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Visa Issuances: Policy, Issues, and Legislation

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Ruth Ellen Wasem
Specialist in Social Legislation
Domestic Social Policy Division

Visa Issuances: Policy, Issues, and Legislation

Summary

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, considerable concern has been raised because the 19 terrorists were aliens who apparently entered the United States with temporary visas despite provisions in immigration laws that bar the admission of terrorists. Foreign nationals not already legally residing in the United States who wish to come to the United States generally must obtain a visa to be admitted, with certain exceptions noted in law. Fears that lax enforcement of immigration laws regulating the admission of foreign nationals into the United States may continue to make the United States vulnerable to further terrorist attacks have led to revisions in the policy as well as changes in who administers immigration law.

The 107th Congress expanded the definition of terrorism and the designation of terrorist organizations used to determine the inadmissibility and removal of aliens in the USA Patriot Act (P.L. 107-56). Another law, the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act (P.L. 107-173), sought to improve the visa issuance process by mandating data sharing so that consular officers have access to relevant electronic information. This law also required the development of an interoperable electronic data system to be used to share information relevant to alien admissibility and removability and required that all visas issued by October 2004 have biometric identifiers. The Homeland Security Act (P.L. 107-296) transferred to the Directorate of Border and Transportation Security in the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS) the authority to issue regulations regarding visa issuances and assigns staff to consular posts abroad. Although the Department of State (DOS) Bureau of Consular Affairs remains the agency responsible for issuing visas, DHS's Bureau of Citizenship and Immigrant Services approves immigrant petitions, and DHS's Bureau of Customs and Border Protection inspects all people who enter the United States.

The 108th Congress is overseeing the implementation of these new policies and may consider further options, such as tightening up interview requirements for visa applicants and expanding the grounds for excluding aliens. The Anti-Atrocity Alien Deportation Act of 2003 (H.R. 1440/S. 710) would, among other things, further broaden the security and terrorism grounds of inadmissibility to exclude aliens who have participated in the commission of acts of torture or extrajudicial killings abroad.

Meanwhile, nonimmigrant (i.e., temporary) visas issued abroad dipped to 5.8 million in FY2002 after peaking at 7.6 million in FY2001. Preliminary FY2003 data indicate a further drop to 4.9 million nonimmigrant visas issued. Over the past dozen years, DOS has typically issued about 6 million nonimmigrant visas annually. Thus far, visas for legal permanent residents (LPRs) have stayed at around one million annually, but the number of LPR visas issued abroad has dipped while those aliens who adjust to LPR status within the United States has grown. This slowdown in visa issuances has sparked concern among the business community, some of whom argue they are adversely affected by the new visa policies. Others are expressing scepticism about the cost, time, and complexity of developing interoperable databases, a feature many others see as essential to enhanced border security.

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Visa Issuances: Policy, Issues, and Legislation

Introduction

In the months following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, considerable concern has been raised because the 19 terrorists were aliens (i.e., noncitizens or foreign nationals) who apparently entered the United States on temporary visas. Fears that lax enforcement of immigration laws regulating the admission of foreign nationals into the United States may continue to make the United States vulnerable to further terrorist attacks led many to call for revisions in the visa policy and changes in who administers immigration law.¹

Foreign nationals not already legally residing in the United States who wish to come to the United States generally must obtain a visa to be admitted.² Under current law, three departments — the Department of State (DOS), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) — each play key roles in administering the law and policies on the admission of aliens.³ DOS's Bureau of Consular Affairs (Consular Affairs) is the agency responsible for issuing visas, DHS's Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is charged with approving immigrant petitions, and DHS's Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) is tasked with inspecting all people who enter the United States. DOJ's Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) has a significant policy role through its adjudicatory decisions on specific immigration cases.

This report opens with an overview of visa issuances, with sections on procedures for aliens coming to live in the United States permanently and on

¹ For an analysis of the transfer of immigration functions and activities to the Department of Homeland Security, see CRS Report RL31560, *Homeland Security Proposals: Issues Regarding Transfer of Immigration Agencies and Functions*; and CRS Report RL31584, *A Comparative Analysis of the Immigration Functions in the Major Homeland Security Bills*, both by Lisa M. Seghetti and Ruth Ellen Wasem.

² Authorities to except or to waive visa requirements are specified in law, such as the broad parole authority of the Attorney General under §212(d)(5) of INA and the specific authority of the Visa Waiver Program in §217 of INA.

³ Other departments, notably the Department of Labor (DOL), and the Department of Agriculture (USDA), play roles in the approval process depending on the category or type of visa sought, and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) sets policy on the health-related grounds for inadmissibility discussed below.

procedures for aliens admitted for temporary stays.⁴ It includes a discussion of visa screening policies, including inadmissibility, databases, an analysis of visa refusals, biometric visas and other major visa policy procedures. Summaries of key laws revising visa policy enacted in the 107th Congress follows. The final section analyzes selected issues in the 108th Congress, notably visa revocation and removal, new technologies, potential impact on business, and other security concerns.

Overview on Visa Issuances

There are two broad classes of aliens that are issued visas: immigrants and nonimmigrants.⁵ Those for whom visas are not required, including humanitarian admissions, such as asylees, refugees, parolees and other aliens granted relief from deportation, are handled separately under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). Those aliens granted asylum or refugee status ultimately are eligible to become legal permanent residents (LPRs).⁶ Illegal aliens or unauthorized aliens include those noncitizens who either entered the United States surreptitiously, i.e., entered without inspection, or who violated the terms of their visas.

