DHS AT 20: AN AGENDA FOR REFORM

A Course
Correction
for Homeland
Security

Curbing Counterterrorism Abuses

By Faiza Patel, Rachel Levinson-Waldman, and Harsha Panduranga

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Counterterrorism Partnerships with State and Local Authorities</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fusion Centers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Intelligence and Analysis</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence Prevention Programs and Partnerships</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Data Collection, Risk Assessments, and Profiling</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Storage and Analysis</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Assessments</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious and National Origin Profiling</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Oversight</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy Office</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of Inspector General</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Recommendations</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen Safeguards Against Profiling</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect Privacy and Free Expression</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate Efficacy</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure Meaningful Transparency</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Robust Oversight</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFI</td>
<td>Analytical Framework for Intelligence</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATS</td>
<td>Automated Targeting System</td>
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<td>CBP</td>
<td>U.S. Customs and Border Protection</td>
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<td>CETC</td>
<td>Current and Emerging Threats Center</td>
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<td>CP3</td>
<td>Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships</td>
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<td>CRCL</td>
<td>DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties</td>
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<td>CVE</td>
<td>Countering Violent Extremism</td>
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<td>DHS</td>
<td>U.S. Department of Homeland Security</td>
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<td>DOJ</td>
<td>U.S. Department of Justice</td>
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<td>ESTA</td>
<td>Electronic System for Travel Authorization</td>
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<tr>
<td>FBI</td>
<td>Federal Bureau of Investigation</td>
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<td>GAO</td>
<td>U.S. Government Accountability Office</td>
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<td>HART</td>
<td>Homeland Advanced Recognition Technology database</td>
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<td>I&amp;A</td>
<td>DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICE</td>
<td>U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement</td>
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<td>ISE</td>
<td>Information Sharing Environment</td>
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<td>MIAC</td>
<td>Maine Information and Analysis Center</td>
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<td>NSA</td>
<td>National Security Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>OIG</td>
<td>DHS Office of Inspector General</td>
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<tr>
<td>OIRA</td>
<td>White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>OPS</td>
<td>DHS Office of Operations Coordination</td>
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<tr>
<td>PCR</td>
<td>privacy compliance review</td>
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<td>PIA</td>
<td>privacy impact assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAR</td>
<td>suspicious activity report</td>
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<tr>
<td>SORN</td>
<td>system of records notice</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPOT</td>
<td>Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| TECS         | DHS information-sharing platform  
  (formerly the Treasury Enforcement Communications System) |
| TRIP         | Traveler Redress Inquiry Program |
| TSA          | Transportation Security Administration |
| TSDB         | Terrorist Screening Database |
Experts and advocates have scrutinized recurring abuses in DHS’s enforcement of immigration law and proposed robust reforms. DHS’s counterterrorism initiatives, by contrast, often operate under the public’s radar. So, too, do its travel and immigration screening programs. Yet these activities touch the lives of millions of Americans every day.

The department has aggressively targeted Muslims, communities of color, and social justice movements in the name of security. It conceals information about its vast databases and intrusive surveillance technologies. And it often embarks on ventures that implicate Americans’ privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties without even establishing or measuring their usefulness.

These problems have long festered due to a dangerous combination of broad authorities, weak safeguards, and insufficient oversight. The Trump administration brought them to the fore. DHS agents enforced the president’s ban on travelers from half a dozen Muslim-majority countries, wrenched children from parents at the southern border, escalated violence at protests from Washington, DC, to Portland, Oregon, spied on journalists and activists, and menaced immigrant communities from New York to New Mexico.

For most of its existence, DHS focused too narrowly on so-called international terrorism. It construed this mandate to include the activities of American Muslims, regardless of whether they had connections to foreign terrorist groups. Only belatedly is DHS turning its attention to domestic terrorism, particularly far-right political violence. In 2021, Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced that the department will increase grants for state and local governments and add a division to its intelligence arm.

But simply shifting its focus is not enough. The Biden administration has yet to critically evaluate the department’s post-9/11 missteps or fix the systems that have entrenched them. A course correction is critical.

With the Homeland Security Act of 2002, Congress tasked the new department with keeping the country safe from terrorist attacks. But DHS is far from the sole federal agency with a counterterrorism mission. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the National Security Agency (NSA), and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, among other agencies, carry the lion’s share of responsibility for it. DHS carved out a role for itself in two main areas: partnerships with state, local, tribal, and territorial authorities and screening of travelers and immigrants.

Section I of this report identifies the agency’s counterterrorism collaborations with state and local authorities and private firms. These programs have routinely surveilled American Muslims, traumatizing entire communities and casting them as hotbeds of terrorism. DHS agents have deployed these very tools against protestors, activists, and journalists.

Section II turns to travel and immigration screening programs. DHS has accumulated vast stores of information about people who travel into, out of, and over the United States. The Transportation Safety Administration (TSA) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), among other DHS components, use this data to draw inferences about them, document their movements, and subject them to warrantless searches and interrogations. Agents do all of this without suspicion of potential wrongdoing. Unsurprisingly, reports of religious or ethnic profiling are common.

Section III analyzes DHS’s oversight infrastructure. Three primary offices — the Privacy Office, the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL), and the Office of Inspector General (OIG) — have curbed some of the department’s transgressions. But they have allowed many other civil rights and civil liberties violations to continue.

Finally, this report identifies five avenues for reform: stronger safeguards against profiling; better protections for privacy and free expression; rigorous evaluations of program efficacy; meaningful transparency about data holdings and the implications DHS programs have for civil rights and civil liberties; and more robust internal oversight. Forthcoming Brennan Center reports will delve into these recommendations in greater detail.

The secretary of homeland security can — and should — make these changes now. The ease with which President Donald Trump weaponized DHS against both immigrants and citizens demonstrates that there are not sufficient safeguards against abuse. It is time for DHS to rein in its discriminatory and ineffective approaches and prevent new ones from being institutionalized.
I. Counterterrorism Partnerships with State and Local Authorities

DHS’s counterterrorism efforts have long depended on cooperation with state and local authorities and private actors, in particular through federally established information-sharing mechanisms, the dissemination of terrorism analyses to state and local authorities, and violence prevention initiatives. These programs, which have repeatedly targeted minority communities and protest movements, have produced little discernible counterterrorism value.

Fusion Centers

Fusion centers were created after 9/11 as hubs for sharing information among federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies, their nonfederal counterparts, and nongovernmental partners. The centers are run by state and local governments and supported by the federal government, most significantly through DHS’s Office of Intelligence and Analysis (OIA). They obtain and distribute information from a wide array of sources — including law enforcement, U.S. military, and homeland security databases; emergency response and public health agencies; suspicious activity reports (SARs) generated by members of the public and the private sector; and public records and commercial data aggregators — under the theory that this material can be pooled to anticipate terrorist attacks. Today, 80 fusion centers are funded by a combination of direct federal spending, federal grants, and state and local investments. They are staffed primarily by local and state law enforcement, alongside DHS personnel and occasional liaisons from sectors such as fire departments, public health and cybersecurity agencies, and state national guards.

Sharing credible information about actual threats of violence is vital. But fusion centers have repeatedly disseminated false, biased, and unreliable information and focused disproportionate attention on minority communities and protest movements — all with minimal demonstrated security benefit.

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These problems have been well documented for a decade. In 2012, a two-year-long bipartisan Senate investigation of fusion centers concluded that the system had “yielded little, if any, benefit to federal counterterrorism intelligence efforts.” Rather, the Senate report found, fusion centers produced reports that were “oftentimes shoddy” and “rarely timely.” The report highlighted the scrutiny that centers had imposed on Muslim groups in particular for benign activities such as hosting events on subjects like marriage and “positive parenting.” One fusion center report released in 2009, just prior to the period reviewed by Senate investigators, even depicted routine advocacy by Muslim civil rights groups as support for terrorism.

Reports of such problems have persisted in the decade since the Senate report. A Chicago-area fusion center reportedly sent DHS and the FBI alerts that it knew to be unreliable about conversations and picture-taking by people who appeared to be “Arabic” or “Middle Eastern.” A Boston-area fusion center scanned social media for #BlackLivesMatter, #MuslimLivesMatter, and commonplace Arabic words. Centers have also targeted racial justice activists and people celebrating Juneteenth, disseminating information about event organizers and attendees to law enforcement and intelligence agencies and tracking the locations of people posting the Black Lives Matter hashtag. Other targets have included environmental activists and people demonstrating on issues ranging from women’s rights to the government response to Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. Some fusion center reporting has veered into patently irrelevant matters, pursuing issues such as the “Criminal and Violent Extremist Use of Emojis,” alleged musical collaborations between “Subscribers of Black Extremism” and the “Indigenous Anarchist Federation,” and the release of a Harry Potter mobile phone game.

Disseminating biased and unreliable information to law enforcement poses serious risks to the people identified as threats. As Michael German, a Brennan Center fellow and former FBI agent, told the Intercept about inaccurate fusion center reporting about protests and protesters: “I always try to read these and put myself in the shoes of a young police officer that doesn’t know anything about this subject. . . . All this tells me to do is be very afraid of these people and imagine the worst of anything that they do.”

Fusion centers are supposed to implement a long list of oversight and compliance mechanisms to receive federal support. (They are also subject to the laws of the state or municipality in which they are located.) Specifically, fusion centers are required to maintain and publish policies covering privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties, and they must conduct reviews in accordance with federal guidelines to ensure that those policies are sufficiently robust and that they are adhered to. Indeed, federal guidance is detailed and voluminous.
In practice, however, these measures are inadequate. While DHS’s intelligence unit does run an annual assessment of fusion centers, it relies almost exclusively on self-reported data to check compliance, frequently resulting in findings of near-perfect compliance even as abusive practices continue. The few public disclosures that exist suggest that the combination of fusion center self-reporting and state and local compliance mechanisms fails to make for an effective oversight infrastructure:

- The Austin-area fusion center is required to undergo external audits reviewed by the city’s Public Safety Commission. But the commission reportedly received only a single “two page, non-substantive” report from its 2014 peer-to-peer review with an El Paso counterpart; according to researchers who reviewed the document, it said little more than that the exercise was “very productive.” The next year, the commission was notified of a peer review with the Boston-area fusion center but received no written materials from the review, leaving it without a means to conduct effective oversight. Both the Austin- and Boston-area fusion centers are among those responsible for abuses related to spying on Black activists and community groups and monitoring the internet for constitutionally protected speech presumed to be associated with Muslims.

- A 2014 peer-to-peer exchange between the Oregon and Idaho fusion centers was similarly vague, finding that the Oregon center’s information-sharing relationships were of “significant value” but offering no concrete details in support of the claim and stating with little analysis that both centers had made protecting privacy and civil liberties “a priority.” In 2021, Oregon community organizers and social justice advocates sued the state’s Department of Justice, alleging that the fusion center had routinely engaged in “surveillance of . . . individuals engaged in innocuous and constitutionally protected activity, including peaceful assemblies.”

- Open the Government, a nonpartisan coalition, reviewed years of audits from the Chicago-area fusion center and found that its compliance division recommended “only small changes in . . . internal regulations, but a near-blanket rubber stamp” of the center’s activities, even as the center disseminated biased intelligence reports.

- When Massachusetts attempted in 2018 to audit the efficacy of the Commonwealth Fusion Center, its primary fusion center, the center refused to give the auditor access to its systems or to basic information on its operations.

The weak information-sharing standards established by the federal government bear much of the blame for the fusion centers’ subpar performance. Through a computer system called the Information Sharing Environment (ISE), fusion centers disseminate suspicious activity reports, which document observed behavior potentially related to terrorism that is reported by citizens, private-sector personnel, government officials, or law enforcement. As detailed in an earlier Brennan Center report, this system jettisoned time-tested standards by functionally exempting the ISE from 28 C.F.R. Part 23, the federal rule requiring that the inclusion of personally identifiable information in criminal
intelligence databases be supported by reasonable suspicion of criminal conduct or activity — essentially defining SARs as material not subject to this requirement.34

Instead of evaluating whether a suspicious activity report is connected to a potential crime, fusion center staff determine whether a report contains a “potential nexus to terrorism.” They do so by evaluating whether the report is “reasonably indicative of pre-operational planning associated with terrorism,” including such common activities as taking photographs, looking through binoculars, writing notes, or asking questions about an event or building.35 If the report meets this overbroad standard, it is uploaded to the system, where it can be accessed by other fusion centers along with the FBI and DHS, and is disseminated to a range of other law enforcement agencies.36

As a consequence, the majority of information collected by fusion centers has nothing to do with terrorism.37 According to DHS, 100,000 SARs were submitted between 2010 and 2017, of which 35,000 were found to have some link to terrorism — an immense but unsurprising number given the broad standard described above.38 However, only about 7 percent of those (barely more than 2 percent of the total submitted) supported an FBI investigation, led to one being opened, or involved a person on the terrorist watch list.39 Worrisomely, SARs that are determined to have no connection to terrorism and are not uploaded to the ISE may still remain in a fusion center’s files.40

DHS has never made public any assessment of fusion centers that meaningfully examines the quality of the information they report and attendant civil rights and civil liberties risks.41 The most robust and methodical evaluation of fusion centers’ intelligence reports was the Senate’s 2012 report, which reviewed “every raw DHS intelligence report drafted on information from state and local fusion centers” over a 13-month period. It “identified problems with nearly every significant aspect of DHS’s involvement with fusion centers” and offered scathing criticism of their efficacy and impact on civil liberties.42

Fusion center leaders have batted away questions about effectiveness, arguing that it is impossible to measure the centers’ security benefits.43 Despite fusion centers’ questionable contributions to counterterrorism, their funding from combined federal, state, and local sources totaled some $336 million in 2018.44

Office of Intelligence and Analysis
The Office of Intelligence and Analysis serves as a conduit between federal agencies and their state and local partners for terrorism-related information.45 In addition to supporting the national network of fusion centers, the office is authorized to carry out domestic surveillance — mostly limited to monitoring and acquiring publicly available information — in support of “authorized intelligence missions,” including counterterrorism, threats to U.S. economic security or public health, and major disasters.46

Since the office collects and disseminates information about Americans, it must act with strict fealty to constitutional values and its specific security mission. But the guidelines that govern I&A are generally quite permissive. For example, the office is not allowed to undertake intelligence activities “for the sole purpose of monitoring” constitutionally or legally protected activities.47 This is hardly an effective safeguard: it is easy to cite a pretextual but constitutionally neutral justification (e.g., an unsubstantiated contention that a protest could turn violent) to collect information on Americans’ political organizing and religious practices.

