

Highlights of GAO-15-559T, a testimony before the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 exposed vulnerabilities in the nation's aviation system, billions of dollars have been spent on a wide range of programs designed to enhance aviation security. Securing commercial aviation remains a daunting task, and continuing fiscal pressure highlights the need for TSA to determine how to allocate its finite resources for the greatest impact. GAO previously reported on TSA's oversight of its aviation security programs, including the extent to which TSA has the information needed to assess the programs.

This testimony focuses on TSA's oversight of aviation security measures including, among other things (1) Secure Flight, (2) Advanced Imaging Technology, and (3) Managed Inclusion. This statement is based on reports and testimonies issued from December 2011 through March 2015, with selected updates conducted from November 2014 through April 2015 to determine progress made in implementing previous GAO recommendations. For prior work, GAO analyzed TSA documents and interviewed TSA officials, among other things. For the updates, GAO reviewed documents and interviewed TSA officials about actions taken to address our recommendations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has previously made recommendations to DHS to strengthen TSA's oversight of aviation security programs. DHS generally agreed and has actions underway to address them. Consequently, GAO is not making any new recommendations in this testimony.

View GAO-15-559T. For more information, contact Jennifer Grover at (202) 512-7141 or groverj@gao.gov.

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AVIATION SECURITY

TSA Has Taken Steps to Improve Oversight of Key Programs, but Additional Actions Are Needed

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has taken steps to improve oversight of Secure Flight—a passenger prescreening program that matches passenger information against watch lists to assign each passenger a risk category—but could take further action to address screening errors. In September 2014, GAO reported that TSA lacked timely and reliable information on system matching errors—instances where Secure Flight did not identify passengers who were actual matches to watch lists. GAO recommended that TSA systematically document such errors to help TSA determine if actions can be taken to prevent similar errors from occurring. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) concurred and has developed a mechanism to do so, but has not yet shown how it will use this information to improve system performance. In September 2014, GAO also found that screening personnel made errors in screening passengers at the checkpoint at a level consistent with their Secure Flight risk determinations and that TSA did not have a systematic process for evaluating the root causes of these errors across airports. GAO recommended that TSA develop a process for evaluating the root causes and implement corrective measures to address them. DHS concurred and has developed such a process but has not yet demonstrated implementation of corrective measures.

In March 2014, GAO found that TSA performance assessments of certain full-body scanners used to screen passengers at airports did not account for all factors affecting the systems. GAO reported that the effectiveness of Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT) systems equipped with automated target recognition software (AIT-ATR)—which displays anomalies on a generic passenger outline instead of actual passenger bodies—relied on both the technology's capability to identify potential threat items and its operators' ability to resolve them. However, GAO found that TSA did not include these factors in determining overall AIT-ATR system performance. GAO also found that TSA evaluated the technology's performance in the laboratory—a practice that does not reflect how well the technology will perform with actual human operators. In considering procurement of the next generation of AIT systems (AIT-2), GAO recommended that TSA measure system effectiveness based on the performance of both the technology and the screening personnel. DHS concurred and in January 2015 reported that it has evaluated the AIT-2 technology and screening personnel as a system but has not yet provided sufficient documentation of this effort.

In December 2014, GAO found that TSA had not tested the effectiveness of its overall Managed Inclusion process—a process to assess passenger risk in real time at the airport and provide expedited screening to certain passengers—but had plans to do so. Specifically, GAO found that TSA had tested the effectiveness of individual components of the Managed Inclusion process, such as canine teams, but had not yet tested the effectiveness of the overall process. TSA officials stated that they had plans to conduct such testing. Given that GAO has previously reported on TSA challenges testing the effectiveness of its security programs, GAO recommended that TSA ensure its planned testing of the Managed Inclusion process adhere to established evaluation design practices. DHS concurred and has plans to use a test and evaluation process for its planned testing of Managed Inclusion.