The documentary requirements for visas are stated in §222 of the INA, with some discretion for further specifications or exceptions by regulation as discussed below. Generally, the application requirements are more extensive for aliens who wish to permanently live in the United States than those coming for visits. The amount of paperwork required and the length of adjudication process to obtain a visa to come to the United States is analogous to that of the Internal Revenue Service's (IRS) tax forms and review procedures. Just as persons with uncomplicated earnings and expenses may file an IRS "short form" while those whose financial circumstances are more complex may file a series of IRS forms, so too an alien whose situation is straightforward and whose reason for seeking a visa is easily documented generally has fewer forms and procedural hurdles than an alien whose circumstances are more complex. There are over 70 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) forms as well as DOS forms that pertain to the visa issuance process.⁷

Permanent Admissions

Aliens who wish to come to live permanently in the United States must meet a set of criteria specified in the INA. They must qualify as:

⁴ For a broader discussion, see CRS Report RS20916, *Immigration and Naturalization Fundamentals*, by Ruth Ellen Wasem.

⁵ For background and analysis of visa issuance policy and activities, see CRS Report RL31512, *Visa Issuances: Policy, Issues, and Legislation*, by Ruth Ellen Wasem.

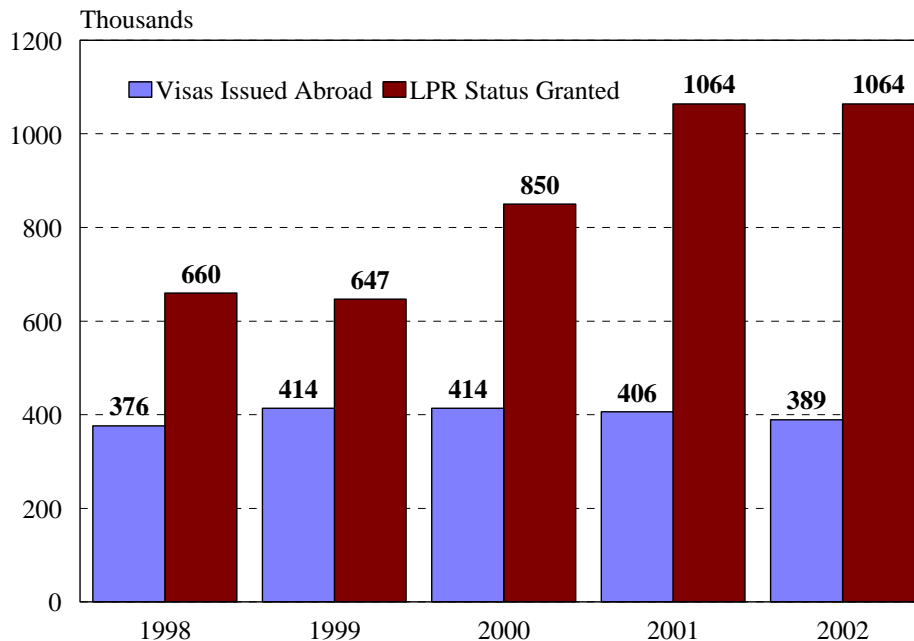
⁶ For background and further discussion of humanitarian cases, see CRS Report RL31269, *Refugee Admissions and Resettlement Policy*, by Andorra Bruno; and CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status: Current Immigration Policy and Issues*, by Ruth Ellen Wasem and Karma Ester.

⁷ USCIS forms are available at [<http://uscis.gov/graphics/formsfee/index.htm>].

- a spouse or minor child of a U.S. citizen;
- a parent, adult child or sibling of an adult U.S. citizen;
- a spouse or minor child of a legal permanent resident;
- an employee that a U.S. employer has gotten approval from the Department of Labor to hire;
- a person of extraordinary or exceptional ability in specified areas;
- a refugee or asylee determined to be fleeing persecution;
- a winner of a visa in the diversity lottery; or
- a person eligible under other specialized provisions of law.

Petitions for immigrant, i.e., LPR, status, are first filed with USCIS by the sponsoring relative or employer in the United States. If the prospective immigrant is already residing in the United States, the USCIS handles the entire process, which is called “adjustment of status.” If the prospective LPR does not have legal residence in the United States, the petition is forwarded to Consular Affairs in their home country after USCIS has reviewed it. The Consular Affairs officer (when the alien is coming from abroad) and USCIS adjudicator (when the alien is adjusting status in the United States) must be satisfied that the alien is entitled to the immigrant status. Many LPRs are adjusting status from within the United States rather than receiving visas issued abroad by Consular Affairs. For example, over 1 million aliens became LPRs in both FY2001 and FY2002, while only 406,000 and 389,00 immigrant visas were issued abroad in those respective years, as **Figure 1** indicates.

Figure 1. Immigrant Visas Issued and LPR Status Granted, FY1998-FY2002



Source: CRS presentation of published USCIS and Consular Affairs data.

A personal interview is required for all prospective LPRs.⁸ The burden of proof is on the applicant to establish eligibility for the type of visa for which the application is made. Consular Affairs officers (when the alien is coming from abroad) and USCIS adjudicators (when the alien is adjusting status in the United States) must confirm that the alien is not ineligible for a visa under the so-called “grounds for inadmissibility” of the INA, which include criminal, terrorist, and public health grounds for exclusion discussed below.⁹

Temporary Admissions

Aliens seeking to come to the United States temporarily rather than to live permanently are known as nonimmigrants.¹⁰ These aliens are admitted to the United States for a temporary period of time and an expressed reason. There are 24 major nonimmigrant visa categories, and 70 specific types of nonimmigrant visas are issued currently. Most of these nonimmigrant visa categories are defined in §101(a)(15) of the INA. These visa categories are commonly referred to by the letter and numeral that denotes their subsection in §101(a)(15), e.g., B-2 tourists, E-2 treaty investors, F-1 foreign students, H-1B temporary professional workers, J-1 cultural exchange participants, or S-4 terrorist informants.