I&A’s activities in the summer of 2020, as racial justice demonstrations broke out across the country, illustrate how its institutional deficiencies open the door to abuse.48 Pursuant to an executive order aimed at quelling protests under the guise of protecting federal buildings, the office issued guidance labeling “threats to damage or destroy any public monument, memorial, or statue” as justification for sweeping intelligence gathering.49

The disclosure of this guidance raised concerns in Congress. Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), chair of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, declared that “never before has the Department sought to so aggressively counter potential threats of graffiti, vandalism, or other minor damage . . . in the same fashion as it would seek to counter acknowledged threats . . . such as terrorism.”50 I&A’s compilation and dissemination of intelligence reports summarizing tweets by two journalists about this guidance ultimately triggered an investigation by the department’s inspector general and a review by its general counsel’s office.51 The latter, which was completed in January 2021 and made public in October of that year by Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR), detailed failures of leadership, management, and rule compliance at I&A and raised questions about its overall value.52

While the general counsel’s review did not find evidence of politicization per se, it showed that bias rather than facts drives DHS’s intelligence priorities. For example, in keeping with the Trump administration’s insistence that Antifa was behind racial justice protests, an unnamed senior I&A official pressured analysts to describe threats “inspired” by “violent antifa anarchists.”53 The unit’s acting chief during this time claimed in a whistleblower complaint that DHS leadership asked him to change various intelligence assessments to substantiate President Trump’s public remarks, including on the supposed dangers posed by “ANTIFA and ‘anarchist’ groups” operating throughout the United States.54

The lack of adequate rules and safeguards makes DHS’s intelligence arm a ripe target for manipulation. The general
counsel recommended a “holistic review of the strategic direction of I&A,” including an evaluation of “buy-in” from various nonfederal governmental partners and the broader DHS intelligence enterprise, as well as of I&A’s contributions to violence prevention and intelligence analysis. The general counsel’s review essentially called for an assessment of whether I&A is serving its statutorily designated role as a nerve center for intelligence sharing on threats within the United States. The review highlighted several systemic problem areas:

- **Poor training.** All I&A personnel collecting open-source information on “current and emerging threats” demonstrated “major gaps” in understanding the scope of collection “affecting First Amendment issues and the Intelligence Oversight guidelines.”

- **Difficulty of identifying threats of violence.** As the review noted, identifying real threats of violence “is a difficult task filled with ambiguity,” and distinguishing between “serious threats and hyperbole” can be “subjective.” It recommended that I&A’s Current and Emerging Threats Center (CETC) shift its focus from immediate threats back to strategic intelligence collection and analysis.

- **Insufficient safeguards for Americans’ information.** According to the review, prior to the summer of 2018, CETC had a practice of replacing the names of U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents with a generic marking (e.g., “U.S. person”) in certain reports based on information collected from publicly available sources such as social media to minimize risks to privacy and to civil rights and civil liberties. The lack of a formal policy enabled the Trump administration to easily discard these rules, allowing sensitive “U.S. person” information to be freely disseminated.

- **No plan to structure intelligence collection.** I&A’s open-source analysts did not follow the standard intelligence community practice of starting information collection with a plan identifying the need it is meant to fill and how it will be collected. The review observed that having a plan in place reduces the potential for collection that is aimed at proving a foregone conclusion and helps build a “culture of compliance.”

Based on these findings, the general counsel’s review recommended that DHS carry out an objective evaluation of I&A’s strategy, structure, and counterterrorism value.

A March 2022 report by DHS’s inspector general largely underscored the findings in the general counsel’s report, portraying I&A’s analysts as woefully undertrained and subject to political headwinds. The inspector general reviewed I&A’s open-source intelligence collection in the weeks leading up to the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol. In contrast to the 366 open-source intelligence reports that I&A issued during the racial justice protests that occurred between May 25 and August 24, 2020, it issued no reports in the weeks leading up to the January 6 attack, despite a direct request for research from I&A’s unit responsible for producing finished intelligence. I&A analysts claimed they viewed the threats of violence they identified online as “unlikely” to come to fruition, despite seeing calls to action by known violent actors such as the Proud Boys. I&A officials also claimed that directions from the office’s leadership changed between the two events, with analysts told to report “anything related to violence” during the 2020 protests but only to report threats “they were confident . . . were real” ahead of January 6.

While the inspector general did not probe the nature of the changed perception of threats by collectors and instructions from superiors — focusing instead on the fact that most collectors received only minimal training and had less than one year of experience — it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the race and political leanings of those planning the gatherings played a role. In March 2022, Stephanie Dobitsch, the deputy undersecretary for I&A, testified to Congress that in response to its failures in the lead-up to January 6, I&A “has made substantial changes to the management, policies, equipment, personnel, organization, and training associated with our open source intelligence activities,” improved the oversight over open-source reports, and doubled the staff for I&A’s Privacy and Intelligence Oversight Office (though the absolute numbers are not publicly available), including dedicating an officer to the open-source team.

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which these changes address the systemic and long-standing issues at I&A. Even before its activities drew sustained scrutiny, the office was issuing inappropriate intelligence reports. Although such reports are often quickly withdrawn after they become public, their issuance points to deep-seated institutional problems. For example, in 2007, the office issued a study on the Nation of Islam that was subsequently withdrawn because, as one senior official conceded, “the organization, despite its highly volatile and extreme rhetoric, has neither advocated violence nor engaged in violence.”

In 2009, I&A published a report on right-wing extremism that was criticized by Republicans and Democrats alike in Congress for targeting nonviolent groups such as veterans and opponents of immigration and abortion. DHS quickly withdrew the report and disbanded the small unit that produced it, which had been tasked with studying “non-Islamic extremism.” While the report may seem prescient in retrospect, it was filled with suppositions and cast various political views as threatening without demonstrating any connection to violence.

More recently, I&A monitored Twitter for information about 2015 protests in Baltimore over the killing of Fred-
Violence Prevention Programs and Partnerships

As part of its terrorism prevention mandate, DHS is charged with supporting and coordinating violence prevention efforts, which since 2021 have been undertaken by its Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships (CP3).73 A key goal of CP3 is to identify individuals who exhibit purported warning signs of violence for referral to law enforcement or to multidisciplinary teams that include law enforcement; these teams collectively determine whether the individual poses a threat and form an intervention plan to manage the ostensible risk.74 CP3 is built on the discredited premise that commonplace feelings, views, and behaviors are predictive of an inclination to violence. As DHS acknowledges, law enforcement “cannot operate” the types of programs funded by CP3 “because of constitutionally based civil rights and liberties.”75 Nonetheless, CP3 provides opportunities for police to become involved in these programs.76

CP3 grew out of the Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) initiative, which formally became part of the U.S. counterterrorism strategy in 2011.77 The scheme provided funding to police departments, academics, and civil society organizations to train teachers, social workers, and religious figures to identify American Muslims who might “radicalize” and become terrorists and to disrupt their progress toward violence. The Biden administration has rightfully recognized that CVE was a biased initiative.78 Indeed, past CVE programs targeted Muslims almost exclusively and often relied on overtly prejudiced — and empirically unfounded — indicators, such as frequent attendance at a mosque or concerns about anti-Muslim discrimination.79

In 2019, CVE was renamed Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention and its focus broadened from political violence by Muslims to a wider spectrum of political violence, along with “targeted violence,” an indeterminate category. In 2021, it was again rebranded, this time as CP3.80

There is simply no evidence to show that this strategy of preventing violence works. A RAND Corporation study that DHS has claimed validates its approach in fact undermines it: “Because there are no unambiguous early indicators of future violent behavior, the performance of risk assessment tools and methods to distinguish individuals who appear to be threats from those who actually do pose a threat is limited.”81

This finding is hardly surprising. Millions of Americans share the conditions that DHS identifies as signs of impending violence, including “social alienation,” having a “grievance,” or “negative home life factors” (such as coming from a single-parent household). Even purportedly extreme views do not necessarily predict violence: while nearly all terrorists have “extreme” views, so too do millions of people who never plan or commit a violent act.82

CP3’s aim to do away with the most blatantly biased aspect of CVE — its near-exclusive focus on Muslims — does nothing to prevent bias from creeping into programs. People tasked with being on the lookout for vaguely articulated suspicious behavior, such as “severe mood swings” or “feelings of hopelessness,” are inevitably influenced by individual and societal prejudices.83 Such biases and their attendant harms are well established; in schools, for example, students of color are punished more often and more severely than white students for the same behavior.84

Moreover, at a time when jurisdictions around the country are considering how to reduce law enforcement involvement in mental health and social issues, CP3 prevention activities take the opposite approach: they categorize a broad range of concerns about mental health and socioeconomic conditions as indicators of criminality and bring them to the attention of law enforcement.

Despite DHS’s claims that these programs are successful, its own assessments have not demonstrated that they prevent violence.85 Rather, the agency’s evaluations rely on unrelated performance metrics, focusing instead on the reach of a program or the degree to which a grantee has fulfilled funding conditions, while simply presupposing that violence reduction will follow if the department’s prevention framework is implemented.

A 2021 evaluation of a grant provided to Crisis Intervention of Houston illustrates the point. According to DHS, the purpose of the grant was to build up a hotline aimed at reducing extremism, including adding “a Muslim youth-oriented hotline.” Success was defined via metrics such as increasing the number of counselors and outreach events aimed at the Muslim community.86 But although a number of counselors were trained and outreach events held, none of the calls handled by the hotline seem to have related to violent extremism.

Despite the risks associated with the CP3 approach and a lack of evidence that it actually prevents violence, Congress continues to fund it, including by providing $20 million for CP3’s Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention grant program in 2022.87
II. Data Collection, Risk Assessments, and Profiling

DHS collects reams of data about travelers; this data is stored in opaque, interlocking databases, powering secret risk assessments that shape each traveler’s experience. The department’s antidiscrimination policies are not up to the task of preventing bias in these activities, and travelers have repeatedly complained about profiling by DHS agents on the basis of religion, ethnicity, and national origin.

Data Collection

Much of DHS’s power comes from the sheer amount of personal data it accumulates. As two former DHS officials have observed:

[DHS] is the only government entity that, as part of its regular operations, conducts invasive physical searches of millions of Americans and their belongings each week without any predicate. It is also one of the only government agencies that retains huge amounts of data on individuals, using only “implied consent” for justification. In addition, it draws inferences based on data in ways that are totally opaque to citizens, and takes actions that may be to their individual detriment (being selected for search and interrogation, being delayed or severely inconvenienced in their travel, etc.). . . [T]he privacy and due process concerns resulting from other homeland security operations, such as information collection by the National Security Agency, pale by comparison.

In contrast to the NSA’s data collection, which has been the subject of much congressional and public scrutiny, DHS’s data programs often fly under the radar. Yet these programs give the department a deeply intimate view of many Americans’ lives through a range of information, including the following:

- biometric data, including not just fingerprints and digitized photographs of foreign travelers but also facial recognition records for both foreign travelers and U.S. citizens;
- social media information obtained from travelers’ electronic devices or through vetting of travelers or their online contacts;
- information retrieved by border agents from travelers’ phones, laptops, or other devices, including data obtained from social media apps, as well as notes about these encounters;
- free text notes entered into DHS databases in the course of border crossings, which have contained information about First Amendment–protected activities, such as the books carried by travelers and the conferences they have attended; and
- passenger name records, which generally include contact information, seat numbers (allowing inferences about travel companions), and credit card data, and which may even disclose IP addresses from which flight reservations were made and details about hotel reservations.

