

## **Citizenship Applications Strain Background Checks**

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### **Body**

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A Clinton administration program designed to streamline naturalization procedures has cleared the way for record numbers of immigrants to take their oaths as new U.S. citizens this year.

By the end of the fiscal year, the Immigration and Naturalization Service projects that more than 1 million immigrants will have been granted **citizenship**, far surpassing the previous record of nearly 460,000 in fiscal 1995. Last year's total was the largest number of naturalizations since 1944, when 442,000 people became citizens.

While swearing in new citizens is a cherished American tradition, the surge in **applications** for naturalization and the government's efforts to speed up the process have raised concerns about the integrity of **citizenship** tests, the motives of some applicants, and pressures on the FBI to meet the heavy demand for criminal **background checks**.

The jump in **citizenship applications** from an annual average of about 300,000 before 1994 to more than 1 million last year caused the INS to fall behind in its processing, and waiting times grew to a year or more in some cities. In response to the problem, the INS last year created a program called **Citizenship** USA, which has largely plowed through a backlog of 600,000 pending **applications** and reduced waiting times to six months in most cases, INS officials said.

But in turning out unprecedented numbers of new citizens, the effort has aroused fears within the INS and FBI that some applicants, possibly hundreds around the country, are receiving **citizenship** before an FBI fingerprint **check** has verified that they have no disqualifying criminal records.

Senior INS officials are "really concerned" that "some serious criminals" are slipping through the fingerprint **checks**, one source said. He added that in the agency's haste to speed up its procedures, "several hundred" ineligible applicants across the country have been granted **citizenship**.

Louis D. Crocetti Jr., the INS associate commissioner for examinations, said that estimate was much too high. While some glitches have crept into INS efforts to improve its processing, the agency is quickly fixing them, and the number of cases in which ineligible applicants may have received **citizenship** is "minuscule," he said. In such cases, the INS can always revoke **citizenship** later, he added. Crocetti said the vast majority of "positive hits," in which a fingerprint card submitted by the INS matches one in the FBI's files, are based on records supplied as part of earlier immigration procedures.

For example, he said, after a misplaced box of 500 fingerprint cards was discovered recently at the INS Arlington office, only one person who had been granted **citizenship** was found ineligible -- because of an embezzlement charge. In New York, the late arrival of another batch of fingerprint cards resulted in grants of **citizenship** to 36 ineligible persons, he said.

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Nevertheless, the FBI has decided to change how it notifies the INS of fingerprint checks, said Dennis Kurre, deputy assistant director of the FBI's criminal justice information services division. Currently, the agency informs the INS only if the search triggers a hit. Starting Monday, the FBI will pass on the result of the check regardless of the outcome, Kurre said.

He said the INS has been assuming that if it did not receive a notification within 60 days, the check was negative. He said this was "not a very reliable way" to proceed, although he did not know how many applications had been approved without knowledge of the immigrant's criminal record.

"All I know is that we didn't feel comfortable having [problems] attributed to us," Kurre said. "There was concern that people were slipping through the cracks. We've had those concerns all along."

The FBI has been taking longer to check fingerprints lately because its workload has increased, its staff has shrunk, and the fingerprint division is moving its offices from Washington to Clarksburg, W. Va., Kurre said. The INS is the bureau's "largest single fingerprint contributor," accounting for about 1 million of the 9.8 million fingerprint cards that the FBI received in fiscal 1995, he said. He said the bureau currently has a backlog of 1.64 million fingerprints in various stages of processing.

INS officials attribute the surge in citizenship applications to a combination of factors stemming largely from a 1986 amnesty that allowed 2.6 million illegal immigrants to legalize their status. Many have become eligible for citizenship only within the past couple of years. In addition, an INS program to replace old alien registration documents known as "green cards" -- and immigrants' fears of discrimination following the 1994 passage of California's Proposition 187 -- prompted thousands who were already eligible to apply for citizenship, officials said.

Now officials expect the recent passage of a welfare reform law that restricts benefits to legal immigrants to further swell the number of citizenship applications, which already had been projected to reach 1.6 million in fiscal 1997.

Critics have expressed concern that standards for citizenship are being lowered, particularly through a program in which the INS hires private contractors to test applicants on their knowledge of English, civics and U.S. history.

## Graphic

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Photo, A record-breaking number of immigrants will have been sworn in as U.S. citizens by the end of the current fiscal year as a result of revamped INS procedures.

## Classification

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