As with immigrant visas, the burden of proof is on the applicant to establish eligibility for nonimmigrant status and the type of nonimmigrant visa for which the application is made. Nonimmigrants must demonstrate that they are coming for a limited period and for a specific purpose. The Consular Affairs officer, at the time of application for a visa, as well as the Customs and Border Protection Bureau (CBP) inspectors, at the time of application for admission, must be satisfied that the alien is entitled to a nonimmigrant status.¹¹ The law exempts only the H-1 workers, L intracompany transfers, and V family members from the requirement that they prove that they are not coming to live permanently.¹² USCIS and CBP play a role determining eligibility for certain nonimmigrant visas, notably H workers and L intracompany transfers. Also, if a nonimmigrant in the United States wishes to change from one nonimmigrant category to another, such as from a tourist visa to a student visa, the alien files a change of status application with the USCIS. If the alien leaves the United States while the change of status is pending, the alien is presumed to have relinquished the application.

⁸ 22 CFR §42.62.

⁹ For a recent review of Consular Affairs’ role in visa processing, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *Border Security: Visa Process Should Be Strengthened as an Antiterrorism Tool*, GAO-03-132NI, Oct. 21, 2002.

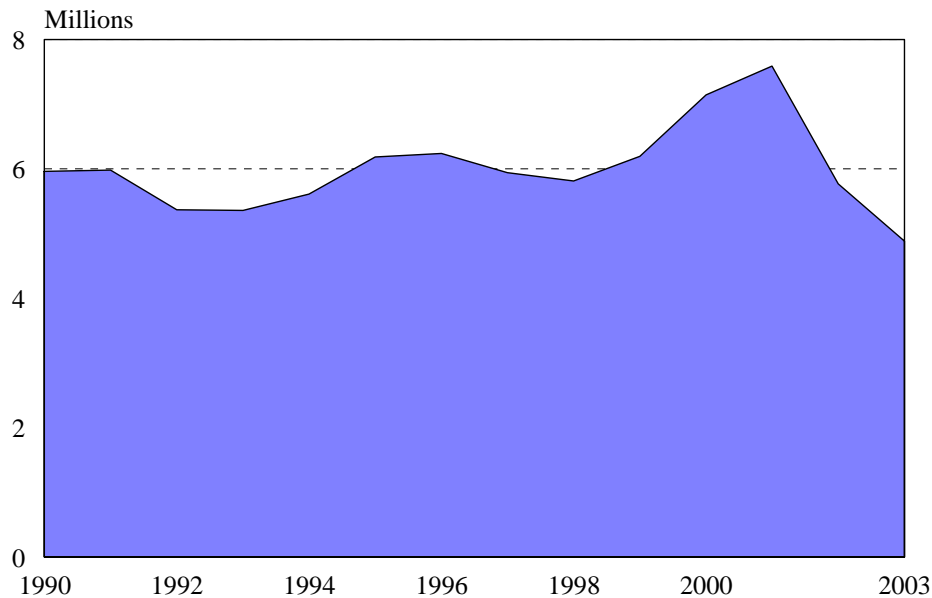
¹⁰ For a full discussion and analysis of nonimmigrant visas, see CRS Report RL31381, *U.S. Immigration Policy on Temporary Admissions*, by Ruth Ellen Wasem. (Hereafter cited as CRS Report RL31381, *Temporary Admissions*.)

¹¹ 22 CFR §41.11(a).

¹² §214(b) of INA; 8U.S.C. 1184(b).

Personal interviews are generally required for foreign nationals seeking nonimmigrant visas. Interviews, however, may be waived in certain cases; prior to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, personal interviews for applicants for B visitor visas reportedly were often waived.¹³ This waiver formed the basis for the controversial and allegedly fraud-prone “Visa Express” in Saudi Arabia (now suspended) where travel agents pre-screened visa applicants and submitted petitions on behalf of the aliens.¹⁴ After September 11, 2001, the number of personal interviews rose significantly as part of broader efforts to meet national security goals. DOS issued interim regulations on July 7, 2003, that officially tightened up the requirements for personal interviews and substantially narrowed the class of nonimmigrants eligible for the waiver of a personal interview. Now personal interview waivers may be granted only to children under age 16, persons 60 years or older, diplomats and representatives of international organizations, aliens who are renewing a visa they obtained within the prior 12 months, and individual cases for whom a waiver is warranted for national security or unusual circumstances.¹⁵

**Figure 2. All Nonimmigrant Visas Issued,
FY1990-FY2003**



Source: CRS presentation of DOS Bureau of Consular Affairs data.

¹³ 22 CFR §41.102.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Myths and Facts about U.S. Immigration Standards for Saudi Arabian Immigrants*, Fact Sheet issued July 8, 2002.

¹⁵ *Federal Register*, vol. 68, no. 129, July 7, 2003, pp. 40127-40129.

Nonimmigrant visas issued abroad dipped to 5.8 million in FY2002 after peaking at 7.6 million in FY2001. Preliminary FY2003 data indicate a further drop to 4.9 million nonimmigrant visas issued. Over the past dozen years, as **Figure 2** illustrates, DOS has typically issued about 6 million nonimmigrant visas annually.