DHS is increasingly buying information about Americans from commercial data brokers as well. In February 2020, the Wall Street Journal reported that DHS was purchasing GPS-based cell phone app location data from the commercial firm Venntel under contracts worth millions of dollars. CBP, ICE, and the U.S. Secret Service also reportedly have contracts with Babel Street, a data analytics company, to identify devices in particular areas and build historical records of their prior locations. The department has repeatedly refused to offer clarification about how it uses the data, however, and the DHS inspector general indicated in November 2020 that he intended to launch an investigation into the practice.

Location is highly revealing, as the Supreme Court noted in a 2018 case concluding that police must get a warrant to access stored location data collected by cell phone providers. The Internal Revenue Service inspector general issued a letter in 2021 indicating that purchasing such data may run afoul of that decision. In the meantime, individuals may have minimal practical awareness that their location data is being sold to the government: apps’ terms of service generally provide little notice that the data they gather may be funneled to the government through data brokers. Data held by these companies is supposedly anonymized, but much of it can easily be de-anonymized and can be used to identify and track individuals based on their real-world behavior. Location data can also be used to target communities that have historically been subjected to government monitoring. Researchers have revealed, for
example, that Muslim users are a “conspicuous target” of location surveillance through consumer apps — data that could then show up in commercial databases available for purchase by DHS.100

Data about people’s identities and activities on social media is flowing into DHS databases in ever-increasing volumes as well. This collection effort began near the end of President Barack Obama’s second term, when the department began asking for social media handles from approximately 15 million foreign travelers per year.101 In 2019, the State Department started requiring an additional 14 million visa applicants annually to disclose their social media handles, which are shared with DHS and retained in its databases.102 As the Biden administration reviews these programs, it should take into account not only the known risk of misinterpretation of social media content103 but also the government’s own findings:

- DHS has described social media handles as “sensitive personally identifiable information,” which is information that “if lost, compromised, or disclosed without authorization, could result in substantial harm, embarrassment, inconvenience, or unfairness to an individual.”104

- DHS pilot programs found social media screening practically useless in support of adjudicating immigration benefits, with officers having difficulty using social media to pinpoint fraud or national security concerns.105

- A 2017 DHS inspector general report found that the department’s failure to measure the effectiveness of social media monitoring during pilot programs gave it no basis for further efforts.106

- The Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs (OIRA), the White House office that reviews federal regulations, in April 2021 rejected a DHS proposal to collect social media identifiers from another 33 million people per year. OIRA noted in rejecting the proposed plan that the department had not “adequately demonstrated the practical utility of collecting this information,” and that the Muslim ban, which underpinned the proposal, had been repealed.107

CBP and ICE also collect data through border searches of phones, laptops, tablets, and other electronic devices at land crossings and at airports for passengers arriving on international flights.108 In fiscal year 2021, CBP conducted more than 37,000 searches of electronic devices; in 2018, when statistics about the citizenship of those targeted were last available, approximately 20 percent of such searches involved U.S. citizens.109

Even though its data collection rules give it ample latitude, DHS has often failed to comply with them. According to a 2018 inspector general report, CBP agents regularly failed to properly document searches and to disable cell phone network connections prior to searches — requirements meant to restrict agents’ access to information stored outside the device.110 The report also found that CBP had no performance measures in place to assess the effectiveness of its forensic searches, including whether these searches resulted in prosecutions or convictions.111 A September 2021 follow-up blasted CBP’s progress since the previous report, disclosing failures in documentation, compliance, auditing, evaluation of efficacy, and training.112

Other flaws have plagued the department’s use of electronic device searches as well. Journalists, activists, and Muslim travelers contend that they have been subjected to targeted device searches based on their activities or religious affiliations.113 The section below describes the use of a DHS database to facilitate the search and seizure of an American traveler’s electronic device based on his political activity.

### Guilt by Association

>> In the summer of 2020, Ismail Ajjawi, a Palestinian student from Lebanon, flew into Boston’s Logan International Airport to start his first year at Harvard University. A CBP officer examined his phone and, according to Ajjawi, denied him entry because “she found people posting political points of view that oppose the U.S. on my friend list.”114 He was sent back to Lebanon and barred from reapplying for a U.S. visa. After intense media scrutiny and pressure from Harvard, Ajjawi was allowed to begin his studies in the United States. But few people denied visas or immigration benefits such as green cards or naturalization will ever know whether social media posts — their own or those of their online contacts — were to blame.

The system operates behind closed doors, allowing political, ideological, and religious vetting — not just of applicants but also of their online “friends” — to take place unchecked. Moreover, social media can easily reveal intimate aspects of people’s lives, such as their sexuality, whether they own guns, their support for organizations like Planned Parenthood, or their mosque, synagogue, or church attendance. As Ajjawi’s experience shows, social media monitoring can be used to target people whom the authorities disfavor by facilitating the ability to refuse them entry into the country, deport them, subject them to investigation, share their information with a repressive foreign government, or just hassle them at the airport.
Challenging the Terrorist Screening Database

Multiple court challenges have been filed against the TSDB in recent years. Although the results in these cases have been mixed, the recurring litigation shows that these concerns are persistent and ongoing.

- In 2016, 25 American Muslims sued DHS and other federal counterterrorism agencies, claiming that they had been detained and harassed when entering the United States because of their presumed inclusion in the database. A Virginia federal district court ruled in their favor in 2019, concluding that the vague standard for adding people to the watch list presented a high risk of “erroneous deprivation” of their protected liberty interest in travel and that the procedural safeguard provided — DHS’s Traveler Redress Inquiry Program (TRIP) — was insufficient. The decision was reversed on appeal on the grounds that the government has the authority to regulate travel and that only Congress or the White House can substantially alter the operation of the TSDB.

- In 2020, 39 American Muslims filed suit in federal court in Maryland challenging several government watch lists, including the TSDB. The court rejected the government’s motion to dismiss the case, finding that the plaintiffs had a protected liberty interest in travel and that individuals who attempted to use TRIP could end up in a bureaucratic “black hole,” stymieing their efforts to vindicate that interest. The judge allowed the case to proceed to discovery, which is ongoing.

- A 2021 case filed by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of a U.S. citizen alleging that he had been wrongly placed on the so-called No Fly List, a subset of the TSDB, after he refused to become an FBI informant was withdrawn when the FBI removed him from the list shortly after he filed suit.

The wide-ranging functionalities of DHS data systems lend themselves to abuse. DHS data architecture was used, for example, to target David House, a computer programmer who set up a website for U.S. Army whistleblower Chelsea Manning that included a petition for her release and an effort to raise legal funds. In 2010, House was stopped at the border and interrogated about his political activities and beliefs; his laptop and other devices were seized for copying and data analysis. A settlement...
revealed that ICE agents had used TECS and the Advance Passenger Information System to receive automatic alerts about House’s travels in and out of the country, enabling investigators to stop and question him and seize his data.135 House was never charged with a crime.

CBP also used TECS to target and harass journalists, attorneys, and activists — including 15 U.S. citizens — for their association with the caravan of migrants and asylum seekers arriving at the border with Mexico in 2018 and 2019. A September 2021 OIG report revealed that nearly half of the people flagged by these TECS lookouts were not suspected of any criminal activity; in one case, a lookout was placed on an individual whose only connection to the caravan was having crossed the border with one of its apparent organizers months earlier.136

This absence of any policy meaningfully limiting the use of DHS’s powerful data systems undergirded an even more shocking story. In late 2021, Yahoo News reported that agents at CBP’s secretive Counter Network Division regularly used highly sensitive databases to obtain travel records and financial and personal information about “journalists, government officials, congressional members and their staff, NGO workers and others,” in order to vet potential contacts.137 A former CBP agent told Yahoo, “there’s no policy and procedure,” confiding that he vetted reporters and others using TECS, ATS, and other databases as though they were terrorists, despite the absence of any evidence of criminal activity.138

Long retention periods and expansive sharing authorities magnify opportunities for misuse.139 For instance, Silent Partner and Quiet Skies, two TSA risk assessment programs described in more detail below, have a retention range of 15 and 7 years, respectively;140 TSA watch list master files are kept for 30 years after an individual’s information is entered,141 and TECS subject records and inspection reports are kept for up to 75 years.142 Several of these data sets can be used for risk assessments during the entire retention period, and some systems even retain data after it has been deleted from the source system.143 The nearly indiscriminate ingestion and long-term retention of data mean that mistakes can proliferate across systems.

In addition, the department’s assertions of the efficacy and necessity of these systems are of dubious credibility at best. With respect to ATS, for instance, DHS has not conducted any public empirical evaluations of the system’s effectiveness or weighed the benefits of its risk assessments against the dangers of collecting oceans of data about people, the vast majority of whom are innocent of any crime. A 2019 report highlighted two cases in which CBP officers used the system to identify one departing passenger who was wanted for child sexual assault and another, deemed a high risk for fraud, who turned out to be in possession of a fake passport.144 ATS’s predictive systems do not seem to have played much of a role in identifying the child abuse perpetrator; he had already been identified by another system, and all that was left was to apprehend him. ATS did assist in identifying the perpetrator in the fraudulent passport case, but if these are the best cases that DHS can highlight for a given period, they hardly seem to justify the entire ATS architecture.

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### Trapped by a Typo

>> In 2005, Rahinah Ibrahim, a Malaysian doctoral student studying architecture at Stanford University, was placed under arrest at San Francisco International Airport while en route to a conference in Hawaii. After being handcuffed and interrogated, she was told that her name appeared on the No Fly List but would be removed. She then continued on her journey and flew home from Hawaii to Malaysia. Ten weeks later, as Ibrahim sought to fly back to the United States, the airline informed her that her U.S. visa had been revoked. She filed a complaint with DHS to remove her name from the list but received no response.145

Ibrahim filed a lawsuit against DHS and other government agencies to remove her name from the No Fly List and other terrorism databases. In the course of the eight-year-long court battle that followed — during which time Ibrahim continued to be barred from the United States — an FBI agent admitted to accidentally placing a check mark on a form, resulting in the “considerable consequence” of her name being added to the list. Ibrahim’s daughter was also mistakenly added to the No Fly List, preventing her from testifying at the trial. The court ultimately ordered the government to search for and remove references identifying Ibrahim in all of its terrorist watch lists and records, as well as to provide Ibrahim with information specifying why her visa had been revoked. In light of its years-long pursuit of the case, during which it knew Ibrahim posed no threat, the government was ordered to pay most of the nearly $4 million her legal team expended on her behalf.146
Other DHS data systems, such as the new Homeland Advanced Recognition Technology (HART) database, raise additional concerns. That system, which does not yet have a comprehensive set of public documents disclosing its scope, operations, or privacy mitigation measures, combines biometric data, data from social media platforms, and information from other publicly available online sources to facilitate analysis of relationship patterns. HART has been criticized on the grounds that it could be used for wholesale tracking and that it will combine massive quantities of disparate data sources in one place, creating a broad picture of an individual’s life and relationships and implicating First Amendment concerns.147

These problems would be significant enough if DHS were transparent about the parameters of its information systems, enabling the public to understand what information is being amassed about them and what happens to it. Instead, as discussed below, the documentation produced by the DHS Privacy Office about the department’s various databases, although voluminous, is often impenetrable to the lay reader. Even for experts, it generally only offers fragmented insight into how the department collects, uses, and shares individuals’ data.148

Risk Assessments

DHS’s collection and storage of data provides the raw material for its risk assessments, which are generated in part by closely held algorithms. CBP and TSA run risk assessments on every traveler, including U.S. citizens, arriving in and departing from the United States as well as those flying over domestic airspace on any airline or flying internationally on U.S. carriers.149

Some risk assessment programs have garnered sporadic congressional and media scrutiny, but they have at most been modestly curbed to mitigate their most intrusive aspects; the programs themselves remain a key part of how DHS currently implements its mission. These programs represent an extraordinary exercise of unchecked authority coupled with lackluster efforts to measure their effectiveness. Two programs about which ample public information is available are highlighted below. Others operate in the background with unknown parameters and consequences.

Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques

Since 2003, TSA has sought to identify potentially risky passengers at airports through a program targeting purportedly suspicious behaviors such as wearing “improper attire for the location,” gazing downward, and giving “nonanswers” to security personnel.150

The Extreme Vetting Initiative

>> The danger that risk assessment programs can be manipulated and even weaponized was underscored by a program that ICE began pursuing shortly after President Trump’s inauguration: the Extreme Vetting Initiative. In the summer of 2017, ICE sought to find out whether private firms could build a tool to monitor Facebook, Twitter, and the rest of the open internet to automatically flag people for deportation or visa denial.151 Trump’s January 2017 executive order creating the discriminatory Muslim travel ban provided the basis for the nebulous screening criteria, which included whether the individual would be a "positively contributing member of society” and “make contributions to the national interest,” as well as whether they would be likely to commit a crime or terrorist act. The contractor supplying the tool would have been required to flag at least 10,000 people each year for either deportation investigations or visa denial.152

As more than 50 civil society organizations told DHS, the program was “tailor-made for discrimination” and would have chilled the free expression of targeted individuals, along with their families and associates.153 It also had no empirical basis: according to a letter to DHS signed by 54 leading experts in machine learning and automated decision-making, there are “no computational methods” that can predict whether a visitor or immigrant poses a risk or will contribute to society.154 In the face of pressure, ICE dropped the automated aspect of the program, hiring human reviewers instead.155 Little public information is available about this manual program, which was rebranded as the Visa Lifecycle Vetting Initiative.156

The initiative, called Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques (SPOT) at its inception, deployed more than 3,000 behavior detection officers at airports around the country to look for these behaviors, identify passengers for additional screening, and identify trends.157

Governmental bodies have repeatedly questioned the scientific validity and effectiveness of SPOT, which cost $1.5 billion over about eight years.158 The program has also been dogged by allegations that officers disproportionately targeted Black, Latino, and Muslim travelers. A stream of assessments from 2010 through 2017 all concluded that TSA was sinking hundreds of millions of dollars into a program with no proof that it contributed to public safety — and no plan to produce such proof:

- 2010. A study by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that DHS had deployed the program without validating its premise and observed that there was no scientific consensus “on whether
behavior detection principles can be reliably used for counterterrorism purposes.”

- **2013.** An audit of the program by the DHS inspector general found that TSA could not “ensure that passengers at U.S. airports are screened objectively, show that the program is cost-effective, or reasonably justify the program’s expansion.” A GAO report the same year urged that funding for the program be restricted until TSA could produce scientifically valid evidence supporting the use of behavioral indicators for risk assessment.

- **2016.** A follow-up OIG report found that while the agency had implemented some performance metrics, it still had not determined the effectiveness of the program, rebranded by that point as Behavior Detection and Analysis.

- **2017.** The GAO reported to the House Committee on Homeland Security that TSA “does not have valid evidence” that most of its indicators would actually help identify people who pose a threat.

Unsurprisingly, the program — with its vague criteria and lack of scientific basis — resulted in profiling. According to a 2012 exposé in the New York Times, “more than 30 [SPOT officers] . . . say the operation has become a magnet for racial profiling, targeting not only Middle Easterners but also blacks, Hispanics, and other minorities.” At Boston’s Logan International Airport, officers charged that “passengers who fit certain profiles — Hispanics traveling to Miami, for instance, or blacks wearing baseball caps backward — are much more likely to be stopped, searched and questioned for ‘suspicious behavior.’” One officer described the initiative in an anonymous complaint to TSA as “no longer a behavior-based program, but . . . a racial profiling program.” Similar complaints surfaced about SPOT’s implementation at the Newark and Honolulu airports. And an April 2019 GAO report observed that while TSA policies prohibited profiling, there was no mechanism built into the program to monitor for possible violations.

Although SPOT no longer operates as a stand-alone program, TSA agents evidently continue to be trained in and use behavior detection techniques. Moreover, despite the serious concerns about the program’s validity, SPOT records were approved by the department’s Privacy Office to be kept for years or even decades and to be shared both inside DHS and with local law enforcement agencies.

**Secure Flight: Quiet Skies and Silent Partner**

In August 2018, the Boston Globe disclosed another questionable TSA program, Quiet Skies. That program and a companion program, Silent Partner, were created in the wake of the attempted underwear bombing in 2009. The programs, which operate under the aegis of TSA’s Secure Flight traveler vetting process, were hidden from view for nearly a decade after their inception. Silent Partner reviews information about passengers on international flights bound for the United States, while Quiet Skies flags a portion of those inbound passengers for continued scrutiny during subsequent domestic U.S. flights and outbound international flights. These individuals are targeted based on a set of evolving, nonpublic rules developed by TSA personnel and fed into ATS.

Under Quiet Skies, armed federal air marshals boarded the flights of flagged passengers and noted whether they exhibited supposedly suspicious behaviors such as fidgeting, sweating, using the bathroom, conversing with fellow passengers, and staring. Flagged passengers were also subjected to extra screening upon arrival. TSA officials reportedly told congressional staff that 5,000 U.S. citizens were monitored under this program between March and August 2018 alone, with none ultimately deemed suspicious or requiring further scrutiny.

In a November 2020 audit, the DHS inspector general issued a blistering rebuke, determining that “TSA did not properly plan, implement, and manage” the Quiet Skies program. As with other DHS surveillance programs, the audit found that the agency had failed to “develop performance goals and measures to demonstrate program effectiveness.” Although TSA stopped requiring air marshals to report on the minutiae of their subjects’ behavior after pushback from the public and from elected officials, marshals continue to surveil travelers — including those not suspected of criminal activity — and to document if their subjects do anything deemed suspicious.

**Religious and National Origin Profiling**

DHS issued a policy in 2013 setting out the agency’s “commitment to nondiscriminatory law enforcement and screening activities.” The document, which builds on the department’s 2004 statement on racial neutrality and the Department of Justice’s 2003 guidance on racial profiling in federal law enforcement, contains several loopholes and lacks a mechanism to fully vindicate its protections. A stand-alone policy issued by CBP in 2020 is also beset by grave weaknesses.

The strongest prohibitions in the DHS-wide policy are reserved for targeting on the basis of race or ethnicity, which is forbidden outside of the “most exceptional” cases; its use is permitted only when narrowly tailored to meet a compelling government interest. This standard corresponds to constitutional protections and should bar practically all invidious uses of race or ethnicity if faithfully applied. The department’s policy further declares that it...
is “erroneous” to assume that “any particular individual of one race or ethnicity is more likely to engage in misconduct than any particular individual of another race or ethnicity.” Of course, the same reasoning applies to an individual’s faith, but DHS’s nondiscrimination limitations are silent on targeting on the basis of religion.

The absence of protections for religion has been keenly felt by Muslim American travelers, who have for years reported being singled out for questions about their religious views and national origin when traveling to or within the United States, including queries about what mosque they attend, how many times a day they pray, and what Muslim charities they support. A heavily redacted sample questionnaire used by ICE has several questions clearly focused on Muslims, including “Do you have any relatives or friends who have been martyred fighting in the defense of your beliefs?” and “What is/are the name(s) of the martyr(s)?”

While religion may be relevant to decisions made by department personnel in certain narrow circumstances — generally only when it is explicitly required by law, such as when adjudicating a refugee or asylum application or an application for a religious worker visa — its untrammeled use in other contexts is unsupportable.

For example, nationality can be used to make risk assessments, as discussed above. It may also be used when it is “expressly relevant” to administering laws related to a range of DHS functions. Because many immigration and customs laws do require establishing a person’s nationality (the visa waiver program, for instance, applies to citizens of 40 countries), some authorization to consider it is logical. However, nationality and national origin can also serve as a proxy for race, ethnicity, or religion. For example, President Trump’s Muslim travel ban was formally based on nationality, as was President George W. Bush’s program requiring boys and men from predominantly Arab and Muslim countries to register with the U.S. government.

Further, DHS policy permits the “individualized discretionary use” of nationality for screening, investigation, and enforcement, which gives the green light to arbitrary and biased targeting at airports and elsewhere.

In January 2020, the New York Times reported that more than 60 Iranian American travelers had been held for questioning about their “political views and allegiances” at a border crossing between Canada and Washington State. It was later reported that CBP’s Seattle field office had instructed its agents to conduct additional vetting on individuals who were born in, traveled to, or held citizenship in Iran, Lebanon, or Palestine — that is, based on individuals’ national origin and/or nationality. The episode triggered congressional demands for information and a complaint to the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties; while the office did commence an investigation, there has been no news of its progress, despite repeated requests from members of Congress.

The incident highlighted the susceptibility of departmental policies on nondiscrimination to abuse, in light of both their actual and implied permissiveness with respect to use of nationality and their ambiguity with respect to use of national origin. CBP’s policy in particular emphasizes that it “does not in any way limit the individualized discretionary use of nationality” as a factor in screening, investigations, and enforcement, deeming the use of nationality to be “appropriate for the vast majority of situations encountered by frontline CBP personnel.” While the incident at the northern border instead involved a categorical instruction from a CBP field office, the highly permissive language in departmental policies is an invitation to push the boundaries and engage in discretionary targeting and screening more broadly.

The incident also underscored the tension between CBP’s policy, which is entirely silent on national origin, and DHS’s master policy, which at least purports to limit the use of national origin to “situations in which such consideration is based on an assessment of intelligence and risk” where there are no adequate alternatives, and only for as long as necessary. The gap between the two policies may have signaled to CBP leadership that the discretionary use of national origin, even in the absence of reliable intelligence, would be tolerated or even tacitly permitted.

Finally, DHS policy instructs components to ensure that officials are “held accountable” for following it, but contains no mechanism to proactively identify and address systemic issues of disparate treatment across the range of department programs and policies.
III. Oversight

Given the breadth of DHS’s programs and their daily impact on Americans’ civil rights and civil liberties, robust oversight is critical. It is sorely lacking. The weakness of the department’s congressional oversight, which is spread across more than 100 committees and subcommittees that claim jurisdiction, has long been recognized.196 This report focuses on the record of the three primary DHS-wide internal oversight mechanisms: the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, the Privacy Office, and the Office of Inspector General.

The first two offices suffer from structural weaknesses and have too often taken — or been pressured to take — a cramped view of their mandate, providing only limited transparency and oversight over the department’s activities. OIG, which enjoys more independence than the other two offices, has provided greater transparency into the programs it audits and insisted on evaluations of their efficacy, but it has not paid sufficient attention to the repercussions for DHS programs on Americans’ constitutional rights.

The shortcomings of the department’s internal oversight structure have not gone unnoticed in Congress. In 2020, the House Homeland Security Committee chair, Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS), introduced a bill that would have strengthened CRCL and the Privacy Office and increased OIG’s transparency.197 The following year, the committee marked up bills to strengthen CRCL and increase disclosures by OIG.198 Additional evidence of concern may be found in Congress’s decision, during the Obama and Trump administrations, to appropriate significantly more funds for CRCL than the department requested.199 These appropriations reflect lawmakers’ recognition of the importance of improved oversight and protection of civil rights and civil liberties.

Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

CRCL is charged with ensuring that DHS programs and activities respect the civil rights and civil liberties of those affected by them.200 The office, which is headed by a non-Senate-confirmed presidential appointee who reports directly to the secretary of homeland security, plays three major roles:

- advising the secretary on the development, implementation, and review of DHS policies and procedures;201
- reviewing and assessing information about civil rights and civil liberties abuses, as well as racial, ethnic, or religious profiling by DHS employees and officials, and coordinating with OIG to investigate complaints;202 and
- providing transparency by reporting to Congress, disseminating information to the public, and conducting outreach to a broad array of stakeholders.203

CRCL has not, however, served as an effective check on the department’s powerful operational units. Although the secretary is charged with ensuring that the head of the office is advised of proposed policy changes and consulted by decision-makers,204 a lack of access and influence appear to hamper the unit. Moreover, its dual role as internal adviser and guardian of constitutional values has created conflicts, with the office at times yielding to operational concerns. Unlike the Privacy Office, CRCL does not have the authority to issue subpoenas, making its information requests relatively toothless.205 And its reports to Congress — which must be cleared by DHS leadership — provide such minimal detail about its activities that they do little to help the public understand the office’s efforts.

Internal Counseling and Review

Much of CRCL’s internal counseling role is hidden from public view, but people familiar with its operations have indicated that the office has had only limited influence. According to Scott Shuchart, who served as senior adviser to the CRCL officer from 2010 to 2018, the office “played a significant behind-the-scenes role in immigration enforcement and detention reforms” but was frequently left “in the dark until an action [had] progressed too far to be brought into compliance with civil rights and civil liberties requirements.”206 As a result, the office was unable to influence policy on a number of serious issues.

Similarly, Stanford University law professor Shirin Sinnar’s 2015 study of the office found that it was widely regarded as ineffective during both the Bush and Obama administrations.207 Former Obama-era CRCL
officials told Sinnar that large and influential DHS components such as CBP and ICE “ignored CRCL policy recommendations and stalled in responding to complaints against those agencies.” One former staffer described the office “as having ‘zero influence’ over most of the policy areas in which it engaged.” Similar reports emerged from staff who served during the Trump administration.

Margo Schlanger, who led the office from 2010 to 2012, had a more sanguine assessment, highlighting instances in which the office influenced decision-making through direct input as well as by raising awareness of civil rights and civil liberties concerns within the department. But civil society organizations and other stakeholders have often perceived the office as failing to fulfill its mandate. Even Thompson, the House Homeland Security Committee chair, observed that CRCL had historically been “an afterthought,” and DHS’s own deputy secretary has spoken disparagingly of its influence.

Part of CRCL’s lack of clout may be attributable to the failure of departmental leadership to prioritize its mandate, but structural factors also play a role. CRCL has almost no formal review and consultation role, so it can simply be excluded from decision-making. Indeed, Thompson described it over a decade ago as being largely reactive to DHS policies implemented without its input, and the situation does not appear to have changed substantially since then. This impotence was recently illustrated when the office was effectively sidelined as the Trump administration implemented its family separation policy at the U.S. border with Mexico.

