

Transcript: “A Message from the Inspector General: Review of the Department’s Oversight of Cash Seizure and Forfeiture Activities” March 2017

Hello, I’m Michael Horowitz, Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Justice.

Today, our office released a report on the Justice Department’s oversight of its cash seizure and forfeiture activities. The Justice Department considers asset seizure and forfeiture to be an important tool in fighting crime, including the crime associated with illegal drugs. Our report describes several concerns with how the Justice Department is overseeing its use. For example:

- We found that the Department does not collect or evaluate the data necessary to know whether its seizures and forfeitures are effective, or the extent to which seizures present potential risks to civil liberties.
- Furthermore, for the majority of the seizures we examined, we found the Department could not verify that the seizure had advanced or was related to, a criminal investigation.
- We also found that the Department does not require state and local task force officers to receive training on federal asset seizure and forfeiture laws before conducting federal seizures, even though these task force officers enjoy the same authority to make seizures as federal agents.

Unfortunately, these concerns about fundamental matters of program management are not new. In 2015, we released a report on the DEA’s practice of having its agents and task force officers approach travelers at airports and other mass transportation facilities and request consensual searches. In that report, we found the DEA was not collecting sufficient data to enable it to assess whether the practice was effective and unbiased in its implementation. We also raised concerns about the training offered to those who conducted interdiction operations. Our recommendations about how to address these problems have not been fully implemented.

Similarly, a separate OIG investigation examined a Florida-based money laundering task force that received more than \$6 million in revenue derived, in part, from federal asset seizures. Yet an official told us that the task force did not file a single criminal indictment related to these seizures.

Against this backdrop, we were particularly concerned to find in our current review that the Justice Department lacks the information and performance metrics it needs to assess the effectiveness of its seizure and forfeiture activities, and also to track the impact of those activities on civil liberties. Ensuring that law enforcement operations are effective, and that they are minimally intrusive on rights and liberties, is fundamental to good program management and oversight – and fundamental to the Justice Department’s core mission.

Today’s report therefore makes four recommendations, including that the Justice Department begin collecting the data that will allow the Department to assess whether its seizures advance or are related to federal investigations. We will monitor the Department’s efforts to implement these recommendations closely.

To learn more, please visit our website, oig.justice.gov, where you can read the full report. Thank you for joining us.