The growth in the late 1990s has been largely attributable to the issuances of border crossing cards to residents of Canada and Mexico and the issuances of temporary worker visas. Combined, visitors for tourism and business comprised the largest group of nonimmigrants in FY2002, about 4.3 million, down from 5.7 million in FY2000. Other notable categories were students (4.5%), exchange visitors (5.0%) and temporary workers (5.1%). Depending on the visa category and the country the alien is coming from, the nonimmigrant visa may be valid for several years and may permit multiple entries. USCIS reported 33.7 million nonimmigrant entries in FY2000 and 27.9 million in FY2002.¹⁶

Visa Waiver Program. Not all aliens are required to have a visa to visit the United States. Indeed, most visitors enter the United States without nonimmigrant visas through the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). This provision of INA allows the visa documentary requirements to be waived for aliens coming as visitors from 27 countries, e.g., Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, and Switzerland. Thus, visitors from these countries are not required to obtain a visa from a U.S. consulate abroad. The DHS reports that 13.2 million nonimmigrants entered the United States through VWP in FY2002, down from 17 million in FY2001.¹⁷ Since aliens entering through VWP do not have visas, CBP inspectors at the port of entry are responsible for performing the background checks and making the determination of whether the alien is admissible.¹⁸

Waiving the Documentary Requirements. In addition to the Visa Waiver Program, there are a number of exceptions to documentary requirements for a visa that have been established by law, treaty, or regulation.¹⁹ The INA also authorizes the Attorney General and the Secretary of State acting jointly to waive the documentary requirements of INA §212(a)(7)(B)(i), including the passport requirement, on the basis of unforeseen emergency in individual cases.²⁰ In 2003, the

¹⁶ For additional analysis, see CRS Report RL31381, *Temporary Admissions*.

¹⁷ In FY2002, nonimmigrants from VWP countries account for 47% of all nonimmigrants admitted to the United States and 54% of nonimmigrants admitted for business or pleasure (i.e., on B-visas). Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, *2002 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Oct. 2003. Available at [<http://www.uscis.gov/graphics/shared/aboutus/statistics/index.htm>].

¹⁸ See CRS Report RL32221, *Visa Waiver Program*, by Alison Siskin.

¹⁹ See CRS Congressional Distribution Memorandum, *Waiving the Documentary Requirements for Visas and Passports to Enter the United States*, by Ruth Ellen Wasem and Andorra Bruno, Oct. 27, 2003.

²⁰ INA §212(d)(4)(A). The Homeland Security Act (P.L. 107-296) transferred most immigration-related functions from DOJ to DHS. It is uncertain as of this writing whether this waiver authority remains, in whole or in part, with DOJ and the Attorney General or with the Secretary of DHS.

Administration scaled back the circumstances in which the visa and passport requirements are waived.²¹

Grounds for Exclusion

All aliens must undergo reviews performed by DOS consular officers abroad and BCBP inspectors upon entry to the U.S. These reviews are intended to ensure that they are not ineligible for visas or admission under the grounds for inadmissibility spelled out in INA.²² These criteria are

- health-related grounds;
- criminal history;
- security and terrorist concerns;
- public charge (e.g., indigence);
- seeking to work without proper labor certification;
- illegal entrants and immigration law violations;
- ineligible for citizenship; and,
- aliens previously removed.

Some provisions may be waived or are not applicable in the case of nonimmigrants, refugees (e.g., public charge), and other aliens. All family-based immigrants and employment-based immigrants who are sponsored by a relative must have binding affidavits of support signed by U.S. sponsors in order to show that they will not become public charges.

Databases. Consular officers use the Consular Consolidated Database (CCD) to screen visa applicants. Over 75 million records of visa applications are now automated in the CCD, with some records dating back to the mid-1990s. Since February 2001, the CCD stores photographs of all visa applicants in electronic form, and more recently the CCD has begun storing finger prints of the right and left index fingers. In addition to indicating the outcome of any prior visa application of the alien in the CCD, the system links with other databases to flag problems that may impact on the issuance of the visa.

For some years, consular officers have been required to check the background of all aliens in the “lookout” databases, specifically the Consular Lookout and Support System (CLASS) and TIPOFF databases.²³ CLASS now contains 15.4 million records on people ineligible to receive visas, including reportedly 90,000

²¹ For additional information about these exceptions, see 8 CFR §212.1; 22 CFR §41.1; and 22 CFR §41.2.

²² §212(a) of INA.

²³ On Sept. 16, 2003, the Administration announced the establishment of the interagency Terrorist Screening Center (TSC) to consolidate terrorist watch lists. The FBI temporarily will administer TSC and assume responsibility for the State Department’s TIPOFF database. Representatives from the intelligence community, law enforcement, DHS and DOS will be involved. U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration and Border Security, *Information Sharing and Coordination for Visa Issuance: Our First Line of Defense for Homeland Security*, hearing, Sept. 23, 2003.

people who are suspected or known terrorists and their associates or associated with suspected or known terrorist organizations.²⁴ There is also the “Terrorist Exclusion List” (TEL) which lists organizations designated as terrorist-supporting and includes the names of individuals associated with these organizations.²⁵

Consular officers also send suspect names to the FBI for a name check program called Visa Condor. Visa Condor is part of the broader Security Advisory Opinion (SAO) system that requires a consular officer abroad to refer selected visa cases, identified by law enforcement and intelligence information, for greater review by intelligence and law enforcement agencies.²⁶

With procedures distinct from the terrorist watch lists, consular officers screen visa applicants for employment or study that would give the foreign national access to controlled technologies, i.e., those that could be used to upgrade military capabilities, and refers foreign nationals from countries of concern (e.g., China, India, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, and Syria) to the Department of Commerce.²⁷ This screening is part of a name-check procedure known as Visa Mantis, which has the following stated objectives: stem the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and missile delivery systems; restrain the development of destabilizing conventional military capabilities in certain regions of the world; prevent the transfer of arms and sensitive dual-use items to terrorist states; and maintain U.S. advantages in certain militarily critical technologies.

