Illegal Workers Slip by System

Homeland Security E Verify Program Seen Failing to Catch Half of Unauthorized Hires

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The Department of Homeland Security's controversial and much-touted E-Verify program might be failing to detect one out of two illegal workers whose employment authorizations are screened, outside consultants have told the agency.

Tens of thousands of companies participate in E-Verify, either voluntarily or as a condition of doing business with the government. The Internet-based program checks information provided by new hires against Social Security Administration and Homeland Security databases to confirm they are U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents of the country.

An evaluation of E-Verify carried out for DHS by research group Westat found the program couldn't confirm whether information workers were presenting was their own, and, as a result, "many unauthorized workers obtain employment by committing identity fraud that cannot be detected by E-Verify," Westat told the department. Westat put the "inaccuracy rate for unauthorized workers" at about 54%. E-Verify has previously faced criticism for failing to authorize individuals who are permitted to work in the U.S.

A spokesman for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a unit of DHS, said the department already was working on improvements to the program, including adding more databases and a photo screening tool, and setting up a monitoring and compliance branch to detect identity fraud.

"The Westat report shows that E-Verify's accuracy continues to improve, with the vast majority of all cases automatically found to be work-authorized," said CIS deputy press secretary Bill Wright. The evaluation found that, overall, E-Verify accurately screened 96% of workers, correctly identifying 93.1% of cases as people allowed to work in the U.S. and 2.9% as unauthorized. Some 3.3% of cases were illegal workers mistaken for legal workers, and 0.7% were individuals
who could work in the U.S. but were not initially identified that way. Westat, of Rockville, Md., regularly advises the federal government. The company didn't respond to a request for comment.

The research company submitted its report in December. It was posted on the Web site of Citizenship and Immigration Services but has received little public attention.

All federal contractors are required to enroll in E-Verify within 30 days of being awarded a government contract. At least 10 states use the system to check the work-eligibility of state workers. Some states, like Arizona and Mississippi, require all employers to use
E-Verify, regardless of whether they are state contractors. Congressional Republicans are pushing to expand the program and for it to be included in federal jobs-creation proposals.

E-Verify was stepped up under former President George W. Bush, and the administration of President Barack Obama has maintained support for the program, taking a tough immigration-enforcement stance designed in part to win support for a broader campaign to create a path to legal residency and citizenship for millions of illegal immigrants.