GAO Highlights

INTERNATIONAL MAIL SECURITY

Costs and Benefits of Using Electronic Data to Screen Mail Need to Be Assessed

Why GAO Did This Study

Expanding international use of e-commerce has increased the volume of global trade, potentially increasing threats sent to the United States via international mail and express cargo. Some in Congress have called for additional measures to identify prohibited items, such as increased collection of EAD that may provide CBP with information to better focus its screening efforts by targeting mail for inspection. GAO was asked to review the security of inbound international mail.

In this report, GAO addresses, among other objectives, (1) how inbound international items are inspected as they arrive in the United States; and (2) what options exist to collect EAD and the costs and benefits of using it to target mail for inspection. GAO reviewed documentation and interviewed officials from CBP, USPS, the U.S. Department of State, and, based on 2015 inbound international volume, the three largest express consignment operators. GAO also conducted site visits to all of USPS's International Service Centers and two express consignment operators' facilities, to observe screening operations and interview officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that CBP, in coordination with USPS: (1) establish measureable performance goals to assess pilot programs and (2) evaluate the costs and benefits of using EAD to target mail for inspection compared with other targeting methods. CBP and USPS agreed with these recommendations.

What GAO Found

Express consignment operators (like FedEx and DHL) and the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) work with U.S. Customs and Border Protection to inspect inbound international express cargo and mail. Express consignment operators are required to provide "electronic advance data" (EAD)—such as the shipper's and recipient's name and address—for all inbound express cargo. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) uses this information to target inspections. USPS is not required to provide this information to CBP. Nonetheless, as of March 2017, advance data are unavailable for roughly half of inbound international mail. Although USPS and CBP have two pilot programs under way to target mail for inspection based on EAD, they have not established specific and measureable goals and therefore lack the performance targets needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the pilots. Without these performance targets, USPS and CBP are unable to make well-informed decisions about the possible expansion of these pilots in the future. While USPS officials reported in November of 2016 that they planned to expand one of the pilots, CBP officials stated that the pilot was not ready for expansion because of USPS's inability to provide 100 percent of targeted mail to CBP for inspection. USPS stated that it is working to address challenges related to identifying targeted mail within sacks containing hundreds of individual pieces of mail (see figure).

Examples of Mail Accepted at the U.S. Postal Service's International Service Centers

Pallets (left) and dollies (right) containing sacks of mail are delivered to the International Service Centers.
Source: GAO. | GAO-17-606

Options for collecting EAD include negotiating agreements with foreign postal operators and legally requiring EAD, but the costs and benefits of using EAD to target mail for inspection are unclear. USPS and CBP officials stated that having EAD to target mail for inspection could result in saving time and resources and increase the percentage of inspections that identify threatening items. However, USPS has not calculated the cost of collecting EAD from countries with which it has data-sharing agreements, and neither USPS nor CBP has collected the necessary information to determine the extent to which the use of EAD would provide benefits relative to current methods of choosing mail for inspection. For example, CBP has collected data on the rate of seizures per inspection for current pilot programs, but it has not collected comparable data for other screening methods it uses to target mail for inspection. As such, USPS and CBP risk spending resources on efforts that may not increase the security of inbound international mail or that may not result in sufficient improvement to justify the costs.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**