Janice Jacobs, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs, reported during a congressional hearing in October 2003, that the once paper-based process of checking suspect names with other federal agencies and departments is moving toward the interoperable system mandated by the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Reform Act.

We are also piloting a one million dollar project to allow for seamless electronic transmission of visa data among Foreign Service posts, the Department of State and other Washington agencies. The other agencies will no longer receive a telegram but a reliable data transmission through an interoperable network that

²⁴ The State Department’s CLASS and TIPOFF terrorist databases interface with the Interagency Border Inspection System (IBIS) used by the DHS immigration inspectors. IBIS also interfaces with the FBI’s National Crime Information Center (NCIC), the Treasury Enforcement and Communications System (TECS II), National Automated Immigration Lookout System (NAILS), and the Non-immigrant Information System (NIIS).

²⁵ For background and analysis, see CRS Report RL32120, *The ‘FTO List’ and Congress: Sanctioning Designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations*, by Audrey Kurth Cronin.

²⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Subcommittee on International Operations and Terrorism, *The Post 9/11 Visa Reforms and New Technology: Achieving the Necessary Security Improvements in a Global Environment*, hearing, Oct. 23, 2003. (Hereafter cited as Senate Subcommittee on International Operations and Terrorism, *The Post 9/11 Visa Reforms*.)

²⁷ U.S. General Accounting Office, *Export Controls: Department of Commerce Controls Over Transfers of Technology to Foreign Nationals Needs Improvement*, GAO-02-972, Sept. 2002.

begins with the Consular Consolidated Database. Using the Consular Consolidated Database as an electronic linchpin will improve data integrity, accountability of responses in specific cases, and statistical reporting.²⁸

Aliens Refused Visas. As **Table 1** presents, DOS refused a total of 273,017 applicants for *immigrant* visas in FY2000 and 194,55 in FY2002. Those immigrant petitioners refused on the basis of the grounds for exclusion totaled 67,269 in FY2000 and 40,606 in FY2002. In both years, most immigrant petitioners who were rejected on INA exclusionary grounds were rejected because the DOS determined that the aliens were inadmissible as likely public charges. Other notable categories were lack of proper labor certification, prior violations of immigration law, and previous orders of removal from the United States.²⁹

Table 1. Immigrants Refused Visa by Grounds of Inadmissibility

Grounds for exclusion	Potential immigrants refused by State Department			
	FY2000		FY2002	
Health	1,528	2.3%	1,176	2.9%
Criminal	736	1.1%	885	2.2%
Terrorism and security	32	0.1%	27	0.1%
Public charge	46,450	69.1%	17,848	44.0%
Labor certification	8,194	12.2%	10,046	27.7%
Immigration violations	3,414	5.1%	6,698	16.5%
Ineligible for citizenship	4	—	4	—
Previously removed or illegal presence	6,900	10.3%	3,909	9.6%
Miscellaneous	7	—	13	—
Total inadmissible	67,269	—	40,606	—
Ineligible for visa applied for due to other reasons	205,742	—	194,255	—

Source: CRS analysis of DOS Bureau of Consular Affairs data.

While the grounds of inadmissibility are an important basis for denying foreign nationals admission to the United States, it should be noted that more immigrant petitions who are rejected by DOS — 194,255 in FY2002 — were rejected because their visa application did not comply with provisions in INA (technically referred to as §221(g) noncompliance) — included in the last category listed in **Table 1**.

²⁸ Senate Subcommittee on International Operations and Terrorism, *The Post 9/11 Visa Reforms*.

²⁹ Although consular decisions are not appealable or reviewable, some aliens are able to bring additional information that may be used to overcome an initial refusal.

Refusals of *nonimmigrant* petitions presented in **Table 2**, have a somewhat different pattern as previous immigration law violations has been the leading category. Violation of criminal law emerged as a more common ground for refusal among nonimmigrant petitioners than it was for immigrant petitioners. Prior orders of removal from the United States was also among the leading grounds for refusals. The overwhelming basis for denying nonimmigrant visas, however, was that the alien was not qualified for the visa.

Table 2. Nonimmigrants Refused Visa by Grounds of Inadmissibility

Grounds for exclusion	Potential nonimmigrant refused by State Department			
	FY2000		FY2002	
Health	177	0.7%	390	1.2%
Criminal	4,370	18.2%	6,554	20.6%
Terrorism and security	224	1.0%	133	0.4%
Public charge	825	3.4%	2,069	6.5%
Immigration violations	14,263	60.%	17,070	53.7%
Documentation problems	1,143	4.8%	1,123	3.5%
Previously removed or illegal presence	2,930	12.2%	4,428	13.9%
Miscellaneous	9	—	15	0.1%
Total inadmissible	23,953	—	31,793	—
Ineligible for visa applied for due to other reasons	2,428,248	—	2,560,526	—

Source: CRS analysis of DOS Bureau of Consular Affairs data.

Comparable data from DHS on aliens deemed ineligible for immigrant status or inadmissible as a nonimmigrant are not available. As a result, the DOS data presented above understate the number and distribution of aliens denied admission to the United States.

