

Why GAO Did This Study

On December 25, 2009, while on a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit, a person attempted to detonate explosives hidden in their underwear. This person was not included in the government's consolidated database of known or suspected terrorists at the time. In response, in 2010, TSA began identifying passengers who are not known or suspected terrorists, but who TSA determined should receive enhanced screening. Specifically, TSA identifies passengers for enhanced screening through the application of screening rules, which TSA develops by considering current intelligence and other factors. TSA refers to these rules and lists as Silent Partner and Quiet Skies.

The TSA Modernization Act includes a provision for GAO to review the current oversight mechanisms and effectiveness of Silent Partner and Quiet Skies. This report examines the extent to which TSA has (1) coordinated with relevant DHS and TSA stakeholders to review passenger screening rules; and (2) assessed the effectiveness of these rules. GAO analyzed TSA documents, including standard operating procedures, and interviewed senior DHS and TSA officials involved in managing and overseeing the programs.

What GAO Recommends

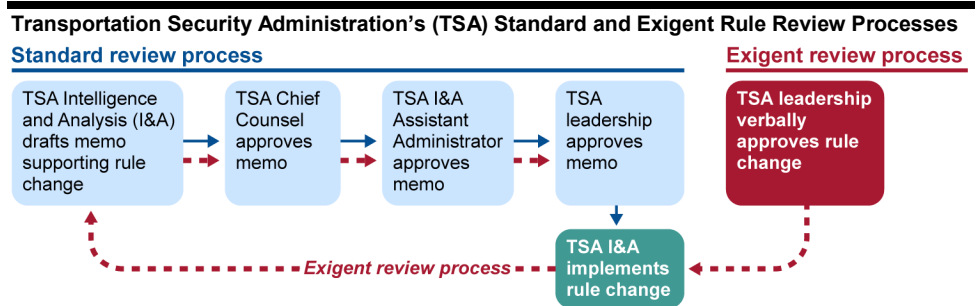
GAO is making three recommendations. DHS should (1) clarify the criteria for exigent and standard rule review procedures; (2) document which review process is used for each new rule or rule change; and (3) explore additional data sources for measuring rule effectiveness. DHS concurred with these recommendations.

AVIATION SECURITY

TSA Coordinates with Stakeholders on Changes to Screening Rules but Could Clarify Its Review Processes and Better Measure Effectiveness

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) coordinates reviews of its intelligence-based screening rules known as Silent Partner and Quiet Skies. Specifically, TSA's Intelligence and Analysis office (I&A) coordinates quarterly rule reviews and notifies Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and TSA stakeholders of rule changes. According to stakeholders, these review processes provide a good mechanism for program oversight. TSA has established guidance for rule changes that involve TSA stakeholders reviewing rules in advance of their implementation. In some instances, TSA uses an alternate process, allowed by guidance in exigent circumstances, where rule changes go into effect before some stakeholders review them. However, agency guidance does not define the conditions for using the standard or exigent processes. Further, TSA officials do not document which review process—standard or exigent—they use for each rule change. Clarifying guidance and documenting which review process is used could improve transparency and better ensure screening rule changes are adequately reviewed.



Source: GAO Analysis of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) information and interviews with TSA officials. | GAO-20-72

TSA tracks some data on rule implementation, but has not identified a means to comprehensively measure rule effectiveness. TSA officials explained that they had not yet fully assessed the rules' effectiveness because it was difficult to measure. Silent Partner rules identify passengers for enhanced screening on inbound flights to the United States. Quiet Skies rules—a subset of the Silent Partner rules—identify passengers for enhanced screening on subsequent domestic and outbound flights. TSA officials said that the one method they had used to assess effectiveness was to count Quiet Skies passengers who were later added to the government's watchlist of known or suspected terrorists. However, because this analysis was limited to Quiet Skies, it excluded 93 percent of the screening rules, making it difficult to interpret what the results indicate about effectiveness. TSA has access to data, such as the outcomes of enhanced screening of Silent Partner and Quiet Skies passengers, that could be explored to better assess rule effectiveness. Exploring additional data sources could help TSA refine and supplement their existing efforts to measure program effectiveness.