

Government's terrorist watch list aiding fight

It helps in sharing information, reducing misidentifications.

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The federal government's consolidated terrorist watch list has become a central issue in the debate about how we can best secure our homeland. Unfortunately, myths about the watch list continue to flourish in just about every report and retelling.

How many times have you heard: There are a million terrorists on the consolidated watch list! Thousands of Americans get detained and inconvenienced daily because of watch-list errors!

There aren't. They don't.

A vigorous debate about the best way to continue protecting our nation is vital, and the terrorist watch list should be a part of that discussion. As director of the federal Terrorist Screening Center, I offer five facts to remember about the government's consolidated watch list:

It helps fight terrorism. The Government Accountability Office, Congress' independent investigative arm, reported in October that its review of outcomes from watch-list encounters shows they "helped to combat terrorism."

The GAO report said the watch list "has helped federal, state and local screening and law enforcement officials obtain information to make better-informed decisions when they encounter an individual on the list as to the threat posed and the appropriate response or action to take."

It enhances information-sharing. During a traffic stop last year, a police officer in a major metropolitan area used the watch list to identify three subjects of separate FBI terrorism investigations in the same car. Their association had previously been unknown. In this instance, important dots were connected and vital intelligence was shared across federal, state and local agencies.

There are many examples like this one, which prompted the GAO to note that the watch list "enhanced U.S. counterterrorism efforts" because encounters provide "the opportunity to collect and share information on known or appropriately suspected terrorists with law enforcement agencies and the intelligence community."

It is constantly checked to reduce misidentifications. Separate from the redress complaints travelers can submit, the Terrorist Screening Center runs quality-assurance checks on watch-list data every day.

One GAO study, "Efforts to Help Reduce Adverse Effects on the Public," made no recommendations

regarding the list's maintenance — a rare occurrence for GAO audits — "because agencies have ongoing initiatives to improve data quality, reduce the number of misidentifications or mitigate their effects, and enhance redress efforts."

A recent example is the Terrorist Encounter Review Process. Under this process, the Terrorist Screening Center will automatically review the records of individuals who have frequent encounters with the watch list, even if no redress complaint is submitted. This review will assess whether the relevant records are still current, accurate and thorough, and whether the information warrants continued inclusion on the watch list.

This effort will be particularly helpful for segments of the population that may be apprehensive about directly engaging government agencies and might otherwise not file a redress complaint.

Its 'records' are not the same as 'individuals.' Terrorists work hard to evade our multiple layers of security, including creating myriad false identities. To counter those efforts, the center creates a separate record for each alias, fake date of birth, fraudulent driver's license and name variation associated with an individual.

As a result, a single individual can generate hundreds of records within the consolidated terrorist watch list.

Its size corresponds to the threat. It's a big world. Even the minuscule percentage of people involved in terrorist activities can equal large numbers. There are slightly more than 1 million records on the watch list, which correspond to about 400,000 individuals.

The majority of those people aren't in the United States right now — and the watch list was created to keep it that way.

The U.S. has more than 300 million people. Of the individuals on the terrorist watch list, about 95 percent are not American citizens or legal residents.

Those on the watch list are drawn from around the globe and represent a tiny fraction of the more than 6.6 billion people on our planet.


The watch list has continued to grow as our law enforcement, intelligence and information-sharing efforts have improved and as the U.S. government is able to better identify known or suspected terrorists and their identifying documentation.

It's healthy to debate the tactics used to maintain and utilize a single list of known terrorists or those appropriately suspected of terrorist activity. But the facts make a compelling case that the federal consolidated terrorist watch list is a successful component of the layered security our nation implemented after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

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