Biometric Visas

Aliens who are successful in their request for a visa are then issued the actual travel document. By October 2004, all visas issued by the United States must use biometric identifiers (e.g., finger scans) in addition to the photograph that has been collected for some time. At a recent congressional hearing, Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Maura Harty reported DOS's progress in implementing this requirement:

To comply with this requirement with respect to nonimmigrant visas, the State Department began deployment of the Biometric Visa Program on September 22,

2003, at the U.S. Embassy in Brussels, Belgium, and quickly followed suit at the U.S. Consulate General in Frankfurt and Embassies in San Salvador and Guatemala City. I am pleased to report that the program is now operational at 55 visa-issuing posts and with our aggressive rollout schedule the program will be in effect at all visa-issuing posts by October 26 of this year. With regard to immigrant visas, we will start issuing biometric visas in February and have this program operational at all immigrant visa-issuing posts by October 26, 2004.³⁰

As required by law, the biometric visa is an integral part of the entry-exit system maintained by DHS's immigration inspectors. The biometric visas are then to be matched against the fingerprint image scanned during the US-Visit system when the alien arrives in the United States.

Revoking Visas

After a visa has been issued, the consular officer as well as the Secretary of State has the discretionary authority to revoke a visa at any time.³¹ A consular officer must revoke a visa if

- the alien is ineligible under INA §212(a) as described above to receive such a visa, or was issued a visa and overstayed the time limits of the visa;
- the alien is not entitled to the nonimmigrant visa classification under INA §101(a)(15) definitions specified in such visa;
- the visa has been physically removed from the passport in which it was issued; or
- the alien has been issued an immigrant visa.³²

The Foreign Affairs Manual (FAM) instructs: “in making any new determination of ineligibility as a result of information which may come to light after issuance of a visa, the consular officer must seek and obtain any required advisory opinion.” This applies, for example, to findings of ineligibility under “misrepresentation,” “terrorist activity” or “foreign policy.” FAM further instructs: “pending receipt of the Department’s advisory opinion, the consular officer must enter the alien’s name in the CLASS under a quasi-refusal code, if warranted.”³³ According to DOS officials, they sometimes prudentially revoke visas, i.e., they revoke a visa as a safety precaution. A “prudential revocation” is undertaken with a relatively low threshold of national security information to ensure that all relevant

³⁰ U.S. Congress, House Select Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Infrastructure and Border Security, *Integrity and Security at the Border: The US VISIT Program*, hearing, Jan. 28, 2004.

³¹ §221(i) of INA; 8 U.S.C. §1201(i).

³² 22 CFR §41.122 Notes N1.

³³ 22 CFR §41.122 Notes PN3.

or potentially relevant facts about an alien are thoroughly explored before admitting that alien to the United States.³⁴

Legislation in 107th Congress

Congress's plenary authority over immigration policy derives from Article 1, §8 of the U.S. Constitution, and the legislative branch has long taken the lead in immigration policy. The 107th Congress enacted several major laws that included significant revisions to visa policy administration and issuances. The key visa provisions in these major laws are summarized below.³⁵

USA PATRIOT Act

The USA PATRIOT Act (P.L. 107-56) was a broad anti-terrorism measure that included several important changes to immigration law, including specific visa policy matters. Foremost, it expanded the definition of terrorism and the designation of terrorist organizations used to determine the inadmissibility and removal of aliens. The Act further sought to improve the visa issuance process by mandating data sharing so that consular officers have access to relevant electronic information. These provisions authorized the Attorney General to share data from domestic criminal record databases with the Secretary of State for the purpose of adjudicating visa applications.³⁶

The USA PATRIOT Act additionally mandated that by October 1, 2003, all aliens applying for admission under the VWP must have machine-readable passports. However, the Act allows the Secretary of State to waive the requirement until September 30, 2007 if he finds that the country is making progress towards

³⁴ Testimony of Janice L. Jacobs, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Visa Services, in U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship, *Visa Issuance, Information Sharing and Enforcement in a Post-9/11 Environment: Are We Ready Yet?*, hearing, July 15, 2003.

³⁵ For a detailed analysis of key immigration provisions in recent laws, see CRS Congressional Distribution Memorandum, *Selected Provisions in the USA PATRIOT Act (P.L. 107-56); the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-173); the FY2002 Supplemental Appropriations Act (P.L. 107-206); and the Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, FY2003 (P.L. 108-007)*, by Lisa M. Seghetti, Ruth Ellen Wasem, Alison Siskin, and Karma Ester, Oct. 17, 2003.

³⁶ The USA PATRIOT Act included provisions to expand the foreign student tracking system and authorized appropriations for the foreign student monitoring system. It also required that the foreign student tracking system be fully operational by Jan. 1, 2003. For a more detailed discussion, see CRS Report RL32188, *Monitoring Foreign Students in the United States: The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS)*, by Alison Siskin.

instituting machine-readable passports and preventing passport fraud.³⁷ Amendments to these provisions and progress in implementation are discussed elsewhere.³⁸

Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act

The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-173, hereafter referred to as the Border Security and Visa Reform Act) expressly targeted the improvement of visa issuance procedures. Among its provisions, it required the development of an interoperable electronic data system to be used to share information relevant to alien admissibility and removability and the implementation of an integrated entry-exit data system. It also requires that all visas issued by October 2004 have biometric identifiers. In addition to increasing consular officers' access to electronic information needed for visa issuances, it expanded the training requirements for consular officers who issue visas.³⁹

The Border Security and Visa Reform Act placed new requirements on the VWP, specifically mandating that the government of each VWP country certify by October 26, 2004 that it has established a program to issue tamper-resistant, machine-readable passports with a biometric identifier. The Act also requires all VWP countries to certify that they report in a timely manner the theft of blank passports, allowing the Secretary of DHS to remove a country from the program if it is determined that the country is not reporting thefts of blank passports.

