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Accountability • Integrity • Reliability

# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-260](#), a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

By positively confirming identifications and linking relevant records of arrests and prosecutions, fingerprint analysis provides a basis for making fundamental criminal justice decisions regarding detention, charging, bail, and sentencing. In 1999, the FBI implemented the Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System (IAFIS)—a computerized system for storing, comparing, and exchanging fingerprint data in a digital format. The FBI's goal under IAFIS is to ultimately achieve paperless processing and to provide a response within 2 hours to users who submit criminal fingerprints electronically. Maximizing the benefits of rapid responses under IAFIS depends largely on how quickly criminal fingerprints are submitted by local and state law enforcement agencies. Concerns have been raised that, after arrests are made by some local or state law enforcement agencies, periods of up to 6 months may elapse before the criminal fingerprints are submitted for entry into IAFIS.

GAO examined (1) the importance of IAFIS processing to local and state law enforcement agencies, (2) the progress these agencies have made toward the goal of paperless fingerprint processing, and (3) efforts being made to improve the timeliness of criminal fingerprint submissions.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making no recommendations in this report.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-260](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-260).

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

## LAW ENFORCEMENT

# Information on Timeliness of Criminal Fingerprint Submissions to the FBI

## What GAO Found

IAFIS processing of criminal fingerprints is important to local and state law enforcement not only for updating national databases but also for obtaining an individual's criminal history and, at times, for obtaining positive identification of arrestees. For a recent 8-month period (October 2002 through May 2003) that GAO reviewed, law enforcement agencies wanted a response from the FBI for 78 percent of the approximately 5.3 million sets of criminal fingerprints submitted to IAFIS. The extent to which these responses were used to either positively identify arrestees or obtain criminal history records is unknown. However, the FBI provided GAO with examples of how IAFIS responses prevented the premature release of individuals who had used false names at arrest and were wanted in other jurisdictions.

Law enforcement agencies have made progress toward the FBI's goal of paperless processing of criminal fingerprints, although there is room for substantial improvement. The percentage of criminal fingerprints submitted electronically by state repositories to the FBI increased from 45 percent in 1999 to 70 percent in 2003. Also, for the recent 8-month period GAO reviewed, the overall average submission time for criminal fingerprints was 40 days (an average that encompasses both paper and electronic submissions)—whereas, before IAFIS, average submission times were much higher (e.g., 118 days in 1997). Although much progress has been made, many jurisdictions lack automation and have backlogs of paper fingerprint cards to be processed, in part because of competing priorities and resource constraints.

Numerous efforts have been made to help improve the timeliness of criminal fingerprint submissions to IAFIS. To facilitate electronic processing, federal technical and financial assistance has encouraged law enforcement agencies to purchase optical scanning (Livescan) equipment for taking fingerprints and to establish automated systems compatible with FBI standards. GAO noted that the need for quick, fingerprint-based identifications—positively linking individuals to relevant criminal history records—is becoming increasingly important. Reasons for such importance are the mobility of criminals (many of whom have multistate records), the growing incidence of identity theft or identity fraud, the significance of homeland security concerns, and increasing demands stemming from background checks required for employment or other noncriminal justice purposes.

### Atlanta Police Department Employee Demonstrates Use of a Livescan Machine



Source: GAO.