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Technology Woes Hamper ICE Tracking of VISA Overstays

A new Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) report concluded that a fragmented, ineffective set of information technology (IT) systems hinder efforts by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to track visa overstays.

OIG auditors found that ICE relies on IT systems that lack integration and information-sharing capabilities, forcing ICE personnel to laboriously piece together vital information from up to 27 distinct DHS information systems and databases to accurately determine an individual's overstay status. As a result, it may take months for ICE to determine a visa holder's status and whether that person may pose a national security threat. This inefficient process has contributed to a backlog of more than 1.2 million visa overstay cases.

Further complicating ICE's efforts to track visa overstays is DHS' lack of a comprehensive biometric exit system at U.S. ports of departure to capture information on nonimmigrant visitors who exit the United States. In the absence of such a system, ICE is forced to rely on third-party departure data, such as commercial carrier passenger manifests, which does not include biometric land departure information reflecting the many travelers who cross the border on foot or using their own vehicles.

"ICE must equip its personnel with the tools and training they require for the vital work of tracking visitors who overstay their visas," said Inspector General John Roth. "Timely identification, tracking, and adjudication of potential visa overstays is critical to ICE's public safety and national security mission."

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