

## **Report finds foreigners defeat border security with stolen passports**

**By Chris Strohm**  
[cstrohm@govexec.com](mailto:cstrohm@govexec.com)

Foreign travelers have entered the country using illegal passports the government knows are stolen, and the whereabouts of some with possible terrorist links remains unknown, according to a report released Monday.

"Aliens applying for admission to the United States using stolen passports have little reason to fear being caught and are usually admitted," Richard Skinner, acting inspector general of the Homeland Security Department, concluded in [the report](#).

The report examined the use of stolen passports from 27 countries that are part of the U.S. Visa Waiver Program. Under the program, travelers from the countries are able to enter the United States without immigrant visas. Twenty-two of the countries are in Europe. The others are Australia, Brunei, Japan, New Zealand and Singapore.

The report criticized the Customs and Border Protection bureau for inconsistent policies and incomplete record-keeping at ports of entry, and recommended that the Immigration and Customs Enforcement bureau take action to determine whether violators are still in the country.

"Because exit records are unreliable, we do not know whether any of the aliens who entered the United States using stolen passports departed, or remain in the country," the report stated.

The review tracked 136 foreigners who entered the country using stolen passports. Some were able to get through ports of entry even though their passports were reported as stolen and they were entered into a government database in the "lookout" category.

Lookout entries are generated when an agency determines that an alien may be inadmissible into the United States, or may be of interest to a law enforcement agency. Reasons for posting a lookout include immigration or visa violations, alien smuggling, suspected criminal activity or actual convictions, and suspected terrorist affiliations.

"While the 136 successful entries using stolen passports is a relatively small number, it is significant for several reasons," the report noted. "First, the passports were obtained by criminal acts. Second, though small, the number could and should be zero, at least for those admissions that occurred after lookouts were posted. ... Third, there was no law enforcement pursuit once it was recognized that an illegal entry had occurred."

Indeed, 57 out of 78 aliens using "lookout" passports were admitted into the United States, a success rate of 73 percent. Of the 57 aliens admitted, 33 entered the country after Sept. 11, 2001.

"We could not determine why the primary inspectors admitted the aliens with the stolen passports," the report added.

The report said the lack of routine reviews to determine whether stolen passports have been used successfully and the lack of follow-up investigations were "particularly alarming" because some stolen passports may have connections to known terrorist activity.

On June 6, 2001, for example, thieves stole 708 blank passports from a foreign city that was also home to an al Qaeda cell that played a significant role in providing financial and logistical support for the 9/11 terrorists, according to the report. The theft was not reported to the U. S. government until April 2004, after 20 aliens successfully entered the country using some of the stolen passports. But CBP only has departure records for two of the aliens.

"We could not confirm, however, that any of the aliens actually left the country, nor can we confirm that any are still here," the report stated. "Because of the geographic association of where the theft of the passports occurred and the al Qaeda terrorist cell, we believe that the activities of these 20 aliens while they were in the United States and their current locations warrant further investigation."

The review found, however, that CBP does not have a formal process for providing information concerning the use of stolen passports to ICE. The report made several recommendations for CBP and ICE to improve their policies and actions.

Asa Hutchinson, DHS undersecretary for border and transportation security, generally agreed with the report and recommendations, although he expressed concern in a written response that "overly broad and generalized conclusions were drawn based on a small and nonstatistical sample."

Hutchinson said CBP and ICE "have already taken steps toward implementing meaningful corrective actions" since the review was completed.

He added that the department now requires travelers from visa waiver countries to have machine-readable passports. Starting Oct. 26, 2005, passports must have biometric information to be valid.

*This document is located at <http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/1204/122004c1.htm>*

