



Highlights of [GAO-09-824](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Border Patrol, part of the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection (CBP), operates checkpoints on U.S. roads, mainly in the southwest border states where most illegal entries occur. As part of a three-tiered strategy to maximize detection and apprehension of illegal aliens, Border Patrol agents at checkpoints screen vehicles for illegal aliens and contraband. GAO was asked to assess (1) checkpoint performance and factors affecting performance, (2) checkpoint performance measures, (3) community impacts considered in checkpoint placement and design, and (4) the impact of checkpoint operations on nearby communities. GAO work included a review of Border Patrol data and guidance; visits to checkpoints and communities in five Border Patrol sectors across four southwest border states, selected on the basis of size, type, and volume, among other factors; and discussions with community members and Border Patrol officials in headquarters and field locations.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that CBP take several actions to strengthen checkpoint design and staffing, and improve the measurement and reporting of checkpoint effectiveness, including community impact. CBP agreed with our recommendations, and identified actions planned or underway to implement the recommendations.

View [GAO-09-824](#) or key components. For more information, contact Richard Stana at (202) 512-8777 or stanar@gao.gov.

## BORDER PATROL

### Checkpoints Contribute to Border Patrol's Mission, but More Consistent Data Collection and Performance Measurement Could Improve Effectiveness

#### What GAO Found

Checkpoints have contributed to the Border Patrol's ability to seize illegal drugs, apprehend illegal aliens, and screen potential terrorists; however, several factors have impeded higher levels of performance. Checkpoint contributions included over one-third of the Border Patrol's total drug seizures, according to Border Patrol data. Despite these and other contributions, Border Patrol officials said that additional staff, canine teams, and inspection technology were needed to increase checkpoint effectiveness. Border Patrol officials said they plan to increase these resources.

The Border Patrol established three performance measures to report the results of checkpoint operations, and while they provide some insight into checkpoint activity, they do not indicate if checkpoints are operating efficiently and effectively. In addition, GAO found that a lack of management oversight and unclear checkpoint data collection guidance resulted in the overstatement of checkpoint performance results in fiscal year 2007 and 2008 agency performance reports, as well as inconsistent data collection practices at checkpoints. These factors hindered management's ability to monitor the need for program improvement. Internal control standards require that agencies accurately record and report data necessary to demonstrate agency performance, and that they provide proper oversight of these activities.

The Border Patrol generally followed its guidelines for considering community safety and convenience in four recent checkpoint placement and design decisions, including the proposed permanent checkpoint on Interstate 19 in Arizona. Current and projected traffic volume was a key factor in the design of the proposed Interstate 19 checkpoint, but was not considered when determining the number of inspection lanes for three recently completed checkpoints in Texas due to a lack of guidance. Having explicit guidance on using current and projected traffic volumes could help ensure that future checkpoints are appropriately sized.

Individuals GAO contacted who live near checkpoints generally supported their operations but expressed concerns regarding property damage that occurs when illegal aliens and smugglers circumvent checkpoints to avoid apprehension. The Border Patrol is not yet using performance measures it has developed to examine the extent that checkpoint operations affect quality of life in surrounding communities. The Border Patrol uses patrols and technology to detect and respond to circumventions, but officials said that other priorities sometimes precluded positioning more than a minimum number of agents on checkpoint circumvention routes. The Border Patrol has not documented the number of agents needed to address circumventions at the proposed I-19 checkpoint. Given the concerns of nearby residents regarding circumventions, conducting a workforce planning needs assessment at the checkpoint design stage could help ensure that resources needed for addressing such activity are planned for and deployed.