Homeland Security Act

Prior to establishment of the DHS, two departments — the DOS through Consular Affairs and the DOJ through INS — each played key roles in administering the law and policies on the admission of aliens. At that time, the INA gave DOS responsibility for issuing visas abroad, and specifically assigned such decisions to

³⁷ On Sept. 24, 2003, the Secretary of State postponed the machine-readable passport requirement for 21 countries until Oct. 26, 2004. These 21 countries requested the extension and certified that they were making progress towards issuing fraud resistant, machine-readable passports. Five countries (Andorra, Brunei, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, and Slovenia) did not request extensions, and Belgium was ineligible to receive an extension.

³⁸ The Visa Waiver Permanent Program Act (P.L. 106-396) gave permanent authority to the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which was established as a temporary program by the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (P.L. 99-603). P.L. 106-396 included provisions designed to strengthen documentary and reporting requirements, including the mandates that all entrants under the VWP have machine-readable passports by October 1, 2007, that all VWP entrants be checked against lookout systems, and that arrival/departure data for all VWP entrants be collected at air and sea ports of entry. See CRS Report RL32221, *Visa Waiver Program*, by Alison Siskin.

³⁹ To close perceived loopholes in the admission of foreign students and to expand on the provisions in IIRIRA, the Border Security and Visa Reform Act required the establishment of electronic means to monitor and verify the status of the students and exchange visitors. See CRS Report RL32188, *Monitoring Foreign Students in the United States: The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS)*, by Alison Siskin.

consular officers.⁴⁰ The Homeland Security Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-296) states that DHS through the Directorate of Border and Transportation Security issues regulations regarding visa issuances and assigns staff to consular posts abroad to advise, review, and conduct investigations, and that DOS's Consular Affairs will continue to issue visas.⁴¹ The memorandum of understanding that implements the working relationship between DOS and DHS's three immigration-related bureaus was signed September 29, 2003.

Current Issues in the 108th Congress

Visa Revocation and Removal

Following September 11, 2001, the U.S. General Accounting Office reviewed 240 cases of visa revocations and identified several problems. It found that the appropriate units within the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the former INS were not always notified, that "lookouts" were not consistently posted on the watch lists of suspected terrorists; that 30 foreign nationals whose visas had been revoked entered the United States and may still remain; and that the FBI and the former INS were not routinely taking action to investigate, locate the individuals, or resolve the cases.⁴²

DOS responded to the GAO study by arguing that it was not fair or accurate to suggest that all persons whose visas were revoked were terrorists or suspected terrorists. In many such instances, DOS reports that it finds that the national security information does not pertain to the alien whose visa was revoked (a mistaken identity due to incomplete identifying data), or that the information can be explained in a way that clarifies the question at hand and eliminates the potential threat. In these cases, the consular officers re-issue the visa and purge the alien's name from the lookout system. DOS maintains that the problem has been fixed in the creation last year of a revocation code that is shared with the relevant agencies via IBIS when a visa is prudentially revoked. It reportedly was put into place in December 2002, and DOS asserts that it has verified that each and every revocation for calendar year 2003 was

⁴⁰ Under current law, consular decisions are not appealable, and critics of transferring the visa function to DHS warned that this adjudication might become subject to judicial appeals or other due process considerations if DHS assumed responsibility.

⁴¹ The President's proposal for DHS, H.R. 5005 as introduced, would have bifurcated visa issuances so that DHS would set the policies, giving the DHS Secretary exclusive authority through the Secretary of State to issue or refuse to issue visas and retaining responsibility for implementation in DOS. When the House Select Committee on Homeland Security marked up H.R. 5005 on July 19, 2002, it approved compromise language on visa issuances that retained DOS's administrative role in issuing visas, but added specific language to address many of the policy and national security concerns raised during hearings. An amendment to move the consular affairs visa function to DHS failed when the House passed H.R. 5005 on July 26.

⁴² U.S. General Accounting Office, *New Policies and Procedures Are Needed to Fill Gaps in the Visa Revocation Process*, GAO 03-798, June 18, 2003.

properly coded and entered into CLASS and IBIS, and was available almost simultaneously to law enforcement and border inspection colleagues.⁴³

A spokesperson for DHS's Immigration and Customs Enforcement Bureau (ICE) recently disputed GAO's findings. He stated that its records indicate that the National Security Unit (NSU) in ICE received information on 10 leads involving visa revocations and that the NSU conducted follow-up investigations in all 10 cases. He reported that NSU concluded that there was insufficient evidence under current civil and criminal immigration law to allow ICE to take action against the visa holders.⁴⁴

An emerging issue is the legal process for removing aliens whose visas have been revoked. Under current law the alien must be inadmissible to be excluded or removed. Some maintain that a foreign national should be immediately removed if the visa that enabled his or her entry has been revoked. They argue that grounds for inadmissibility in the INA §212(a) should be amended to expressly include visa revocation as a basis for removal. Others assert that current law balances the broader discretion given to the consular officers abroad with the explicit standards of the grounds for inadmissibility and the legal process for removing aliens from the United States. They further maintain that consular officers often make "prudential revocations" of visas that they subsequently re-issue.

