personnel are limited in their ability to collect high-quality biometrics data to better confirm the identity of enemy combatants.

Several factors during the transmission process limit the use of biometrics in Afghanistan. Among them is unclear responsibility for the completeness and accuracy of biometrics data during their transmission. As a result, DOD cannot expeditiously correct data transmission issues as they arise, such as the approximately 4,000 biometrics collected from 2004 to 2008 that were separated from their associated identities. Such decoupling renders the data useless and increases the likelihood of enemy combatants going undetected within Afghanistan and across borders. Factors affecting the timely transmission of biometrics data include the biometrics architecture with multiple servers, mountainous terrain, and mission requirements in remote areas. These factors can prevent units from accessing transmission infrastructure for hours to weeks at a time. The DOD biometrics directive calls for periodic assessments, and DOD is tracking biometrics data transmission time in Afghanistan, but DOD has not determined the viability and cost-effectiveness of reducing transmission time.

Timeliness of the Biometrics Transmission Process from October 2009 through October 2011



Source: GAO analysis of DOD data.

Lessons learned from U.S. military forces' experiences with biometrics in Afghanistan are collected and used by each of the military services and U.S. Special Operations Command. Military services emphasize the importance of using lessons learned to sustain, enhance, and increase preparedness to conduct future operations, but no requirements exist for DOD to disseminate existing biometrics lessons learned across the department.