COMMERCIAL AVIATION

Program Aimed at High-Risk Parent Abductors Could Aid in Preventing Abductions

Why GAO Did This Study
Since 2000, the annual number of new international parental child abduction cases reported to the Department of State—many of which likely involved air travel—has nearly tripled. Such abductions occur when a parent, family member, or person acting on behalf thereof, takes a child to another country in violation of the custodial parent’s or guardian’s rights. Once a child is ab ducted, the laws, policies, and procedures of the foreign country determine the child’s return. Thus, preventing such abductions can help keep parents and children from being separated for a long period or indefinitely.

As requested, this report addresses (1) the policies and measures airlines, federal agencies, and others have to prevent international parental child abductions on airline flights and (2) options federal agencies, airlines, and others could consider for helping prevent such abductions on airline flights, as well as the advantages and limitations of those options. To perform this work, GAO reviewed applicable laws and policies, interviewed government officials, and surveyed airlines and nonprofit associations.

What GAO Recommends
GAO recommends that DHS consider creating a program similar to the child abduction component of its Prevent Departure program that would apply to U.S. citizens. DHS concurred with the recommendation, but cited challenges toward implementing it, such as potential constitutional, operational, privacy, and resource issues.

View GAO-11-602 or key components. For more information, contact Gerald Dillingham at dillinghamg@gao.gov or (202) 512-2834.

Federal Programs Aimed at Preventing International Parental Child Abductions

| State Department requires both parents’ or guardians’ consent prior to the issuance of a child’s passport. | DHS Prevent Departure list program to match non-U.S. citizen abductors with an identified child |
| Parents can sign up for the State Department’s Children’s Passport Issuance Alert Program. | DHS check of NCIC data on missing children against airlines’ passenger list |
| Parent can contact the State Department to place a suspected non-U.S. citizen abductor on DHS’ Prevent Departure list if certain criteria are met. | AMBER Alert at airport, if abduction case meets criteria |

Source: GAO.

Two options—a parental-consent letter requirement and a high-risk abductor list—were cited by stakeholders (federal agency, airline, and nongovernmental organization officials) as having potential to prevent abductions, but consent letters may be impractical to adopt while a high-risk list may help prevent some abductions. A consent letter policy could require that children traveling alone, or without both parents, have a note of consent from the nonaccompanying parents authorizing the child to travel. Stakeholders GAO met with and surveyed noted that such consent letters may be effective in deterring some abductions, but the relative ease in forging a letter along with other significant issues indicate that such a requirement is not a practical option. A high-risk abductor list program could operate similarly to the Prevent Departure list program but would apply to U.S. citizens. While stakeholders pointed out certain limitations to such a high-risk abductor list—such as the relatively difficult and time-consuming steps needed to place a child and potential abductor on this list—such a list may be helpful in preventing abductions on airline flights.