Implementing New Technologies

Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, considerable concern has been raised because the 19 terrorists were aliens who apparently entered the United States legally on temporary visas. Although the INA bars terrorists, consular officers issuing the visas and immigration inspectors working at the borders did not have access to all the law enforcement and intelligence databases that might identify potential terrorists. As discussed above, Congress has enacted several major laws requiring information sharing and interoperable databases. Whether these provisions are being successfully implemented remains an important policy question.⁴⁵

Many assert that the need for all agencies involved in admitting aliens to share intelligence and coordinate activities is essential for U.S. immigration policy to be effective in guarding homeland security. Some maintain that the reforms Congress made in the mid-1990s requiring all visa applicants to be checked in the "look out" databases were inadequate because the databases across the relevant agencies were not interoperable and the various agencies were territorial with their data. They

⁴³ Jacobs, testimony on *Visa Issuance, Information Sharing and Enforcement*.

⁴⁴ Testimony of Michael T. Dougherty, Director of Operations, Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Department of Homeland Security, in U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee On Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship, *Visa Issuance, Information Sharing and Enforcement in a Post-9/11 Environment: Are We Ready Yet?*, hearing, July 15, 2003.

⁴⁵ For evaluations, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *Information Technology: Terrorist Watch Lists Should Be Consolidated to Promote Better Integration and Sharing*, GAO-03-322, Apr. 15, 2003; and U.S. General Accounting Office, *Border Security: Challenges in Implementing Border Technology*, GAO-03-546T, Mar. 12, 2003.

maintain that, in the long run, the most efficient and effective guard against the entry of aliens who would do us harm is an interagency and inter-departmental database that is accessible in “real time” to consular officers, immigration inspectors, and key law enforcement and intelligence officials.

Others point to the cost, time, and complexity of developing interoperable databases. They cite the difficulty thus far in determining what biometric identifiers are most appropriate for screening aliens.⁴⁶ They point out competing technologies of the existing databases in which various key agencies have already heavily invested. Some maintain that success of the interoperable database technology depends on 100% inclusion of aliens applying for visas and seeking admission, but that the sheer scope of such a system poses “real time” implementation issues. They also warn that if intelligence data become too accessible across agencies, national security may actually be breached because sensitive information may be more likely to fall into the wrong hands.

On a related matter, concerns have been raised that consular officers did not personally interview many aliens to whom they issue nonimmigrant visas. Bypassing the personal interview, especially for visitors coming for purportedly short periods of time, was advocated by some as an efficiency of staffing and resources. Critics assert that this cost savings comes at too high a price in terms of national security. While some argue that checking an alien’s name in a database is no substitute for a face-to-face interview, others assert that the value of a brief personal interview is overrated as a security precaution and that time is better spent doing more thorough background checks. DOS’s interim final regulations that increase the type and number of aliens required to have a personal interview have sparked concern that the waiting times to obtain a visa will increase dramatically. H.R. 3452 and H.R. 3522 would, among other provisions, require all visa applicants to be interviewed.

Potential Impact on Business

A perceived slowdown in visa issuances has sparked concern among the business community. Some members of the business community have expressed concern about the dependence of their operational success on “the timeliness, predictability and efficiency of our visa and immigration system.”⁴⁷ These business representatives have claimed that security checks such as the Visa Mantis and Visa Condor programs have caused delays in the issuance of visas that could strain international business relationships. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce acknowledges that its assertions about the negative impact tightened visa requirements are having

⁴⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Technology, Terrorism and Government Information, *Border Technology: Keeping Terrorists Out of the United States* — 2003, hearing, Mar. 12, 2003.

⁴⁷ Testimony of Randel K. Johnson, Vice President of Labor, Immigration and Employee Benefits of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Government Reform, *Impact of the Visa Process on Foreign Travel to the U.S.*, hearing, July 10, 2003. (Hereafter cited as Johnson, testimony on *Impact of the Visa Process on Foreign Travel*.)

on U.S. business are based on anecdotes rather than on statistics, but contends that these accounts involve “key personnel, often essential for the operation of a company that experience[s] delays.”⁴⁸ The critics maintain that the scope of the alleged problem is multifaceted and not limited to initially bringing people from abroad to work in the United States. Companies that employ nonimmigrants who must renew their visas are affected as well. In addition, foreign customers of U.S. firms typically travel here for plant visits and design meetings, to inspect products prior to their shipment abroad, and for training on the equipment being produced by the U.S. company. Similarly, some U.S. companies hold conferences annually for foreign distributors of their products, and there have been accounts of visitors from abroad being unable to secure visas in time to attend the events.⁴⁹ For the same reason, conference and trade show planners reportedly are reconsidering whether to hold meetings in the United States.⁵⁰

Others argue that the impact of the more stringent visa policies on business has been exaggerated, sparked by problems because the new screening procedures and databases were not fully operational. These observers maintain that the visa reforms are essential for national security and that business-related travel will normalize once everyone is familiar with the new procedures. Some speculate that generalized travel concerns after the September 11 terrorist attacks and the slow down in the U.S. economy were key factors in the reduction in nonimmigrant visas issued in FY2002 and FY2003.

Other Security Concerns

The Anti-Atrocity Alien Deportation Act of 2003 (H.R. 1440/S. 710) would, among other things, further broaden the security and terrorism grounds of inadmissibility to exclude aliens who have participated in the commission of acts of torture or extrajudicial killings abroad. In addition to denying visas to such aliens, these bills also would make aliens already in the United States removable on the same grounds. The Senate Judiciary Committee reported S. 710, filing a written report on November 24, 2003 (S.Rept. 108-209).

⁴⁸ Johnson, testimony on *Impact of the Visa Process on Foreign Travel*.

⁴⁹ Dan Haar, “Feeling Pinch of Visa Rules; Firms Say Delays Costing Millions,” *Hartford Courant*, Sept. 30, 2003.

⁵⁰ Evelyn Iritani, “U.S. Firms Feel the Pinch of Tighter Border Security,” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 18, 2003.