Moreover, CRCL seems to have little to no insight into or authority over many of the public safety and counter-terrorism activities undertaken by DHS components. For example, some components have issued bulletins treating First Amendment–protected activities as threats, sometimes under the guise of “situational awareness.” Of course, these agencies need to understand the potential for major disturbances when planning for events, but they have often exceeded that mandate and cast even nonviolent protests as dangerous, as cataloged below:

- Under the guise of situational awareness, the Federal Protective Service issued a “civil activists and extremist action calendar” in 2006 listing advocacy groups and events gleaned from the internet. Of the 75 protests listed in the bulletin, at least 60 had no relation to the federal buildings or property that the service is meant to protect.

- In 2015, the DHS Office of Operations Coordination (OPS) collected information on Black Lives Matter activities from public social media, including Facebook and Twitter, and Federal Emergency Management Agency watch centers likewise gathered information on police brutality protests in Baltimore and Philadelphia. Around the same time, an unspecified DHS component was reported to be monitoring a prominent racial justice activist from Baltimore on social media.

- New York City ICE agents used Facebook in 2018 to monitor anti-Trump protests, keeping a spreadsheet of left-wing groups, their goals, and the names of people who had signed up to participate.

- Between 2016 and 2020, ICE regularly used social media and other means to monitor and intimidate immigrants’ rights groups, activists, and journalists covering these issues. Agents tracked a candlelight vigil for a man who died in custody, preparing a “significant incident report” for a nonviolent event involving 19 people. They also monitored the Twitter feed of a senior employee of the activist group Project South and tried to get her to remove posts about hunger strikes at a detention center. During this four-year period, NYU School of Law’s Immigrant Rights Clinic documented more than 1,000 cases of alleged retaliation by DHS against immigrant activists, including 318 perpetrated by ICE.

When CRCL is given meaningful opportunity to provide input, it can serve a useful role. After the DHS Office of Intelligence and Analysis published its 2009 intelligence bulletin on right-wing extremism over CRCL’s objections, creating a firestorm of criticism, CRCL was authorized to review I&A’s finished intelligence products, ushering in a period of fewer public controversies. In 2015, however, the press reported on I&A monitoring of protests in the wake of the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown and the death of Freddie Gray in police custody. The media attention prompted DHS to further strengthen and elaborate CRCL’s role vis-à-vis I&A. But with this role enshrined only in internal rules, the office was easily marginalized by the Trump administration, likely enabling I&A’s participation in monitoring and suppressing racial justice protests in 2020.

Impact Assessments and Complaints

Although CRCL has not published many of its reviews of alleged civil rights and civil liberties abuses, some information on its impact assessments and complaints is publicly available.

Impact Assessments

Impact assessments are program reviews that can cover “all types of policy, policy implementation, and practices,” providing a critical opportunity for the office to make its
voice heard. The DHS website lists eight CRCL impact assessments, all of them published prior to 2013. The American Civil Liberties Union obtained an additional assessment produced in 2009. There may be others that are not public.

The small number of published impact assessments and their apparent absence over the past nine years—a period in which the department launched numerous programs with the potential to undermine Americans’ civil rights and civil liberties—suggests that the office has been missing in action.

The publicly available impact assessments suggest that despite a statutory mandate to balance the need for a particular governmental power against protections for privacy and civil liberties, CRCL has often taken a perfunctory approach to analyzing a given program’s security benefits as well as its impact on civil rights and civil liberties. Three examples illustrate CRCL’s evident reluctance to use its assessments as an opportunity to advocate forcefully for civil rights and civil liberties protections.

First, CRCL’s 2009 impact assessment of the TSA SPOT program accepted without examination the “scientific behavioral research” on which the program was based. By contrast, the 2013 analysis of the same program by the GAO—one in a series of critical reports described above—observed that “decades of peer-reviewed, published research . . . draw into question the scientific underpinnings of TSA’s behavior detection activities.” On the issue of racial, religious, and ethnic profiling by officers deployed under SPOT, CRCL further failed to sufficiently address concerns about the broad discretion the program gave to officers. Instead, CRCL summarily concluded that officers were unlikely to engage in such misdeeds. Less than three years after the program launched, frontline officers came forward to report that such profiling was common.

Second, CRCL’s 2011 impact assessment of airport searches of laptops and electronic devices generally acceded to CBP’s view that the searches did not require individualized suspicion despite their extreme intrusiveness, including their potential to reveal intimate details of their subjects’ lives extending back years. The office’s legal analysis is entirely redacted in the public report, but it seems that CRCL was influenced by CBP’s stated operational imperatives. A cautious approach by CRCL on legal issues that were not resolved at the time the assessment was completed may be understandable. However, the office also found that requiring individual suspicion could be “operationally harmful without concomitant civil rights/civil liberties benefits.” As Sinnar pointed out, CRCL accepted the stated harm to operations “without any independent analysis of the claimed security need for suspicionless searches.” It is difficult to see how the office could fail to recognize the harms of invasive electronic searches and the litany of transgressions discussed in this report.

Third, in sharp contrast to the Senate’s highly critical 2012 report, CRCL’s 2013 evaluation of fusion centers barely considered their effectiveness at identifying security threats and indicated that it was unaware of civil rights and civil liberties violations. The office did make important recommendations, including that fusion centers focus on information supported by a reasonable suspicion of criminal activity (pursuant to 28 C.F.R. Part 23) and that DHS tighten protections for civil rights and liberties. But, as discussed above, these recommendations have either been ignored or implemented perfunctorily.

Complaints
CRCL is charged with investigating complaints alleging civil rights and civil liberties abuses by DHS employees, though the inspector general has the right of first refusal. For those that remain in CRCL’s hands, CRCL may either investigate them directly or refer them to the relevant component and then review the component’s findings. While CRCL cannot provide complainants with a concrete remedy, it can advise DHS leadership to change the relevant policies.

The number of CRCL complaint investigations doubled between 2014 and 2020, rising from 417 to 881, with the bulk relating to immigration and detention. The office’s most recent annual report to Congress indicated that it has also opened multiple investigations regarding “allegations about inappropriate questions into religious affiliation and practices at U.S. ports of entry.” The office reported that CBP has “substantially improved officer training” and issued two recommendations to assist CBP in its “efforts to avoid improper questions regarding travelers’ religion while conducting border inspections.” While these seem like positive developments, the vagueness of the information provided makes it difficult to gauge their efficacy. Indeed, an earlier recommendation from CRCL that CBP and ICE state in their policies that it is generally impermissible to discriminate against travelers on the basis of religion has not been adequately addressed.

Transparency
Although the Homeland Security Act of 2002 requires CRCL to convey information to the public, its reports—submitted semiannually to Congress and to the independent Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board—often fail to provide enough information to assess its work. These reports tend to identify issues and programs on which the office has worked and indicate whether it made recommendations to the relevant DHS component. But they provide only bare-bones information on the nature of the problems or the recommendations made and do not typically reveal whether the component agreed to the recommended changes or report on their implementation. Former high-level DHS officials have suggested that
the process for clearing CRCL reports through the secretary of homeland security and the White House is responsible for deficiencies in them — for example, a lack of transparency about when advice has been “disregarded or excluded from policy development.”

Recently, the office has started publicly releasing some of the memorandums it issues to components on its investigations. While redactions and the lack of detail about components’ responses limit the usefulness of these disclosures, they do provide additional information about the types of complaints that CRCL is fielding. Still, it is hard to come by more than a fragmented understanding of the office’s contribution to protecting civil rights and civil liberties.

In sum, the concept of a civil rights and civil liberties watchdog within DHS has promise, but CRCL lacks the institutional support, the concrete authority, and, at times, the initiative to serve as a meaningful check on departmental overreach.

Privacy Office

Under its enabling statute, the Privacy Office is afforded broad powers. The chief privacy officer, who is appointed by the secretary, is directed to “assur[e] that the use of technologies sustain, and do not erode” privacy protections for personal information, and to undertake any “investigations and reports relating to the administration of the programs and operations of the Department.”

Yet in practice, much like CRCL, the Privacy Office has not come close to fully exercising — or being supported in its exercise of — this authority.

Many of the office’s public disclosures come in the form of privacy impact assessments (PIAs). These documents focus on detailing the privacy implications of various DHS data collection systems and programs and explaining how privacy concerns are mitigated, often via procedural and technical means. Because PIAs address individual data systems, they represent a siloed approach that makes it difficult to understand the interconnected operations of the department’s vast and ever-growing holdings, which numbered more than 2,000 data sets as of May 2021. Notably, the chief privacy officer — who has broad statutory authority to undertake investigations of “possible violations or abuse” in any DHS program as well as the authority to subpoena documents and testimony — has conducted only one public investigation, now a decade past, even as DHS has acquired and deployed myriad new systems for collecting information about Americans.

Adding to these problems, a 2020 OIG report concluded that the Privacy Office did not have “effective oversight of department-wide privacy activities, programs, and initiatives.” According to the report, the office had not exercised adequate oversight over agreements covering the disclosure of information from DHS to other federal agencies and third parties. Even with respect to reviewing compliance documents, the office was years behind schedule. And it had not monitored whether personnel were completing required privacy training; the OIG’s investigation revealed that approximately half of all headquarters staff — nearly 5,000 people — had failed to complete training over a two-year period.

Structural Advantages

Compared with CRCL, the Privacy Office enjoys several structural advantages that give it better access to information and influence, and it also benefits from greater protections from both internal and external interference. Each DHS component is required to have its own privacy officer, who performs oversight activities in coordination with the chief privacy officer; the chief privacy officer in turn is positioned to provide headquarters privacy staff with insight into operational developments at the component level. The requirements for oversight and compliance documentation, such as PIAs, also give the Privacy Office specific points of leverage. Finally, the chief privacy officer oversees the submission of multiple mandated reports to Congress and the public.

Under a 2007 law, in addition to reporting to the secretary, the chief privacy officer submits annual congressional reports that are statutorily protected from internal and external interference, conferring additional authority and insulation. In short, unlike CRCL, the Privacy Office cannot simply be ignored or kept out of the loop — though the fact that the officer is appointed by the secretary rather than the president has tended to weaken the office’s authority within the department.

Privacy Mandate Implementation

Despite these advantages, the office has often fallen short of fulfilling its transparency and oversight mission. The compliance documents for which it is responsible sometimes give short shrift to privacy concerns, and they rarely provide sufficient information to allow for a public understanding of the complex data systems on which DHS relies.

Under the Privacy Act of 1974 — a measure passed in the wake of Watergate — DHS components are required under certain circumstances to publish a system of records notice (SORN) in the Federal Register. SORNs, which cover government databases from which personal information can be retrieved by an identifier, such as a name or social security number, alert the public when a government agency creates a new covered database or updates an existing one; the Privacy Act gives individuals whose data is included in a covered system the right to request their records, to change inaccurate, irrelevant, or
incomplete records, and to be protected against invasions of privacy based on the collection, maintenance, use, and disclosure of their data. But records systems implicating law enforcement and national security are exempt from a number of the Privacy Act’s provisions, and DHS’s SORNs frequently set out extensive exceptions to the act’s requirements on those grounds.261

The Privacy Office seems to place a sizable portion of its resources into PIAs, which are meant to cover “what information is collected and why; how the information will be used, stored, shared, and accessed; how the information will be protected from unauthorized use or disclosure; and how long the information will be retained.”262 While PIAs check these boxes, they often make only a modest contribution to informing the public about the privacy impact of DHS’s activities or how their data might actually be collected and used. In addition, because each PIA only covers a particular system or program, they fail to tell the whole story of how DHS ingests and internally shares data arising from interactions across multiple agency systems.

For example, travelers who visit the United States under the program for visa-free travel and fill out an online application through the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) would first need to review the ESTA PIA to understand how their information is being processed. Then they would have to review the PIAs of all the other databases that are checked as part of ESTA processing.263 Upon arrival in the United States, the travelers would also be subject to DHS’s biometric entry and exit program, which implicates yet another PIA.264 Even if they could understand each individual document, they would not be able to discern the interaction between the range of databases and screening tools that affect them.

In short, there is no top-down picture of the full scope of DHS’s data holdings. PIAs, SORNs, and related documents offer only a tunnel view of how a particular type of data might be used, with whom it might be shared, and how long it might be retained. The public has no real way to fully grasp the department’s data management.

Such data fragmentation is not inevitable. The department’s annual data mining reports, for example, typically offer a broader view of the impact of covered operations than PIAs, including more user-friendly descriptions. However, these reports are required only for programs involving data analysis aimed at uncovering patterns that ostensibly predict terrorist or criminal activity. No analogous requirement exists for a data system or analysis tool that simply collects, uses, or extracts information about a particular individual or group.265

The final piece of the privacy oversight structure is the privacy compliance review (PCR), which assesses programs’ fidelity to privacy rules, including assurances made in PIAs, SORNs, and information-sharing agreements.266 If the Privacy Office uncovers “potentially egregious behavior” during a review, it will refer the matter to the inspector general or open an investigation itself.267

In November 2020, the Privacy Office analyzed 20 open PCR recommendations and published a report revealing significant delays in the implementation of certain privacy mechanisms. In 2015, for instance, the office recommended that a 2013 directive on CBP’s use of passenger name records be “promptly updated.” Five and a half years later, the updates were still “ongoing” and the 2013 directive — at that point more than seven years old — was still in place.268 In 2017, the office recommended that OPS “fully implement” the DHS requirement that it have its own privacy officer. Three years later, Privacy and OPS were still “continu[ing] to discuss” how to implement that DHS policy rule.

