

Evaluation of the Biometrics (Steady State) and Canada-United States Immigration Information Sharing (IIS) Initiatives

Executive Summary

Research and Evaluation

Evaluation Division

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Purpose of the Evaluation:

This report presents the findings of the evaluation of the Biometrics (Steady State) and Canada-United States (US) Immigration Information Sharing (IIS) Initiatives. The evaluation examined the relevance and performance of these initiatives, with a focus on their ongoing operations between 2014 and 2017. Expansion activities in relation to the Biometrics and IIS initiatives were not assessed as part of the evaluation. However, considerations to inform expansion efforts are presented.

The evaluation was conducted in fulfillment of commitments made within the Biometrics and IIS Treasury Board Submissions and Performance Measurement Strategies, as well as evaluation requirements of the Treasury Board 2016 Policy on Results. The evaluation was led by Immigration, Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and conducted in collaboration with the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

Overview of the Initiatives:

Both Biometrics and IIS with the US are mechanisms used within the context of identity management and immigration decision-making to better establish the identity of foreign nationals seeking entry into in Canada, and to obtain otherwise unknown information on applicants to aid in determining admissibility.

Biometrics

The biometrics currently collected by Canada are comprised of a digital photograph and fingerprints, as well as associated biographic information.

At the time of the evaluation, biometrics were being collected from asylum claimants, deportees and refugee resettlement applicants, as well as from Temporary Resident (TR) applicants (visitor visa, work and study permit applicants) from 29 visa-required countries and one territory.

Once collected, biometrics are searched against the RCMP's Real Time Identification (RTID) system for match information related to previous criminality and immigration history in Canada, and then stored in the RTID system. Biometric information is also verified to confirm the identity of visa holders upon arrival at Canadian ports of entry (POE).

Canada-US IIS

In 2011, under the Beyond the Border Action Plan, Canada and the US committed to establishing automated immigration information sharing capabilities in order to improve immigration and border determinations, establish and verify the identities of travelers, and conduct screening at the earliest possible opportunity to strengthen the screening of foreign nationals. Under systematic IIS with the US, Canada exchanges immigration information using two types of queries: Biographic (based on elements such as name, date, country of birth and gender) and Biometric (based on fingerprints).

At the time of the evaluation:

Canada exchanged immigration information with the US using biographic-based queries for all foreign nationals applying for a TR visa (including applicants for study and work permits), permanent residence (PR), and refugee resettlement from abroad. Potential matches from the US are only returned if derogatory (i.e. negative) information exists.

Canada exchanged immigration information with the US using biometric-based queries for biometric-required TR applicants, resettled refugee applicants and in-Canada asylum claimants. Biographic and immigration information are only exchanged upon confirmation of a fingerprint match, and immigration information exchanged can be positive or derogatory in nature.

Expansion

At the time of the evaluation, efforts to expand Canada's Biometrics and IIS initiatives were well underway, and many of the key commitments under the Expansion project had already been implemented. While not assessed as part of the evaluation, some important accomplishments of Expansion are outlined below.

Systematic immigration information sharing began expanding in 2017 to other Migration 5 partners, beginning with Australia (April 2017) and New Zealand (February 2018).

The Biometrics Expansion project began rolling out in 2018. Key accomplishments at the time of evaluation included:

The expansion of the biometrics requirement to non-exempted TR applicants, as well as permanent residence applicants, applying from outside of Canada (completed in December 2018); and

The deployment of automated Systematic Fingerprint Verification (SFV) at Primary Inspection Kiosks (PIK) for five of the eight planned airport POEs: Vancouver (January, 2019), Halifax (February, 2019), Ottawa and (March, 2019), Calgary and Edmonton (June, 2019). In addition, Quebec City (February, 2019) and Toronto City Centre (March, 2019) also deployed SFV through their participation in the PIK initiative.

Summary of conclusions and recommendations:

In sum, the evaluation found that the Biometrics and Canada-US IIS initiatives are well aligned with domestic and international security priorities, as well as with Canada's objectives under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA). The initiatives provide important tools for Canada's identity management, immigration and border decision-making processes, and play an important role in protecting the integrity of Canada's immigration and refugee programs, as well as in maintaining public and partner confidence in these efforts.

The evaluation focused on results related to the ongoing operations of these initiatives with a view to informing the Biometrics Expansion project. With this in mind, the conclusions highlight key findings from the evaluation of Biometrics (Steady State) and IIS with the US, while providing considerations within the context of Expansion, and presenting recommendations for the way forward with this work.

