AVIATION SECURITY

TSA Is Taking Steps to Improve Expedited Screening Effectiveness, but Improvements in Screener Oversight Are Needed

Why GAO Did This Study
In 2015, TSA screened or oversaw the screening of more than 708 million passengers at more than 450 U.S. airports. In carrying out the screening process, TSA is responsible for ensuring the security of civil aviation while also managing the efficient flow of passengers. TSA employs screening personnel, called TSOs, to carry out passenger and baggage screening operations. Each year, TSA tests TSO performance as part of its efforts to monitor the effectiveness of aviation security screening. In 2011, TSA began providing expedited screening procedures to selected passengers, intended to strengthen security and improve the passenger experience by shortening lines and wait times.

This testimony addresses the extent to which TSA (1) has taken steps to improve the security effectiveness of expedited screening and (2) uses TSO performance testing data to enhance TSO performance in screening for prohibited items. This statement is based on reports GAO issued in May 2016 and December 2014, and selected updates. Among other things, GAO analyzed TSA documentation on expedited screening and TSO testing data.

What GAO Recommends
In its May 2016 report, GAO recommended that TSA ensure that (1) airports submit complete TSO performance data, (2) the data are analyzed nationally, and (3) implementation of covert testing recommendations are tracked. DHS concurred and is taking actions to address the recommendations.

What GAO Found
The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has taken steps intended to improve the security effectiveness of expedited passenger screening since GAO reported on it in December 2014. These steps include

- Adjusting the TSA Pre✓® Risk Assessment program algorithm used to assign passengers scores and identify low risk passengers;
- Limiting the use of Managed Inclusion to airports that employ canine teams to detect explosives; and,
- Developing plans to test the security effectiveness of the Managed Inclusion process as an overall system—ensuring that the testing adheres to established design practices.

According to a TSA memorandum dated November 2015, TSA made changes to TSA Pre✓® Risk Assessment program and Managed Inclusion process as a result of the findings and recommendations included in three prior Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General audit reports. According to TSA, these changes were necessary to ensure security and resulted in a 20 percent decrease in the number of individuals receiving expedited screening. Previously, in December 2014, GAO found that TSA had not tested the overall effectiveness of the Managed Inclusion process, and recommended that TSA ensure that its planned testing adhere to established evaluation design practices to yield reliable test results. DHS concurred with the recommendation and plans to begin testing the effectiveness of the Managed Inclusion process as a system during fiscal year 2016.

TSA uses data on Transportation Security Officer (TSO) performance obtained from its various testing programs to ensure that individual TSOs are (1) demonstrating through annual proficiency reviews and resulting recertification that they are qualified to continue conducting passenger and checked baggage screening, and (2) demonstrating proficiency during live screening operations in adhering to screening procedures. However, in a report containing sensitive security information completed in May 2016, GAO found that TSA’s ability to fully evaluate TSO performance in screening passengers and bagage for prohibited items is constrained by incomplete and unreliable testing data and a lack of data analysis. For example, some airports did not report testing data on TSOs’ ability to identify prohibited items over fiscal years 2009 through 2014 as required by TSA policy. TSA officials also stated they do not systematically analyze test results to determine any national trends for informing future TSO training. In addition, TSA determined that pass rate data for one of its covert testing programs that uses role players at airports to assess TSO performance was unreliable. Specifically, testing by an independent contractor indicated that TSA’s covert testing data likely overstated TSO performance. TSA is taking action to determine the root cause of the variance in the testing results and is implementing corrective actions. Further, GAO found that TSA does not track the implementation, where appropriate, of recommendations made based on the covert testing results. DHS concurred with GAO’s recommendations made in its May 2016 report and is planning actions to address them.