Perhaps the most notable deficiency is that the Privacy Office does not appear to have a process in place to advise components on whether a particular program should be undertaken or technology purchased.269 Instead, it focuses largely on procedural mechanisms for mitigating privacy issues. As the nongovernmental Electronic Privacy Information Center has observed, the Privacy Office has signed off on all manner of programs and technologies, including fusion centers, whole body imaging, closed-circuit television surveillance, and suspicionless searches of electronic devices at the border. In the course of those approvals, the office has addressed procedural issues, training, and public outreach, but not the basic question of whether these initiatives are compatible with personal privacy.270

To be sure, this is not all within the Privacy Office’s control: it may not learn of a program under consideration, thus missing the opportunity to weigh in at an early stage, or it may lack the technical expertise to offer sophisticated advice on the potential privacy repercussions of developing technologies. But many of the office’s shortcomings seem to have stemmed from a circumscribed view of its role, which may reflect insufficient institutional backing — up through the leadership level — to fulfill its mandate.

Office of Inspector General

The Office of Inspector General layers an important oversight function on top of the Privacy Office and CRCL, and it operates far more independently than the other two offices. Nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate, the inspector general reports both to Congress and to the DHS secretary.271 The inspector general has broad investigative powers and must promptly notify Congress of any serious problems within DHS. Interference in OIG investigations by department leadership is generally prohibited.272 OIG does not provide input as poli-
cies and programs are being developed but examines them after they are implemented.

Armed with this authority, OIG conducts four different types of inquiries: investigations, audits, inspections, and evaluations. Investigations examine specific allegations of misconduct, which may be referred to OIG by CRCL or the Privacy Office. The other types of inquiries address system-level questions and issues. For example, Congress assigned OIG to conduct annual audits of electronic device searches at the border from calendar years 2017 to 2019; two of the three audits have been completed, the last in September 2021.\textsuperscript{273} As described in section II, these reviews have overall been critical of the process.

While the results of most inquiries are publicly released, OIG does not release reports of investigations. Instead, the office releases brief summaries of investigations it considers significant.\textsuperscript{274} These summaries show that the vast majority of the complaints fielded by OIG from 2002 through 2022 relate to detentions at the southern border.

In a series of inquiries on immigration detention — encompassing audits, evaluations, and inspections — OIG has produced more than 30 reports examining civil rights and civil liberties issues (though these have also been criticized as insufficient).\textsuperscript{275} In contrast, its inquiries focused on the programs covered in this report have tended to avoid engaging with these issues. In multiple reports on DHS’s watch list programs, for instance, OIG covered the programs’ effectiveness but stayed away from obvious profiling and due process concerns. OIG’s report on the Quiet Skies program examined TSA’s failure to properly administer the program, demonstrate its effectiveness, and adhere to applicable privacy rules, but it did not meaningfully address widespread concerns about bias, including whether the program’s targeting criteria relied on race, religion, or national origin.\textsuperscript{276} It may be that the inspector general considers these matters to be primarily within the purview of the specialized oversight offices, but those offices’ relative lack of influence has meant that these matters have often been given short shrift.\textsuperscript{277}

Despite these limitations, OIG’s reports provide critical insight and transparency into the programs that are the focus of this report. They are by far the best publicly available source for understanding the functioning of several key DHS programs. And, as described above, OIG has also consistently highlighted DHS’s repeated failure to develop metrics to measure the reach and effectiveness of many of its programs.
IV. Recommendations

Based on our review of DHS’s record, we have developed a series of recommendations to overhaul the department’s approach to counterterrorism, making transparency and the protection of civil rights and civil liberties integral to its efforts while boosting programs’ effectiveness. Below we outline five main avenues for reform, which later reports will explore in more detail. In addressing these matters, the department should also seek advice from the Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board, the bipartisan body created by Congress to ensure that the federal government’s efforts to prevent terrorism are balanced with the need to protect privacy and civil liberties.

Strengthen Safeguards Against Profiling

DHS and its state and local partners have often used bias and presumption in lieu of facts to decide whom to surveil, question, and even deport. Some examples are recent, such as the Trump administration’s targeting of racial justice protesters, immigrant rights activists, and journalists. Others, such as the questioning of Muslim travelers about their religious beliefs and practices, emerged soon after the department was established. In addition, there is insufficient information about whether — and to what extent — factors such as religion, ethnicity, and national origin play a role in the secretive travel-related risk assessments that DHS undertakes daily.

The DHS secretary should take concrete steps to correct these practices, including by

- expanding DHS policies on nondiscrimination to explicitly cover religion and national origin and eliminating the use of protected characteristics (e.g., race, religion, and ethnicity) except for individual cases in which there is trustworthy information, specific in time and location, that links a person possessing a listed characteristic to a concrete and particular security threat, or as required to administer or enforce U.S. law or executive order (such as those relating to refugees and petitions for asylum); and
- requiring I&A to verify that fusion centers and other entities to which the department provides funding have rules to protect against bias and abide by those rules.

Protect Privacy and Free Expression

Given the huge amount of information about Americans that DHS has already amassed, the department must do more to protect Americans’ privacy. Robust privacy and free expression protections would complement strengthened rules against profiling, serving as an additional barrier against abuse.

The secretary should start by reconfiguring DHS’s intelligence activities with a dual focus on improving the quality of information and protecting against targeting on the basis of constitutionally protected activity. This effort should include

- reinstituting CRCL review of I&A’s intelligence products, which was ended during the Trump administration; and
- instituting a rule that I&A is permitted to create, maintain, or share records of Americans’ personal information only if there is reasonable suspicion of criminal activity or planning and the information is relevant and material to that activity or planning. When the information contained in a record concerns First Amendment–protected activities, it must also directly relate to the suspected criminal activity.

As recommended by the DHS general counsel, the secretary should conduct a top-to-bottom review of I&A, which should assess the office’s utility and its role in preventing violence. The general counsel’s office should also devise a plan to address long-standing challenges, such as inadequate training, the lack of formal and uniform rules on critical issues such as the treatment of U.S. person information in intelligence reports, and the failure to follow best practices in structuring intelligence collection.

In addition, the secretary should direct the Privacy Office and CRCL to

- conduct a wholesale review of the surveillance technologies in use by the department, which should assess the compatibility of these tools with privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties and be made publicly available to the maximum extent possible;
- take the necessary steps to ensure adequate public disclosure of all surveillance technologies used by DHS, including the policies governing the use of these tools, and develop and release an audit plan; and

- develop a formal policy for the department that contains robust protections for individuals’ and groups’ exercise of First Amendment rights.

The secretary should instruct the department’s components to provide the Privacy Office and CRCL with the information they need to carry out these mandates.278

Evaluate Efficacy

Time and again, DHS has rolled out programs without evaluating whether they will work and without implementing metrics to measure whether they achieve their stated goals, much less giving serious consideration to their effects on civil rights and civil liberties. Examples include fusion centers, which have hardly contributed to federal counterterrorism efforts; SPOT, the $1.5 billion behavior detection program contradicted by scientific research; Quiet Skies and Silent Partner, the programs tracking both American and foreign travelers on their journeys to, from, and within the United States; the use of social media to assess individuals’ threat levels and fitness to enter or remain in the United States; and countering violent extremism programs (now under the CP3 umbrella), which have never been shown to prevent violence.

The secretary should order reviews of these programs and develop a plan for strengthening the processes by which DHS designs and approves initiatives — especially those that are likely to infringe on privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties — to ensure that they are scientifically validated and include appropriate metrics for measuring success before they are implemented or piloted. To support these efforts, the secretary should ensure that the Homeland Security Advisory Council — an appointed body that provides policy analysis, advice, and recommendations — and its subcommittees include nongovernmental experts on privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties.279

Ensure Meaningful Transparency

The lack of comprehensive information about the extent of DHS’s data holdings hampers the department’s formulation of privacy and free speech protections. The secretary should direct a full review of DHS’s intake, use, and retention of Americans’ data. This process, which could be undertaken by the department’s undersecretary for management or its chief data officer, should produce a publicly available taxonomy of what information is collected, where it goes, and to whom it is available.

In addition, while both the Privacy Office and the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties issue multiple public reports, those reports do not always provide useful transparency. The Privacy Office should ensure that its reports allow readers to understand how the department uses data and how information flows between overlapping systems and databases. It may need to develop new products to augment those that are statutorily mandated. Similarly, CRCL’s reports to Congress should provide more granular insight into the unit’s work. The department’s leadership should support rather than inhibit public reporting on serious issues.

Finally, DHS should commit to making the legal bases for its programs clearly delineated and publicly available.

Foster Robust Oversight

The Privacy Office and CRCL should embrace a more robust interpretation of their statutory authorities, and DHS leadership should provide its explicit and public support.

The secretary should empower the Privacy Office to weigh in on whether the department should undertake certain initiatives or adopt certain technologies, not just articulate how to implement them.280 CRCL needs more specific leverage points to ensure that its views are seriously considered early in the design and deployment of programs. For example, CRCL has not been able to make effective use of impact assessments. The secretary should make these impact assessments a formal part of the process for approving programs, instruct components to comply with CRCL requests for the information needed to conduct them, and commit to making them public on a regular basis.

The internal influence of both the Privacy Office and CRCL would be further reinforced if the secretary established consequences for a component’s failure to notify them of upcoming or ongoing initiatives that implicate privacy, civil rights, or civil liberties, as well as for failure to obtain the offices’ affirmative approval for programs.281

Finally, the DHS inspector general has provided important insights into several of the programs discussed in this report. OIG should supplement these insights with examinations of the actual impact on privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties of the department’s counterterrorism initiatives.
Conclusion

In pursuing its central mission of protecting the United States, DHS has undertaken many misguided programs that have needlessly targeted minority communities and social movements, and it has built the largest governmental store of Americans’ personal information with little transparency, oversight, or accountability. While the breadth of management and mandate challenges DHS faces may ultimately require Congress to restructure the department, DHS leadership can take steps now to improve its performance and remedy the accumulated mistakes of the last two decades.
1 A substantial amount of discussion in this report involves harms to Americans. The authors recognize the significant and detrimental consequences of DHS activities to protect communities and travelers of other nationalities. This report is not meant to diminish those harms but rather to fill what we perceive to be a gap in policy discussions regarding DHS.

2 In the last two decades, the U.S. government has often treated the actions of individuals in the United States said to be influenced by groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS as international terrorism, even absent any indication of operational links or other concrete connections, on the theory that they promoted a common “foreign” ideology.


4 Bureau of Justice Assistance, Department of Justice (hereinafter DOJ) Office of Justice Programs, Fusion Center Guidelines: Developing and Sharing Information and Intelligence in a New Era, August 2006, https://bja.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh186/files/media/document/fusion_center_guidelines_law_enforcement.pdf. The Department of Justice is responsible for implementing the fusion center guidelines, which are intended to support the development of fusion centers, including through personnel, management support, and technical assistance. 6 U.S.C. § 124(h) (2018).

5 See Sena, Examining the Role of I&A, 2.


8 Permanent Subcomm. on Investigations, Federal Support for Fusion Centers, 38.


16 Devereaux, “Leaked Documents.”


19 Tipping, “Data Breach Exposes Activities.”


27 Hargus et al., Silicon Hills Have Eyes. 11.


31 Open the Government, Cost of Fear.


39 Taylor, Sixteen Years After 9/11. Even these numbers should be taken with a grain of salt. Given the low standard used by the FBI for opening investigations — with the lowest level not requiring any criminal suspicion — linkage to an FBI investigation means very little. See Michael German, “Standards for Opening an FBI Investigation So Low They Make the Statistic Meaningless,” Brennan Center for Justice, May 2, 2017, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opin-ion/standards-opening-fbi-investigation-so-low-they-make-statistic,
Similarly, the fact that an SAR’s subject is on a watch list scarcely suggests that their inclusion pertains to terrorism, considering long-standing issues relating to those lists’ breadth and reliability (as discussed further in section II).

40 The Los Angeles fusion center, for example, kept 98 percent of its suspicious activity reports between 2008 and 2010, despite the fact that only 2 percent were determined to have a connection to terrorism. Price, National Security and Local Police, 14.


44 DHS, 2018 Final Report, 4. In 2020, the DHS Field Engagement Accountability Act became law. Passed roughly two decades after fusion centers were first stood up, the legislation requires DHS to come up with and update every five years a strategy for information sharing with fusion centers, and better measure the performance of its field personnel deployed at them, albeit without specifying specific metrics for doing so. But it does not require DHS to evaluate how well fusion centers are actually working to prevent terrorist and is silent on addressing civil rights and liberties issues they have posed. Pub. L. No. 116-116, 134 Stat. III (2020).


