



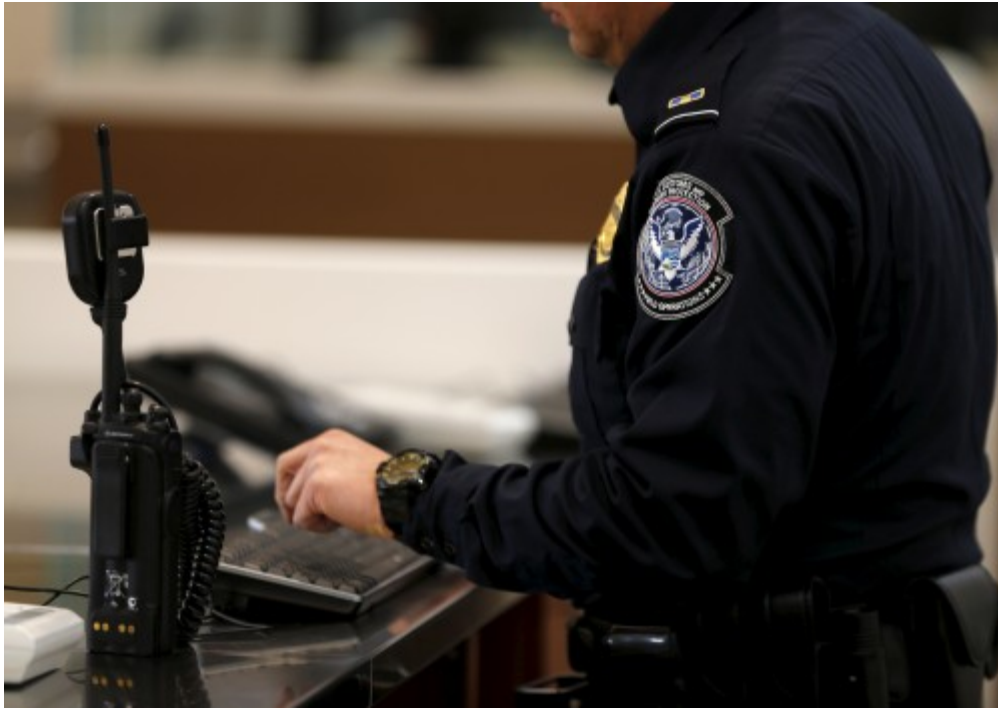
The known unknown: Visa overstayers

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Earlier this week, the US Department of Homeland Security [issued a report](http://freebeacon.com/national-security/dhs-more-than-half-a-million-aliens-overstayed-visas-in-2015/) (http://freebeacon.com/national-security/dhs-more-than-half-a-million-aliens-overstayed-visas-in-2015/) on the number of people who came to the United States legally, but failed to leave when their visas expired. DHS estimates that approximately 482,000 people overstayed their visas to remain in America in 2015.

To put this number in perspective, if those now-illegal immigrants formed a city, it would be the 36th largest city in America based on the 2014 US Census — larger than Kansas City, Atlanta, Miami, Minneapolis, and Cleveland. That is a big city. This report came out after DHS officials couldn't answer the most basic questions on visa overstayers at a congressional hearing. Government officials estimate that [roughly 40% of the 11 million illegal immigrants](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/02/us/politics/us-doesnt-know-how-many-foreign-visitors-overstay-visas.html?_r=0) (http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/02/us/politics/us-doesnt-know-how-many-foreign-visitors-overstay-visas.html?_r=0) in the United States are individuals who came legally using visas, but failed to leave once their visas expired. Year-after-year, this government failure compounds our illegal immigration problems.



(http://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RTX1XYZJ_airport_borders-e1453479437409.jpg)

A U.S. Customs and Immigration officer works a new border crossing during the opening day of the Cross Border Xpress pedestrian bridge between San Diego and the Tijuana airport, December 9, 2015. REUTERS/Mike Blake.

Now, if these illegal immigrants are all just perfectly law-abiding foreigners who liked it here so much they decided to stay and have obtained jobs to become productive members of society, then, beyond discussing another failure of government to enforce our laws, we'd be left debating how these illegal immigrants impact the labor market and the employment opportunities of citizens. The problem, however, is no one knows if these illegal immigrants are in fact law-abiding citizens.

Because some of them entered America under the Visa Waiver Program and not by a more rigorous process through a US consulate, our knowledge of some of these illegal immigrants comes largely from what was contained on the passport they used to get here. Given how little we knew about Tashfeen Malik, the wife in the San Bernardino terrorist attack, who [came under a K-1 visa that required](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/13/us/san-bernardino-attacks-us-visa-process-tashfeen-maliks-remarks-on-social-media-about-jihad-were-missed.html) (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/13/us/san-bernardino-attacks-us-visa-process-tashfeen-maliks-remarks-on-social-media-about-jihad-were-missed.html>) a more thorough background analysis than VWP users, this known unknown is troubling.

How many used the VWP in 2015 but didn't leave? The report noted that "[a]dditionally, 0.65 percent of the 20,974,390 individuals granted access to the United States under the visa waver program, which facilitates travel to America

from 35 partner countries, are suspected of overstaying their authorization.” That equates to roughly 136,000 VWP overstayers in 2015 — nearly 30% of all overstayers in 2015. As I’ve written extensively [here](https://www.aei.org/publication/its-too-easy-for-terrorists/) (<https://www.aei.org/publication/its-too-easy-for-terrorists/>), [here](https://www.aei.org/publication/federal-immigration-failures-undermine-our-safety/) (<https://www.aei.org/publication/federal-immigration-failures-undermine-our-safety/>), and [here](https://www.aei.org/publication/the-importance-of-fingerprints-to-americas-security/) (<https://www.aei.org/publication/the-importance-of-fingerprints-to-americas-security/>), we must do more to ensure that our visa programs, as important as those programs are to our economy, don’t let terrorists reach our shores. That demand has even greater urgency when we know that nearly half a million foreigners who make it here don’t leave.

This article was found online at:

<http://www.aei.org/publication/the-known-unknown-visa-overstayers/>