

Why GAO Did This Study

In recent years, certain individuals who had been convicted of a sex offense in the United States have traveled overseas and committed offenses against children. GAO was asked to review what relevant federal agencies—including DOJ, DHS, and the Department of State—are doing with regard to registered sex offenders traveling or living abroad. This report addresses the following questions: (1) How and to what extent does the federal government determine whether registered sex offenders are leaving or returning to the United States? (2) How and to what extent have federal agencies notified foreign officials about registered sex offenders traveling internationally? GAO analyzed August and September 2012 data from the U.S. Marshals, USNCB, and ICE on registered sex offenders who traveled internationally. GAO also interviewed relevant agency officials and surveyed officials from all 50 states, 5 territories, and the District of Columbia to determine the extent to which they identify and use information on traveling sex offenders.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that ICE consider receiving the automated notifications and DOJ and DHS take steps to ensure that USNCB and ICE (1) have information on the same number of traveling registered sex offenders and (2) have access to the same level of detail about each traveling registered sex offender. USNCB within DOJ and DHS concurred with our recommendations.

REGISTERED SEX OFFENDERS

Sharing More Information Will Enable Federal Agencies to Improve Notifications of Sex Offenders' International Travel

What GAO Found

Three federal agencies—U.S. Marshals, International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) Washington – U.S. National Central Bureau (USNCB), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)—use information from state, local, territorial, and tribal jurisdictions, as well as passenger data from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), to identify registered sex offenders traveling outside of the United States. Similarly, these agencies may be notified of registered sex offenders traveling to the United States through several means, including tips from foreign officials or when CBP queries the registered sex offender's biographic information at a port of entry and finds that the offender has a criminal history. However, none of these sources provides complete or comprehensive information on registered sex offenders leaving or returning to the United States. For example, CBP does not routinely query individuals who leave the United States by commercial bus, private vessel, private vehicle, or by foot, in which case CBP may not be able to determine if any of these individuals are registered sex offenders. In addition, foreign officials do not always monitor when a registered sex offender is returning to the United States. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), working with other agencies, is developing a process that will address some of these limitations. Specifically, the FBI will send an automated notice to the U.S. Marshals and law enforcement officials in the jurisdictions where the sex offender is registered that the offender is traveling, to the extent that the offender's biographical information is queried at the port of entry. However, because ICE has not requested to receive the automated notifications, ICE will not be notified of registered sex offenders who leave the country via a land port of entry whose biographical information is queried.

USNCB and ICE have notified foreign officials of some registered sex offenders leaving and returning to the country, but could increase the number and content of these notifications. USNCB notifies its foreign INTERPOL counterparts about registered sex offenders traveling internationally, and ICE notifies its foreign law enforcement counterparts about traveling sex offenders who had committed an offense against a child. USNCB provides more detailed information than ICE because USNCB uses offenders' self-reported travel information that some jurisdictions collect, which may include details such as hotel information. Since ICE uses passenger data, it does not have these details. Also, data from August 1 to September 30, 2012, showed that the two agencies had significant differences in the number of offenders they identified in notifications. USNCB sent notifications on 105 traveling sex offenders that ICE did not, and, conversely, ICE sent notifications on 100 traveling sex offenders that USNCB did not. In part this is because the two agencies rely on different information sources and do not share information with one another. Taking steps to ensure that these agencies have all available information on the same registered sex offenders traveling internationally could help ensure that the agencies are providing more comprehensive information to their foreign counterparts to help inform public safety decisions.