46 Office of Intelligence and Analysis (hereinafter I&A), Office of Intelligence and Analysis Intelligence Oversight Program and Guidelines, DHS, January 19, 2017, 3–4, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/office-of-intelligence-and-analysis-intelligence-oversight-program-and-guidelines.pdf; I&A’s intelligence oversight guidelines divide its “authorized intelligence missions” into two categories: “national missions” related to “foreign security threats” and “departmental missions” related to “threats to homeland security.” While the categories appear intended to distinguish between threats from outside the United States and threats from within it, they may not correspond with operational realities (e.g., a U.S.-born and resident person being investigated for “international terrorism” due to an alleged connection to or influence from a designated foreign terrorist organization). The guidelines recognize that “I&A activities can be in furtherance of both national and departmental missions simultaneously.” Intelligence activities are authorized when I&A officials have a “reasonable belief” that they support one or more of these national or departmental missions.


51 The department acknowledged the inappropriateness of these actions when they came to light and said that it would “discontinue” collecting information on members of the press. Shane Harris, “DHS Compiled ‘Intelligence Reports’ on Journalists Who Published Leaked Documents,” Washington Post, July 30, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/dhs-compiled-intelligence-reports-on-journalists-who-published-leaked-documents/2020/07/30/9be5ec9e-d25b-11ea-9038-a089b63ac21_story.html. At the time of this report’s publication, the DHS inspector general’s report had not been publicly released.


53 Office of the General Counsel, Report on DHS Administrative Review into I&A, 64. The instruction was made even though I&A did not have any evidence supporting such a characterization. The term was later modified to “threat actors who are probably motivated by Anarchist or ANTIFA” and made optional after pushback from I&A’s associate general counsel and another senior official, though analysts’ concerns about the credibility of connected intelligence products persisted. Office of the General Counsel, Report on DHS Administrative Review into I&A, 66 (emphasis in original).


Office of the General Counsel, Report on DHS Administrative Review into I&A, 68–69. Among other issues, the review found that I&A analysts could not distinguish a “true threat” from chatter online; that personnel misused the word “incite”; and that even the head of the Current and Emerging Threats Center (the I&A component leading the effort in Portland, Oregon, which aims to “provide[] 24/7 indication and warning of threats directed against the Homeland”) did not know that “counterintelligence,” an elementary intelligence term, involved a foreign component. Office of the General Counsel, Report on DHS Administrative Review into I&A, 21, 27; and DHS, “Other Intelligence Elements,” accessed January 24, 2022, https://www.dhs.gov/others-intelligence-elements, I&A has since implemented a mandatory two-week training program for intelligence collectors. Office of the General Counsel, Report on DHS Administrative Review into I&A, 68. How effective the training will be remains to be seen. Training issues and I&A’s failure to properly measure the effectiveness of efforts to improve personnel skills are long-standing concerns. GAO, DHS Intelligence Analysis: Additional Actions Needed to Address Analytic Priorities and Workforce Challenges, June 4, 2014, 31–32, https://jrp.fas.org/agency/dhs/dhs-intel.pdf.


Office of the General Counsel, Report on DHS Administrative Review into I&A, 30. While I&A’s guidelines do not require these markings for publicly available information, the unit had historically taken what the review called “a more prudent course of action” and “minimized” the naming of Americans. After the Portland incident, part of I&A issued a policy to its workforce requiring masking of personally identifiable information except where unmasking is permitted by other authorities; however, the policy does not apply to all parts of I&A. Office of the General Counsel, Report on DHS Administrative Review into I&A, 30, 70–71. And these markings are not permanent; when an entity wants to learn the identity of an individual that has been redacted in an intelligence report, it can submit a request articulating a need for the information. DHS, “Requests for Identities of U.S. Persons in Disseminated Intelligence Reports,” no. 264-01-010, February 24, 2020, https://www.intel.gov/assets/documents/702%20Documents/overight/DHS_ICPG_107_1%Unmasking_Procedures_022420OCR.pdf.


OIG, I&A Identified Threats Prior to January 6, 2021, 11, 14, 19.


OIG, I&A Identified Threats Prior to January 6, 2021, 8.


I&A, Rightwing Extremism, 2.


In 2020, for example, DHS awarded $10 million to 29 organizations, 13 of which funded law enforcement or public safety entities directly. Another seven grant recipients had some relationship to law enforcement (e.g., they listed the FBI as a partner). In 2021, DHS awarded $20 million to 37 organizations. DHS, “Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention Grant Program,” last updated September 28, 2021 (hereinafter “TVTP Grant Program 2021”), https://www.dhs.gov/tvtpgrants; and Panduranga, Community Investment, Not Criminalization, appendix. While fewer grants (10) were awarded directly to law enforcement or public safety entities, 28 grants provide at least some funds for bolstering pre-criminal identification


79 Patel and Koushik, Countering Violent Extremism, 9–16.

80 The initiative is connected to a federal grants program that retains the former title, DHS, “TVTP Grant Program 2021.”


82 Panduranga, Community Investment, Not Criminalization, 13–15.

83 Panduranga, Community Investment, Not Criminalization, 24.


85 DHS Office for Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention: FY2016 Grant Evaluations October 2021 (hereinafter FY2016 Grant Evaluations), https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2021-12/21/1220_st_CVE_Final_Report-10-4-21.pdf. Unfortunately, recent GAO reviews of these grants also failed to delve into whether the programs were meeting their goal of violence prevention. A February 2021 audit, for example, criticized DHS’s failure to determine effectiveness, but focused on several grantees’ failure to provide required information rather than the more basic question of whether the approach was a credible one. GAO, Countering Violent Extremism: DHS Needs to Improve Grants Management and Data Collection, February 2021, https://www.gao.gov/assets/720/724525.pdf. See also GAO, Countering Violent Extremism: DHS Can Further Enhance Its Strategic Planning and Data Governance Efforts, July 2021, https://www.gao.gov/assets/400/403076.pdf.

86 DHS, FY2016 Grant Evaluations, 2.


94 See Charles Levinson, “Through Apps, Not Warrants, ‘Locate X’ Allows Federal Law Enforcement to Track Phones,” Protocol, March 5, 2020, https://www.protocol.com/government-buying-location-data. Little is known about the specifics, as Babel Street’s contracts require that Locate X data remain confidential and not be cited in court or investigation-related documents. CBP’s and ICE’s privacy impact assessments only authorize the use of location data to detect activities or the presence of — but not to identify — individuals in areas of interest. Philip S. Kaplan, Privacy Impact Assessment Update for the


98 ExpressVPN, “Investigation Xoth: Smartphone Location Tracking,” accessed December 23, 2021, https://www.expressvpn.com/digital-security-lab/investigation-xoth; and Kaplan, PIA for DAS, 13 (stating that “when information is gathered by these vendors from open (i.e., publicly available) sources, individuals may have no notice or only constructive notice”).


100 See ExpressVPN, “Investigation Xoth.”


108 These searches take two forms: “basic” searches, in which agents view information that “would ordinarily be visible by scrolling through the phone manually,” and more intrusive “advanced” searches, in which an officer connects equipment to the device to download, review, copy, and analyze its contents. Court decisions and changes in departmental policy have tightened the standards for these searches, but agents may still conduct basic searches for any reason or for no reason at all. Philip S. Kaplan, Privacy Impact Assessment Update for CBP Border Searches of Electronic Devices, DHS/CBP/PIA-008(a), DHS Privacy Office, January 4, 2018, 6, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/PIA-CBP%20Border-Searches-of-Electronic-Devices%20Janu ary-2018%20-%20Compliant.pdf; CBP, “Directive 3340-049A: Border Search of Electronic Devices,” 4–5. If there is a “national security concern” or reasonable suspicion of a violation of law, border officers may also perform an advanced search.


110 CBP’s Searches of Electronic Devices, 5–7. In addition, the systems used and data collected during searches were in many cases
not adequately managed and secured. OIG, CBP’s Searches of Electronic Devices, 7–8.

112 OIG, CBP’s Searches of Electronic Devices, 9.


117 A subset of the people on the TSDB are on the No Fly List, which prevents them from boarding planes to or in the United States. The use of the No Fly List to prevent Americans from boarding planes has been challenged in several court cases. See, e.g., Latif v. Holder, 28 F. Supp. 3d 1134, 1149, 1154 (D. Or. 2014); Kashem v. Barr, 941 F.3d 358, 391 (9th Cir. 2019); Mohamed v. Holder, 995 F. Supp. 2d 520, 528 (E.D. Va. 2014); and Mohamed v. Holder, 266 F. Supp. 3d 868 (E.D. Va. 2017).


121 AFI, which appears to be directed primarily at non-Americans, helps CBP construct networks of associations by identifying “non-obvious relationships” and offers a variety of analytical tools along with a “platform for the research, collaboration, approval, and publication of [CBP’s] finished intelligence products.” Jonathan R. Cantor, Privacy Impact Assessment Update for the Analytical Framework for Intelligence (AFI), DHS/CBP/PIA-010(a), DHS Privacy Office, September 1, 2016 (hereinafter PIA Update for AFI), 10, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/privacy-pia-cbp010a-afiprivacy-update-september-2016.pdf. See also Privacy Office, 2019 Data Mining Report, 33.


124 Cantor, PIA Update for AFI, 4. AFI is also susceptible to relying on out-of-date information because it ingests databases in their entirety and there may be a lag in receiving updates from the source systems. Cantor, PIA Update for AFI, 1–4, 17, 18.


126 Cantor, PIA Update for AFI, 10. These include U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services’ Fraud Detection and National Security Directorate; ICE’s Homeland Security Investigations Office of Intelligence; personnel in TSA’s Office of Intelligence and Analysis; and DHS’s Office of Intelligence and Analysis, among others.

127 Cantor, PIA Update for AFI, 15.


129 The judge did not decide on the appropriate remedy, and before the case could proceed to develop solutions, it was appealed to the Fourth Circuit. Elhady v. Kable, 391 F. Supp. 3d 562, 577 (E.D. Va. 2019), appeal docketed, No. 20-1119 (4th Cir. Feb. 3, 2020).

130 Elhady v. Kable, 993 F. 3d 208 (4th Cir. 2021).


Stilling: “Border Is a Back Door.”


Winter, “Operation Whistle Pig.”

See Patel et al., Social Media Monitoring, 8; Cantor, PIA Update for ATS, 33 (regarding sharing with Secure Flight); and Cantor, PIA Update for AFPI, 2–3, 6. Data from the system can be shared under some circumstances with local, state, federal, and tribal law enforcement agencies, as well as with foreign governments and federal and foreign intelligence and counterterrorism agencies. Cantor, PIA Update for ATS, 57. For the Silent Partner and Quiet Skies systems, data from both lists may be shared within DHS and disseminated to the DOJ. Jonathan R. Cantor, Privacy Impact Assessment Update for Secure Flight, Silent Partner and Quiet Skies, DHS/TS/PIA-018(h), DHS Privacy Office, April 19, 2019 (hereinafter PIA Update for SPQS), 10, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/PIA_tscaSPQS018i-april2019_1.pdf.

Records about an individual’s presence on the Silent Partner list are kept in active status for seven years and dormant status for an additional eight; records showing that someone was selected for enhanced screening under either program are kept for seven years in TSA’s Secure Flight system, Cantor, PIA Update for SPQS, 2–3.


Civil Rights Litigation Clearinghouse, “Ibrahim v. Department of Homeland Security,” University of Michigan Law School, accessed December 17, 2021, https://www.clearinghouse.net/detail.php?id=13632; and Ibrahim v. Department of Homeland Security, No. C06-00545-WHA (N.D. Cal. 2006). See also Cantor, PIA Update for AFPI, 2–3, 14 (reporting that the AFPI’s structure, in which the system stores multiple copies of the underlying data sources from which it draws, “poses significant privacy concerns” because of the “continuous replication of data,” making it more likely that the system will end up with inaccurate or out-of-date information).


The department’s data mining reports often have a more narrative and inclusive approach, but they are not comprehensive. As described in section III of this report, privacy impact assessments have a fairly narrow focus, covering individual data systems rather than painting a complete picture of DHS’s handling and exploitation of travelers’ data.


160 In addition, the program did not have a “comprehensive training program” or a financial plan, and also did not “ensure outreach” to partners such as law enforcement agencies. OIG, TSA’s SPOT, 1, 9.


162 OIG, Verification Review of SPOT, 1, 2; and OIG, TSA’s SPOT.


167 GAO, Aviation Security: TSA Has Policies That Prohibit Unlawful Profiling, 7 (noting that “in early fiscal year 2018, TSA ended the stand-alone behavior detection program and eliminated the behavior detection officer position. TSA also began integrating the former behavior detection officers into the screener workforce . . .”).

