

Trump Wants To Force Immigrants To Submit Eye Scans, Voice Prints, And DNA

"They're using what is overly general language in the law to justify a massive, unprecedented expansion to collect really personal information," one former immigration official said.

By Hamed Aleaziz

Last updated on September 1, 2020, at 6:43 p.m. ET

Posted on September 1, 2020, at 2:57 p.m. ET



An immigrant sits in detention waiting to be deported back to Honduras.

Rebecca Blackwell / AP

The Trump administration has drafted a proposal that would

dramatically expand the number of people required to provide

Demands for their immigration applications, while also increasing

the personal information the government can demand, such as eye scans, voice prints, DNA, and photographs for facial recognition.

According to parts of a draft policy obtained by BuzzFeed News, the government would be allowed to request biometrics from immigrants who have received some benefit, like a green card or work permit, at any point up until they are a US citizen to ensure continuous “vetting.”

If implemented, the draft rule would represent a massive shift in the Department of Homeland Security’s collection of personal information from immigrants and US citizens and will likely cause concern among privacy and immigrant advocates.

“It is stunning,” said Ur Jaddou, a former senior US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) official. “They’re using what is overly general language in the law to justify a massive, unprecedented expansion to collect really personal information that they appear to plan to keep and use in perpetuity. What is the reason for this? What is the problem they are trying to solve?”



Rebecca Blackwell / AP

The Department of Homeland Security declined to comment. But in a statement, confirmed that it planned to publish a finalized version of the policy for public review. The proposed rule "improves the screening and vetting process and reduces our dependence on paper documents and biographic information to prove identity and familial relationships," the DHS added.

"This proposed rule eliminates any ambiguity surrounding the Department's use of biometrics, setting clear standards for how and why we collect and use this information," acting Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Ken Cuccinelli said in the statement. "Leveraging readily available technology to verify the identity of an individual we are screening is responsible governing. The collection of biometric information also guards against identity theft and thwarts fraudsters who are not who they claim to be."

But Sarah Pierce, a policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute, said the regulation was "in line with what this administration has wanted to do to — increase 'extreme vetting' of immigrants coming through — but it is possible to go too far and to do vetting that is unnecessary. This is 10 steps too far."

The additional biometrics proposed by the administration, according to the draft regulation, could also help immigrants and those involved with their petitions more convenient verification of their identity. At the same time, it will work toward the Trump administration's vows to crack down on alleged fraud in the immigration system.

Andrea Flores, deputy director of immigration policy for the American

Civil Liberties Union, said in a statement that "collecting a massive

BuzzFeed News Trump wants to force immigrants to submit eye scans, V

make it easier for the government to surveil and target our communities and to bring us closer to a dystopian nightmare."

"Trump's goal is clear: to shut down the legal immigration system and make immigration as difficult as possible," she added.

The draft proposal would directly affect applications taken by USCIS, which processes green cards and visas for family members, high-skilled workers, refugees, and asylum-seekers, among others, as well as employment authorization documents.

The policy cites statutory authority that allows the DHS to require collection of biometrics from any individual involved with an immigration benefit and claims the expansion of collection would help bolster the government's ability to accurately identify individuals.

USCIS officers generally only require fingerprints, a signature, and a picture from foreign national adults and those over 14 hoping to obtain certain immigration benefits, like temporary visas, green cards, and citizenship.

The draft regulation, however, would change the procedure to make it so everyone associated with an immigration benefit, from US citizen sponsors to applicants themselves, would be required to appear for biometrics collection unless told otherwise by USCIS. There also would be no age limit on collection of this information, allowing the government to obtain biometrics from those under 14.

What's more, DHS would expand the types of biometrics that could be collected to include eye iris image scans, palm prints, voice prints, and DNA in instances in which familial relationship is necessary to be verified, according to the draft. The expansion of biometrics that could be collected is part of the agency's efforts to keep up with

“technological developments” and allow agency officials to easily identify individuals on the phone or without physical contact.

Last year, the Trump administration enabled immigration officers to begin collecting DNA samples from undocumented immigrants who are being detained.

The new draft regulation, which will be subject to public comments and not take effect immediately, would also open the door to immigration authorities collecting DNA samples from families in government custody to verify whether they are related. It would also authorize biometric collection of anyone picked up by DHS and in the process of being deported from the US. Last year, authorities at the border began a pilot program to take DNA swabs of those suspected of faking family relationships.

The draft regulation notes that it hopes to flip the government’s current approach from requiring biometrics in only certain situations to one in which biometrics are always required unless the government determines it is not necessary.

“This subjects a huge population to additional surveillance,” Pierce said.

In late 2017, Paul Hunter, former chief of biometrics strategy for USCIS, told a trade publication at a conference that the agency was looking to add iris scans, voice prints, and DNA to their biometric footprint to help not only speed up their processing of certain applications but to increase the security of the immigration system, according to [a report in FCW](#).

Privacy advocates, such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, have long found issues with iris scans, pointing out that they can not only be faulty in certain situations, like if an individual has an inflamed

but that the creation of iris scan databases can be compromised

leaving highly sensitive information at risk. Law enforcement officials, including some sheriff's departments, already deploy iris scans.

The proposal, if instituted, could potentially create even more hurdles for immigrants at a time when USCIS is floundering financially. USCIS officials have warned since spring that the agency, which is mostly funded by fees, was running out of money due to a decline in applications during the pandemic and needed an influx of \$1.2 billion from Congress.

TOPICS IN THIS ARTICLE

Immigration



Hamed Aleaziz is a reporter for BuzzFeed News and is based in San Francisco.

Contact [Hamed Aleaziz](mailto:hamed.aleaziz@buzzfeed.com) at hamed.aleaziz@buzzfeed.com.

Got a confidential tip? [Submit it here](#).