

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106540](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In fiscal year 2023, the Department of Homeland Security's CBP encountered nearly 2.5 million individuals at the southwest border. CBP holds individuals in short-term custody in holding facilities located along the border. When individuals enter short-term custody, CBP personnel must search, collect, store, and transfer or return their personal property. Property deemed to be contraband or hazardous is to be discarded. Individuals and representatives from nongovernmental organizations have raised concerns about CBP personnel not returning or improperly discarding personal property of individuals in custody along the southwest border.

GAO was asked to review CBP's policies and procedures regarding the handling of personal property. Among other things, this report assesses the extent to which CBP has developed and implemented policies and procedures for handling personal property. GAO analyzed policies and procedures for handling personal property. GAO also interviewed officials and conducted site visits to 16 CBP facilities in Arizona, California, and Texas.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to CBP. These include that Border Patrol issue clarifying guidance for the handling of personal property and develop a mechanism to monitor implementation of this guidance, and that CBP develop and provide to individuals written instructions regarding property retrieval after their release from custody. DHS concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106540](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or Gambler@gao.gov.

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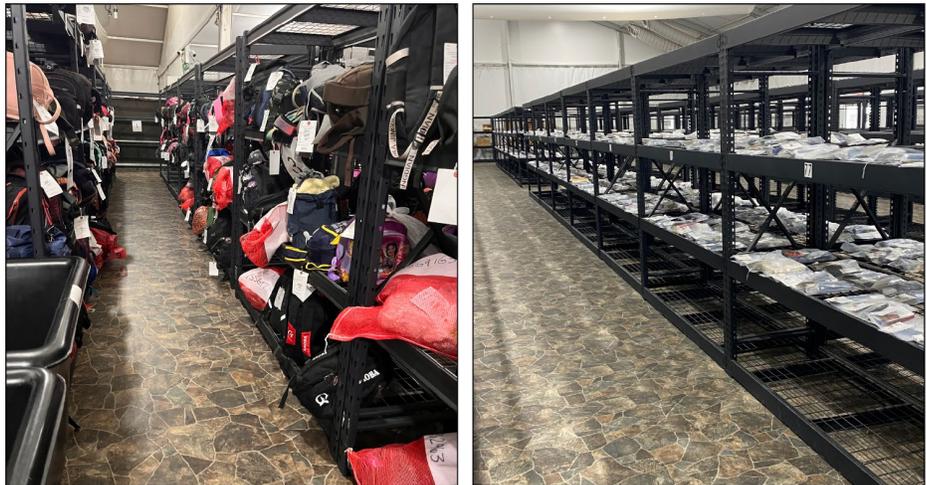
SOUTHWEST BORDER

Additional Guidance and Monitoring Needed to Improve CBP's Handling of Personal Property

What GAO Found

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and its components—U.S. Border Patrol and the Office of Field Operations—have policies and procedures for how its personnel are to handle the personal property of individuals held in custody, and the components have taken action to implement this guidance. For example, GAO observed CBP personnel searching and storing individuals' personal property at short-term holding locations. However, GAO found that Border Patrol locations interpret the guidance differently, including definitions of health hazards and the amount and type of property field locations should collect and store.

Property Storage Rooms at Two Border Patrol Facilities, July and September 2023



Source: GAO. | GAO-24-106540

Note: These photographs illustrate the amount of personal property stored in storage rooms at the two facilities at the time of our visits. The photo on the left is of a facility that did not limit the amount of personal property an individual may store, whereas the photo on the right is of a facility that limits personal property.

According to Border Patrol headquarters officials, field locations interpret the guidance differently because it does not define key terms and concepts. Border Patrol headquarters also does not monitor implementation of guidance at the field level. By issuing clarifying guidance on handling personal property and developing and implementing a mechanism to monitor its implementation, Border Patrol would be better positioned to ensure personal property is handled consistent with agency guidance.

In addition, CBP policies and procedures state that individuals are to be notified of CBP's process for claiming personal property upon release from custody. GAO found that Border Patrol and the Office of Field Operations field locations do not consistently communicate this information to individuals. By providing written instructions, CBP would be better positioned to communicate procedures to individuals released from custody to better allow them to retrieve their property.