168 Peter Pietra and Hugo Teufel III, Privacy Impact Assessment for the Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques (SPOT) Program, DHS, August 5, 2008, 6–7, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/privacy_pia_tsa_spot_0.pdf (noting that electronic records in the SPOT database are kept for 15 years, while encounters resulting in incident reports are kept for anywhere from 3 to 25 years, depending on the system. If they were entered into TECS or ATS, their retention would be governed by those systems’ policies, which provide for preservation for up to 75 and 15 years, respectively). Privacy Office, “DHS/CBP/PIA-006 Automated Targeting System.” See also Callahan, PIA for TECS; and OIG, Summary Report: Persistent Data Issues Hinder DHS Mission, Programs, and Operations, DHS, May 24, 2021, 2, https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2021-05/OIG-21-37-May21.pdf.

169 Privacy Office, 2019 Data Mining Report. 27 (noting that the programs are designed to "address unknown and partially identified threats" through “risk-based, intelligence-driven rules”). On December 25, 2009, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab smuggled a bomb on board a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam in his underwear, which he attempted to detonate as the plane descended toward Detroit. The resulting explosion caused a fire but no major injuries, and the plane landed safely. Abdulmutallab was sentenced to life in prison in February 2012. Jason Ryan, “Underwear Bomber Abdulmutallab: ‘Proud to Kill in the Name of God.’” ABC News, February 16, 2012, https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/underwear-bomber-abdulmutallab-sentenced-life-prison/story?id=15681576.

170 Cantor, PIA Update for SPQS, 1.

171 The program was apparently started in 2012 but ramped up in March 2018. OIG, TSA Needs to Improve Management of the Quiet Skies Program (Redacted), DHS, November 25, 2020, 2, 6, https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/2020-11/OIg-21-11-Nov20-Redacted.pdf and Cantor, PIA Update for SPQS, 1, 6 (describing the process of determining matches to a “TSA targeting rule”). These individuals are not among those listed in the TSDB.


173 Jana Winter, “TSA Admits ‘Quiet Skies’ Surveillance Snared Zero Threats,” Boston Globe, August 2, 2018, https://www.boston-globe.com/metro/2018/08/02/tsa-says-quiet-skies-surveillance-snared-zero-threats/d5Cm4BG39p0Vxi0IzhL/story.html?display=Article_Inline_Text_Links.” Among those reported to have been targeted: a Virginia woman who had flown to Turkey for an arts-and-crafts course, a professional basketball player, a working flight attendant, a business executive, and a law enforcement officer

174 OIG, TSA Needs to Improve Management of the Quiet Skies Program. 3. OIG also documented other problems with Quiet Skies, including softwares glitches that resulted in people remaining on the list long after they were no longer considered a risk; the use of information obtained via Quiet Skies for purposes other than screening at checkpoints; and TSA’s failure to obtain required approvals from the Privacy Office, Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, and Office of the General Counsel, as well as its failure to update compliance documentation.


176 Napolitano, “DHS’s Commitment to Nondiscriminatory Law Enforcement.”


179 The policy permits the consideration of race and ethnicity when it is “specific to particular suspects or incidents or ongoing criminal activities, schemes or enterprises.”


181 CBP, “CBP Policy on Nondiscrimination in Law Enforcement.”


186 Napolitano, “DHS’s Commitment to Nondiscriminatory Law Enforcement.”

187 Napolitano, “DHS’s Commitment to Nondiscriminatory Law Enforcement.”


189 Napolitano, “DHS’s Commitment to Nondiscriminatory Law Enforcement.”


193 CBP, “CBP Policy on Nondiscrimination in Law Enforcement.”

194 Napolitano, “DHS’s Commitment to Nondiscriminatory Law Enforcement.”

195 Notably, while the incident followed tensions between Iran and the United States after a U.S. drone strike killed Qassem Soleimani, a general in Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, prompting a threat of retaliation from Iran, DHS acknowledged that it had “no information indicating a specific, credible threat” to the United States at the time. DHS, “Summary of Terrorism Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” National Terrorism Advisory System Bulletin, January 4, 2020,


201 6 U.S.C. § 345 (2004) (directing the office to “ensure that the protection of civil rights and civil liberties is appropriately incorporated into Department programs and activities”).


205 Compare 6 U.S.C. § 345 (establishing office for civil rights and civil liberties without conferring subpoena authority) with 6 U.S.C. §§ 142(b)(1)(C) & (b)(2) (conferring subpoena authority on privacy officer). See also Kareem W. Shora, “A Twenty-Year Lesson: The Role of Civil Rights in Securing Our Nation,” Journal of National Security Law and Policy 12 (2021): 191 (“The internal civil rights oversight office within the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), for example, unlike similar offices such as the one at the US Department of the Interior, was not provided with the subpoena authorities needed to effectively conduct its oversight investigations. This has sometimes left the effectiveness of the office’s oversight investigations to the whims of the component agencies being investigated.”).


208 Sinnar, “Institutionalizing Rights in the National Security Executive,” 305.

209 Shuchart, Building Meaningful Civil Rights and Liberties Oversight, 1, 6.


213 Thompson, Working with Communities to Disrupt Terrorist Plots.


215 In addition to I&A, other DHS components collect intelligence and circulate threat reports, but we have been unable to identify any publicly available policies that require such components to submit their intelligence reports to CRCL for review. CBP and TSA also have their own civil rights and civil liberties functions, while other components — including ICE, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and the Secret Service — have CRCL offices that appear to play exclusively an internal-facing function, focusing on employee diversity and equal employment matters. I&A has no internal CRCL office. A bill introduced in 2017 would have required every DHS component to appoint a career officer who would coordinate with CRCL, but the Senate did not take it up. DHS Authorization Act, H.R. 2825, 115th Cong. (2017); and S. Rep. 115-351, 115th Cong. (2018).


225 See notes 48–49 and accompanying text.

226 Schlanger, “Offices of Goodness,” 96. Schlanger explains the pros and cons of different types of reviews, suggesting that reviews that are triggered by recognition of a problem or by an important stakeholder and are potentially public provide the most opportunities for impact.


230 42 U.S.C. § 2000ee–1(a)(4) (2018). As part of the office’s statutory role to provide advice to the secretary regarding “proposals to retain or enhance a particular governmental power,” the office is specifically directed to consider whether “the need for the power is balanced with the need to protect privacy and civil liberties.”

231 Keefer, CRCL Impact Assessment for the SPOT Program, 3n3.

232 GAO, Aviation Security: TSA Should Limit Future Funding, 47.

233 Schmidt and Lichtblau, “Racial Profiling Rife at Airport.”


235 There is currently a circuit split on whether extensive electronic border searches require any type of suspicion, which the Supreme Court has declined to address. Merchant v. Mayorkas, 988 F. 3d 8 (1st Cir. 2021), cert. denied, 594 U.S. ___ (2021). See also Merchant v. Mayorkas, 988 F. 3d 8 (holding that “border agents may review the material stored on international travelers’ devices without a warrant, probable cause, or even reasonable suspicion” and need not limit examination to searches for contraband, but may “search for evidence of any possible violation of … laws that customs and immigration agencies help enforce”); U.S. v. Cano, 934 F. 3d 1002 (9th Cir. 2019) (holding that the border search exception “authorizes warrantless searches of a cell phone only to determine whether the phone contains contraband” and that forensic searches require reasonable suspicion); and U.S. v. Touset, 890 F. 3d 1227 (11th Cir. 2018) (observing that there was “no reason why the Fourth Amendment would require suspicion for a forensic search of an electronic device when it imposes no such requirement for a search of other personal property”).


238 CRCL did recommend some safeguards, including that CBP agents should record a reason for their searches, collect data on the distribution of electronic device searches by race and ethnicity of travelers, and remedy any disparate impact, and that travelers subjected to electronic searches be referred to a redress program. Schlanger, CRCL Impact Assessment: Border Searches of Electronic Devices: CRCL’s 2013 follow-up essentially found that CBP had complied with all of the office’s recommendations and concluded that its review of two years’ worth of searches showed no ethnic bias, though the searches subject to review were defined to exclude those related to watch lists. Kessler, CRCL Impact Assessment: Border Searches of Electronic Devices. As discussed in section II under “DHS Data Collection,” subsequent OIG reports released in 2018 and 2021 have panned CBP for poor oversight over these searches, including officers’ failure to properly document them. OIG, CBP’s Searches of Electronic Devices; and OIG, CBP Continues to Experience Challenges.


A Course Correction for Homeland Security


256 OIG, DHS Privacy Office Needs to Improve Oversight, 15.


259 The statute provides that the privacy officer shall submit independent reports to Congress “without any prior comment or amendment by the Secretary, Deputy Secretary, or any other officer or employee of the Department or the Office of Management and Budget [OMB].” See 6 U.S.C. § 142(e)(1) (2007). The DOJ Office of Legal Counsel has taken the position that both the secretary of homeland security and OMB must be permitted to review and submit comments on the privacy officer’s reports, although the privacy officer need not edit reports in response to those comments. Constitutionality of the Direct Reporting Requirement in Section 802(e)(1) of the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007, 32, Op. O.L.C. 27, 31 (2008). Accordingly, although the privacy officer has reportedly submitted reports to OMB for review since 2008, its statutory authority to submit reports that do not reflect the views of OMB — even if accompanied by OMB’s comments — is a significant grant of independence.


261 DHS also regularly takes advantage of other Privacy Act exemptions, one of which is the “routine use” exemption that allows agencies to share records without the consent of the individual to whom the record pertains “for a purpose which is compatible with the purpose for which [the record] was collected.” 5 U.S.C. § 552(a)(7) (2014). See Saira Hussain and Sophia Cope, “Deep Dive: CBP’s Social Media Surveillance Poses Risks to Free Speech and Privacy Rights,” Electronic Frontier Foundation, August 5, 2019, https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2019/08/deep-dive-cbpb-social-media-surveillance-poses-risks-free-speech-and-privacy.

262 On the other hand, agencies do not often use the “routine use” exemption, which is why this year’s annual report to Congress notes that the agency does not open an investigation on every complaint it receives, the actual number of complaints is higher.

248 The report must include a summary of “the type of advice provided and the response given to such advice” and “a summary of the disposition of . . . complaints, the reviews and inquiries conducted, and the impact of the activities of such officer.” 42 U.S.C. § 2000ee–1(f)(2) (2018). The secretary of homeland security is also required to file an annual congressional report “detailing any allegations of [civil rights or civil liberties] abuses . . . and any actions taken by the Department in response to such allegations.” 6 U.S.C. § 345 (2004).

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235 Although this exemption has been interpreted narrowly by courts, DHS frequently invokes it in SORNs to justify granting itself increasingly vast authority to disclose individuals’ personal information in ways inconsistent with the Privacy Act. U.S. Postal Serv. v. Nat. Ass’n, Letter Carriers, 9 F. 3d 138 (D.C. Cir. 1993); EPIC, “Comments of the Electronic Privacy Information Center to the Department of Homeland Security,” docket nos. DHS-2020-0015 and DHS-2020-0014, January 13, 2020, https://epic.org/wp-content/uploads/apa/comments/EPIC-Comments-DHS-
262 OIG, DHS Privacy Office Needs to Improve Oversight. 6. PIAs are preceded by privacy threshold analyses, which must be completed by the component for the privacy office’s review. OIG, DHS Privacy Office Needs to Improve Oversight, 5.


269 In 2012, then-Chief Privacy Officer Jonathan Cantor testified before Congress about privacy concerns with body scanners. He explained that the Privacy Office works closely with DHS components in the course of rolling out new technologies to develop “privacy-mitigation strategies,” but it does not appear that the Privacy Office would advise a component not to use a particular technology, except perhaps in rare circumstances. TSA’s Recent Scanner Shuffle: Real Strategy or Wasteful Smokescreen, Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Transportation Security of the H. Comm. on Homeland Security, 112th Cong. (2012) (testimony of Jonathan Cantor, acting chief privacy officer, DHS) https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112hhrg81130/html/CHRG-112hhrg81130.htm.


272 Inspector General Act of 1978, 5a U.S.C.C.A. 95-452, § 5. Although national security agencies can invoke an exceptional power to interfere with IG investigations or reports, they have almost never used this power.


274 OIG’s early practice was to publish a report summarizing its significant investigations for the preceding period. Since 2013, OIG has instead incorporated less detailed summaries of some significant investigations into its semiannual reports to Congress. See, e.g., OIG, Semiannual Report to the Congress, October 1, 2020–March 31, 2021, June 1, 2021, https://www.oig.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/assets/SAR/2021/oig-sar-oct20-mar21.pdf.


276 OIG, TSA Needs to Improve Management of the Quiet Skies Program.


278 Cordero, Reforming the DHS.


280 One avenue would be for the chief privacy officer, in coordination with the secretary of homeland security, to reinvigorate DHS’s Data Privacy and Integrity Advisory Committee (DPIAC) to assist the office in addressing foundational questions about programs — for example, by drawing on the comprehensive risk assessment process it designed in 2006 — rather than simply responding to narrow questions posed by department leadership. DPIAC, Framework for Privacy Analysis of Programs, Technologies, and Applications, DHS, March 7, 2006, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/DPIAC%20Recommendations%20Paper%202006-01.pdf.

281 Congress should also consider conferring subpoena power upon CRCL to enhance its ability to obtain information from DHS components.
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