Since September 11, 2001, TSA has made considerable progress in meeting congressional mandates designed to increase aviation security. By the end of 2002, the agency had hired and deployed about 65,000 passenger and baggage screeners, federal air marshals, and others, and it was using explosives detection equipment to screen about 90 percent of all checked baggage. TSA is also initiating or developing efforts that focus on the use of technology and information to advance security. One effort under development, the next-generation Computer-Assisted Passenger Prescreening System (CAPPS II), would use national security and commercial databases to identify passengers who could pose risks for additional screening. Concerns about privacy rights will need to be addressed as this system moves toward implementation.

Although TSA has focused on ensuring that bombs and other threat items are not carried onto planes by passengers or in their luggage, vulnerabilities remain in air cargo, general aviation, and airport perimeter security. Each year, an estimated 12.5 million tons of cargo are transported on all-cargo and passenger planes, yet very little air cargo is screened for explosives. We have previously recommended, and the industry has suggested, that TSA use a risk-management approach to set priorities as it works with the industry to determine the next steps in strengthening aviation security.

TSA faces longer-term management and organizational challenges to sustaining enhanced aviation security that include (1) developing and implementing a comprehensive risk management approach, (2) paying for increased aviation security needs and controlling costs, (3) establishing effective coordination among the many entities involved in aviation security, (4) strategically managing its workforce, and (5) building a results-oriented culture within the new Department of Homeland Security. TSA has begun to respond to recommendations we have made addressing many of these challenges, and we have other studies in progress.