Biometrics and IIS with the US for immigration decision-making: Use and capacity

The evaluation found that Biometrics and IIS with the US have been contributing to identity management and decision-making, largely at the application stage, for Canada's TR and refugee programs. Biometrics provide objective, reliable information to establish and confirm a client's identity, and IIS with the US provides access to a larger system of records to help confirm a client's identity and travel history. Both also provide information on potential criminal, security and immigration risks associated with the client. Correspondingly, the evaluation found added benefits for officers as result of having this information for decision-making, and highlighted its contribution to enhancing Canada's safety and security, and detecting abuse/fraud in the immigration program.

However, the evaluation also revealed challenges with the functional guidance, training and support available, and with interpreting derogatory information returned through IIS with the US. It found that quality assurance related to using this information for decision-making has been limited, and that the equipment, IT systems and network supporting their use are not always reliable. As the amount of biometric and IIS information to review increases with Expansion, it will be important to ensure that officers are well supported to use this information, and that mechanisms are in place to ensure that they are using it effectively and efficiently in decision-making for clients.

Recommendation 1: IRCC should, in consultation with partners, review and enhance functional guidance and training related to Biometrics and IIS and put in place a Quality Assurance Strategy to monitor the use of this information in immigration decision-making.

Recommendation 2: IRCC should identify and prioritize technical issues related to the Biometrics and IIS equipment, IT systems, network and support, and put in place a plan to address these issues where feasible.

Biometrics and IIS with the US for immigration decision-making: Refugee context

The evaluation found that Biometrics and IIS with the US have been useful to decision-making for both the asylum and resettlement contexts and play an important role in supporting identity management and program integrity, particularly for the asylum system. However, the evaluation also revealed areas for improvement, unique to the asylum and resettlement contexts:

In the asylum context, there is a need for better communication, coordination and support related to the initiatives to facilitate decision-making.

In the resettlement context, biometric information sharing with the UNHCR, a key referral partner, would be beneficial to strengthen identity management.

Recommendation 3: IRCC should, in collaboration with CBSA and the IRB, put in place a strategy to improve coordination, information sharing and support for the use of Biometrics and IIS in the asylum context.

Recommendation 4: IRCC should develop options for biometric information sharing on resettled refugee applicants with the UNHCR and implement a selected option to enhance identity management in the resettlement context.

Biometric verification at POEs: Use and capacity

The evaluation found that the approach to biometric verification largely relied on the digital photographs, and not fingerprints, during the reporting period for the evaluation. Photograph verification was mandatory for all biometric-related passages, while fingerprint verification was discretionary at eight major airport POEs equipped under the Temporary Resident Biometrics Project (TRBP). BSOs were instructed to refer clients for fingerprint verification if there were identity concerns after a visual inspection of their biometric photograph. Correspondingly, only 4.4% of biometric-related passages at these POEs were biometrically verified through fingerprints.

However, fingerprint verification is becoming automated at PIKs at ten airports through Biometrics Expansion and the PIK initiative. It is also being expanded to additional POEs on a discretionary basis at Secondary Inspection through Biometrics Expansion. Expansion of the capacity to verify biometrics at POEs, and in particular SFV, will take fuller advantage of the biometric tools available, and is expected to further strengthen identity management at POEs.

The evaluation also found that many Border Services Officers (BSOs) were not aware of functional guidance related to biometric verification, and that they tended to learn how to verify biometrics through informal ways rather than training. Furthermore, there were no quality assurance mechanisms in place to monitor their decision-making in the biometric verification process. Given the increased client volumes that will come with Expansion, there is a need to disseminate adequate guidance on biometric verification to support effective decision-making at POEs.

Recommendation 5: CBSA should review, enhance and promote functional guidance, training and support for biometric verification.

Biometric enrolment: Service coverage and accessibility

At the time of the evaluation, most biometric enrolment was conducted abroad by Visa Application Centers (VACs). While VAC country coverage was generally adequate for clients from the 29 countries and one territory subject to this requirement, there was an indication of possible gaps related to the proximity of service locations. As the evaluation did not directly capture information on the client experience related to biometric enrolment, challenges related to service coverage were based on the perspectives of IRCC representatives.

Biometrics expansion is extending the enrolment requirement to TR and PR client populations from all countries applying from abroad and within Canada. With more and more clients being impacted by biometric enrolment, it will be critical to better understand the client experience with respect to service coverage and accessibility.

Recommendation 6: IRCC should put in place a strategy to measure and monitor the quality of client services related to biometric enrolment, taking into account enrolment services provided abroad, as well as those eventually provided in Canada.