

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-22-104583](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

In response to the pandemic, the federal government has been concerned about how to slow the spread of COVID-19, including in the transportation sector. TSA, the federal agency responsible for securing the nation's transportation sector, issues security directives if threat information, events, or significant vulnerabilities indicate that additional security measures are needed. TSA security directives establish mandatory measures for transportation operators to implement.

The CARES Act includes a provision for GAO to monitor the federal response to the COVID-19 pandemic. GAO was also asked to review TSA efforts to respond. This report describes TSA's (1) security directives issued to address COVID-19, (2) coordination with interagency and industry stakeholders on COVID-19 security directives, and (3) efforts to ensure operators' implementation of TSA's COVID-19 security directives as well as TSA and FAA investigations of non-masked passengers.

GAO reviewed relevant agency documents and guidance, and analyzed data on related enforcement actions taken from February 2, 2021 to March 7, 2022 for TSA and from January 1, 2021 to November 1, 2021 for FAA. GAO interviewed TSA, FAA, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention officials as well as a nongeneralizable sample of transportation stakeholders, selected based on transportation mode, region of operation, and other factors to obtain insights into stakeholder perspectives on TSA coordination.

View [GAO-22-104583](#). For more information, contact Tina Won Sherman at (202) 512-8461 or shermant@gao.gov.

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TRANSPORTATION SECURITY

TSA Efforts to Coordinate with Stakeholders on COVID-19 Security Directives

What GAO Found

Starting in January 2020, presidential executive actions imposed restrictions on international air travel to the U.S. from certain countries and mandated that face masks be worn on transportation systems, due to COVID-19. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) issued security directives to operators of transportation systems to implement these executive actions. TSA expedited coordination with external stakeholders—other federal agencies and industry—to develop and issue these directives, due to the urgent nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to TSA officials, development of security directives can take up to several months. However, the executive actions typically gave TSA less than a week to issue the COVID-19 security directives. While selected external stakeholders raised several issues with the security directives, they stated that TSA's expedited coordination was generally effective.

TSA Face Mask Security Directive Signage at Airport Security Checkpoints



Source: GAO. | GAO-22-104583

TSA took steps to ensure operator implementation of its security directives and, in addition to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), has investigated incidents of or related to non-masked passengers. For example, TSA conducts in-person inspections of air carriers' preboarding procedures for U.S.-bound flights to confirm that they are following the directives restricting travel from certain countries. It also conducts investigations into incidents reported by transportation operators of passengers who refuse to comply with the face mask security directives and become disruptive or aggressive towards an operator or others. Of the over 3,800 incidents investigated from February 2021—when the face mask security directive was implemented—to March 2022, TSA issued more than 2,700 warning notices and over 900 civil penalties against passengers. Separately, the FAA investigates incidents of unruly passengers who interfere with crew members in their duties, including times when they have been asked to comply with the face mask security directive.