Global Migration, Border Security, and Information Sharing: 
The Department of Homeland Security’s US-VISIT Program

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The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) established the United States Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology (US-VISIT) Program in 2003. US-VISIT underpins DHS’s immigration management and border control efforts by collecting biometric information, such as digital fingerprints and photographs, on most non-U.S. citizens arriving at the country’s air, land, and sea ports of entry. After collection, the information is checked against a database of “known or suspected terrorists, criminals and immigration violators” in order to prevent illegal or dangerous border crossings into the United States. The data also becomes available to over 30,000 federal, state, and local government officials, including those in charge of counterterrorism and law enforcement, making US-VISIT one of the major features of national information-sharing efforts.

A Gradual Evolution

US-VISIT has roots in Section 110 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, which was to implement an automated system to determine whether nonimmigrant visitors to the United States were overstaying their visas. Revisions to the 1996 legislation slowed the progress of those efforts, and eventually the post-9/11 USA PATRIOT, Border Security, and Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Acts mandated that more robust entry and exit capabilities be put in place. Among other requirements, the three pieces of legislation stipulated that visas and other travel documents must contain biometric information and that the new system must be compatible with other national security–related government databases.

The two provisions covering biometric information and interoperability stand out as especially salient components of US-VISIT. Unlike biographical information, which includes names and dates of birth, biometric information is nearly impossible to forge. And interoperability is essential to making US-VISIT relevant to the larger goal of enhanced information sharing on terrorism- and other security-related threats.

US-VISIT Today

Since its inception, US-VISIT has grown in size and scope. In recent years, DHS moved from a 2- to a 10-fingerprint standard for collection, which reportedly increased the speed and accuracy of US-VISIT’s biometric verification processes. The department also claims that the change makes it easier to apprehend suspected criminals; under the new standard, for instance, officials have a better chance of matching US-VISIT data to partial fingerprints collected at crime scenes.

In addition, DHS has expanded the number and type of visitors subject to biometric collection on entry to the United States. In August 2004, the department ruled that individuals traveling under the Visa Waiver Program

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would be required to participate. Beginning in January 2009, the same requirements applied to lawful permanent residents of the United States.5

These expansions of US-VISIT have occurred in the context of a growing biometric information-sharing regime at the federal, state, and local levels. Among US-VISIT’s numerous stakeholders are the Departments of State (DoS) and Defense (DoD). As touted by DHS, DoS benefits from US-VISIT by using the program to “establish and verify the identities of visa applicants at embassies and consulates” throughout the world. And DoD has matched US-VISIT fingerprints against those collected as evidence at terrorist training camps.6

The Road Ahead

Despite the growth of US-VISIT, DHS faces important challenges in making the program more workable. An exit capability does not yet exist, meaning that the department has a limited ability to determine the activities and status of foreign nationals during their time in the United States. Since a program like US-VISIT relies on both entry and exit capabilities to be most useful, it is only logical for the latter to be developed as soon as possible.

However, two pilot programs testing the feasibility of air exit capabilities, conducted at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International and Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airports between May and July 2009, suggest that this will be difficult. An August 2010 Government Accountability Office report on the pilot programs noted that DHS struggled to conduct air exit scenarios because airlines refused to participate.7 Since customs and border officials only interact with international air travelers on their arrival in the United States, DHS will need to rely on the private sector for assistance in implementing air exit capabilities.

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6 “Government Agencies Using US-VISIT,” DHS.