



Highlights of [GAO-09-399](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Incidents of airport workers using access privileges to smuggle weapons through secured airport areas and onto planes have heightened concerns regarding commercial airport security. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA), along with airports, is responsible for security at TSA-regulated airports. To guide risk assessment and protection of critical infrastructure, including airports, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) developed the National Infrastructure Protection Plan (NIPP). GAO was asked to examine the extent to which, for airport perimeters and access controls, TSA (1) assessed risk consistent with the NIPP; (2) implemented protective programs, and evaluated its worker screening pilots; and (3) established a strategy to guide decision making. GAO examined TSA documents related to risk assessment activities, airport security programs, and worker screening pilots; visited nine airports of varying size; and interviewed TSA, airport, and association officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that TSA develop a comprehensive risk assessment of airport security, and milestones for its completion; an evaluation plan for any future airport security pilot programs; and a national strategy for airport security that includes key characteristics, such as goals and priorities. DHS reviewed a draft of this report and concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-09-399](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Steve Lord at (202) 512-4379 or [lords@gao.gov](mailto:lords@gao.gov).

## AVIATION SECURITY

### A National Strategy and Other Actions Would Strengthen TSA's Efforts to Secure Commercial Airport Perimeters and Access Controls

#### What GAO Found

Although TSA has implemented activities to assess risks to airport perimeters and access controls, such as a commercial aviation threat assessment, it has not conducted vulnerability assessments for 87 percent of the nation's approximately 450 commercial airports or any consequence assessments. As a result, TSA has not completed a comprehensive risk assessment combining threat, vulnerability, and consequence assessments as required by the NIPP. While TSA officials said they intend to conduct a consequence assessment and additional vulnerability assessments, TSA could not provide further details, such as milestones for their completion. Conducting a comprehensive risk assessment and establishing milestones for its completion would provide additional assurance that intended actions will be implemented, provide critical information to enhance TSA's understanding of risks to airports, and help ensure resources are allocated to the highest security priorities.

Since 2004, TSA has taken steps to strengthen airport security and implement new programs; however, while TSA conducted a pilot program to test worker screening methods, clear conclusions could not be drawn because of significant design limitations and TSA did not document key aspects of the pilot. TSA has taken steps to enhance airport security by, among other things, expanding its requirements for conducting worker background checks and implementing a worker screening program. In fiscal year 2008 TSA pilot tested various methods to screen airport workers to compare the benefits, costs, and impacts of 100 percent worker screening and random worker screening. TSA designed and implemented the pilot in coordination with the Homeland Security Institute (HSI), a federally funded research and development center. However, because of significant limitations in the design and evaluation of the pilot, such as the limited number of participating airports—7 out of about 450—it is unclear which method is more cost-effective. TSA and HSI also did not document key aspects of the pilot's design, methodology, and evaluation, such as a data analysis plan, limiting the usefulness of these efforts. A well-developed and well-documented evaluation plan can help ensure that pilots generate needed performance information to make effective decisions. While TSA has completed these pilots, developing an evaluation plan for future pilots could help ensure that they are designed and implemented to provide management and Congress with necessary information for decision making.

TSA's efforts to enhance the security of the nation's airports have not been guided by a unifying national strategy that identifies key elements, such as goals, priorities, performance measures, and required resources. For example, while TSA's various airport security efforts are implemented by federal and local airport officials, TSA officials said that they have not identified or estimated costs to airport operators for implementing security requirements. GAO has found that national strategies that identify these key elements strengthen decision making and accountability; in addition, developing a strategy with these elements could help ensure that TSA prioritizes its activities and uses resources efficiently to achieve intended outcomes.