

FBI Cited for Wasting Time And Misleading the Public

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The FBI has been wasting far too much time on minor cases and has misled the public with greatly inflated statistical claims of accomplishment, the General Accounting Office said yesterday in a report to Congress.

The report was based on a recent sampling of cases at FBI field offices in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento, Chicago, Milwaukee and Boston.

It found that only nine per cent of the cases investigated were ever prosecuted—and that fully 33 per cent of the cases listed as accomplishments were false claims.

The General Accounting Office, which serves as Congress' auditing arm, said the FBI is trying to make amends but more needs to be done.

Representative Don Edwards (Dem-Calif.), chairman of the judiciary subcommittee which requested the GAO study, commented that the FBI "is fooling themselves and fooling the people" with the misleading statistics it trumpets in annual reports and budget requests.

"There is something wrong with a police agency that wastes its time on 91 out of 100 cases," said Edwards, a former FBI agent. "We need to rechannel the FBI's resources so that it will be a cracker-jack agency."

The GAO report said FBI agents waste so much time on minor cases because of an FBI policy that all apparent violations of federal law must be investigated, even if local police agencies are already involved and even if federal prosecutors habitually decline to act on certain types of cases.

Victor L. Lowe of GAO, in presenting the report to Edwards' subcommittee on civil and constitutional rights, recommended that the Justice Department and local U.S. attorneys develop investigative guidelines that would keep FBI field offices focused on major crimes.

The report commended the FBI for instituting a "quality over quantity" investigative approach a year ago, but said it would be ineffective until criteria were developed for identifying "quality" cases.

The GAO survey of six field offices found that 91 per cent of the 6209 cases handled from last April to July either were closed administratively by the special agent in charge or were declined for prosecution by the U.S. attorneys. The nine per cent accepted for prosecution involved more serious violations or repeat offenders.

The report cited several examples of wasted efforts, including these:

- Agents from three field offices spent seven months looking

for a \$100 bicycle stolen from a national park. They dropped the case because there was no suspect and the owner could not supply an identification number for the bike even if it were to be recovered.

- Agents spent a month looking for the perpetrator of a \$339 bank robbery who was identified by local police through photographs and who was later captured by police in another city. The U.S. attorney decided to let local authorities prosecute.

The report found that one-third of a sample of the FBI's statistical claims of accomplishment were inaccurate, duplicative or misleading. It said the FBI gave itself undue credit for arrests and convictions, and it listed fines never imposed or potential savings never realized by taxpayers.

Los Angeles Times