



Homeland Security Dept. Moves Beyond Terrorism to Check for Pickpockets and Movie Pirating

By: Noel Brinkerhoff

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Barely a dozen years old, the [Department of Homeland Security](#) (DHS) has steadily grown in size and particularly in scope, raising questions over why it is now focusing on problems outside its primary mission of counterterrorism.

Established just over a year after 9/11, DHS was charged with the duty to “prevent terrorist attacks within the United States; reduce the vulnerability of the United States to terrorism; minimize the damage, and assist in the recovery from terrorist attacks that do occur within the United States,” according to [Homeland Security Act of 2002](#) (pdf), which created DHS.

The law did add that the agency would also respond to natural or manmade disasters and delve into drug trafficking when it involved terrorist connections.

But these days DHS is tackling a whole lot more than terrorist plots and tornadoes.

Agents are investigating movie piracy and counterfeit merchandise, as well as going after small-time criminals who pickpocket.

They’re even spending time at schools and senior centers telling children and the elderly to beware of crooks and perverts on the Internet.

All of this “mission creep” has government watchdogs, civil libertarians and even the agency’s first cabinet secretary questioning DHS’s direction.

“They’ve kind of lost their way,” former Homeland Secretary Tom Ridge told the *Albuquerque Journal*. “I was proud to be associated with those men and women, but it just seems to me ... the focus – the primary focus – has been substantially diminished.”

DHS is now the third-largest agency in the federal government, following the departments of [Veterans Affairs](#) and [Defense](#).

Some of this growth may be due to the agency allowing its work to become too influenced by how much money it can get out of Congress.

A [Congressional Research Service report](#) (pdf) issued last year said DHS had “no clarity in the national strategies of federal, state, and local roles and responsibilities; and, potentially, funding is driving priorities rather than priorities driving the funding.”

When the department was launched in 2003, its budget was \$29 billion and it had 180,000 employees. Today its budget is \$61 billion and it employs 240,000 people. However, about 25% of its top executive posts are vacant or run by acting administrators.

“This is a runaway train,” Joan Johnson-Freese, professor of national security affairs at the [U.S. Naval War College](#) and [Harvard Extension School](#), told the *Journal* in describing DHS. She believes the department is seeking more responsibilities rather than increasing efficiency and sticking to its original authorized purpose.

The [Cato Institute](#)’s Benjamin Friedman said that the absence of a clearly defined mission at DHS makes one question its large-scale spending. “Perfect safety is an illusion; we could spend 10 times what we spend on Homeland Security and still not approach it,” he told the *Journal*. “We’re spending big bucks chasing some pretty small dangers.”

Meanwhile, some DHS officials are looking to broaden their local operations.

Kevin Abar, assistant special agent in charge of [Homeland Security Investigations](#) in New Mexico, told the *Journal*: “I really do want to expand the footprint as far as my side of Homeland Security. Too many people think we do immigration, and we don’t really do any of that at all.”

This remark was especially curious given DHS’ many departments include [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#), the government’s primary enforcer of immigration laws.