

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-216](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

DHS seeks to identify and interdict international air travelers who are potential security threats to the United States, such as foreign fighters and potential terrorists, human traffickers, and otherwise inadmissible persons, at the earliest possible point in time. In fiscal year 2015, CBP processed more than 104 million U.S.-bound air travelers. CBP operates various predeparture programs domestically and overseas that are designed to identify and interdict high-risk travelers before they board U.S.-bound flights.

GAO was asked to review CBP's predeparture programs. This report addresses (1) how CBP identifies high-risk travelers before they board U.S.-bound flights; (2) the results of CBP's predeparture programs and the extent to which CBP has measures to assess program performance; and (3) how CBP plans to expand its predeparture programs. GAO reviewed CBP policies and procedures and fiscal year 2015 data across these programs. GAO also visited nine foreign and one domestic airport, selected based on location and traveler volume, among other factors. Information from these visits was not generalizable but provided valuable insights into program operations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that CBP develop and implement a system of performance measures and baselines to evaluate the effectiveness of its predeparture programs and assess whether the programs are achieving their stated goals. CBP concurred with the recommendation and identified planned actions to address the recommendation.

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BORDER SECURITY

CBP Aims to Prevent High-Risk Travelers from Boarding U.S.-Bound Flights, but Needs to Evaluate Program Performance

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) analyzes traveler data and threat information to identify high-risk travelers before they board U.S.-bound flights. CBP's National Targeting Center (NTC), the primary entity responsible for these analyses, conducts traveler data matching which assesses whether travelers are high-risk by matching their information against U.S. government databases and lists, and rules-based targeting, which enables CBP to identify unknown high-risk individuals. CBP operates multiple predeparture programs that use the results of NTC's analyses to help identify and interdict high-risk travelers before they board U.S.-bound flights. CBP officers inspect all U.S. bound travelers on precleared flights at the 15 Preclearance locations and, if deemed inadmissible, a traveler will not be permitted to board the aircraft. CBP also operates nine Immigration Advisory Program (IAP) and two Joint Security Program (JSP) locations as well as three Regional Carrier Liaison Groups (RCLG) that allow CBP to work with foreign government and air carrier officials to identify and interdict high-risk travelers. Through these programs, CBP may recommend that air carriers not permit such travelers to board U.S.-bound flights.

CBP data show that it identified and interdicted over 22,000 high-risk air travelers in fiscal year 2015 through its predeparture programs. CBP officers at Preclearance locations determined that 10,648 of the approximately 16 million air travelers seeking admission to the United States through such locations were inadmissible. Similarly, CBP, through its IAP, JSP, and RCLG locations, made 11,589 no-board recommendations to air carriers for the approximately 88 million air travelers bound for the United States from such locations. While CBP's predeparture programs have helped identify and interdict high-risk travelers, CBP has not fully evaluated the overall effectiveness of these programs using performance measures and baselines. CBP tracks some data, such as the number of travelers deemed inadmissible, but has not set baselines to determine if predeparture programs are achieving goals, consistent with best practices for performance measurement. By developing and implementing a system of performance measures and baselines, CBP would be better positioned to assess if the programs are achieving their goals.

CBP plans to expand its predeparture programs where possible, though several factors limit its ability to expand to all priority locations. In May 2015—after soliciting interest among foreign airport authorities and scoring interested airports using risk and other factors—CBP stated it would begin Preclearance expansion negotiations with 10 priority airports in 9 countries. As of November 2016, CBP had not completed the process required to begin operations in any locations prioritized for expansion, but had reached agreement with one location at which Preclearance operations could begin as early as 2019. According to senior CBP officials, Preclearance expansions are lengthy and complex processes because host governments and airports must be willing to allow for a Preclearance location, and CBP's Preclearance expansion strategy relies on partnering with airports that are willing to pay for the majority of operational costs.