



Highlights of [GAO-10-139](#), a report to Senate and House Committees on Appropriations

TRANSPORTATION SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

TSA Executive Attrition Has Declined, but Better Information Is Needed on Reasons for Leaving and Executive Hiring Process

Why GAO Did This Study

The Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) Transportation Security Executive Service (TSES) consists of executive-level staff serving in key agency positions just below political appointees. Committees of Congress have raised questions about the frequency of turnover within the TSES and have directed GAO to examine turnover among TSES staff. Accordingly, this report examines: (1) TSES attrition and how it compares with that of Senior Executive Service (SES) staff in other DHS components and cabinet-level departments, (2) the reasons TSES staff separated from TSA, and (3) TSA efforts to manage TSES attrition consistent with effective management practices. To answer these objectives, GAO analyzed data within the Office of Personnel Management's Central Personnel Data File, reviewed TSA human capital policies and procedures, and interviewed former TSES staff. The results of these interviews are not generalizable, but represent the views of about half the TSES staff who separated from fiscal years 2005 through 2008.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends the TSA enable TSES staff to identify their level of employment when completing exit surveys and better document how it applies merit staffing requirements when hiring TSES staff. TSA concurred with GAO's recommendations and has taken steps to implement them.

[View GAO-10-139](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Stephen M. Lord at (202) 512-8777 or lords@gao.gov.

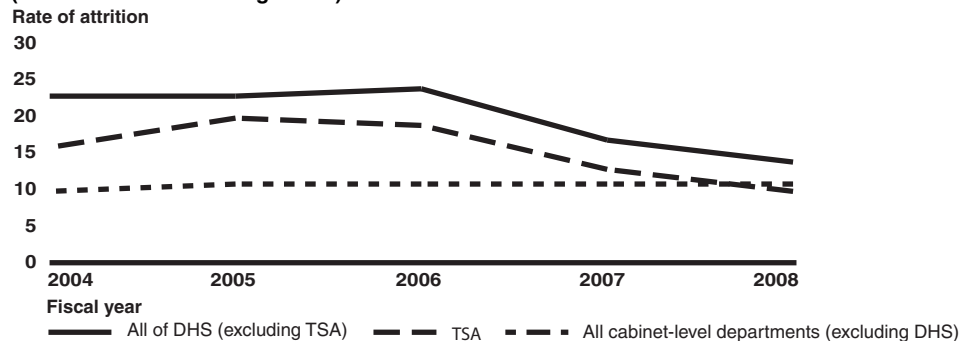
What GAO Found

Separation data from fiscal years 2004 through 2008 show that attrition among TSA's TSES staff was consistently lower than the rate of attrition among all DHS SES staff and, through 2007, higher than SES attrition for all other cabinet-level departments. Separations among TSES staff peaked at 20 percent in fiscal years 2005, but declined each year thereafter, and resignations (as opposed to retirements, terminations, transfers to other cabinet level departments, or expirations of a term appointment) were the most frequent type of TSES separations over this period.

In interviews with 46 former TSES staff, the majority (36 of 46) identified at least one adverse reason (that is, a reason related to dissatisfaction with some aspect of their experience at TSA) for leaving, as opposed to a nonadverse reason (such as leaving the agency for another professional opportunity). The two most frequently cited reasons for separation were dissatisfaction with the leadership style of the TSA administrator or those reporting directly to him (14 of 46) and to pursue another professional opportunity (14 of 46).

To better address TSES attrition and manage executive resources, TSA has implemented measures consistent with effective human capital management practices and standards for internal control in the federal government. These measures include, among other things, reinstating an exit survey and establishing a process for hiring TSES staff that encompasses merit staffing requirements. However, TSA could improve upon these measures. For example, due to TSA officials' concerns about respondents' anonymity, TSA's new exit survey precludes TSES staff from identifying their position. Without such information, it will be difficult for TSA to identify reasons for attrition specific for TSES staff. Moreover, inconsistent with internal control standards, TSA did not document its adherence with at least one merit staffing procedure for 20 of 25 TSES hired in calendar year 2006 and 8 of 16 TSES hired in calendar year 2008. Although there are internal mechanisms that provide TSA officials reasonable assurance that merit staffing principles are followed, better documentation could also help TSA demonstrate to an independent third party, the Congress, and the public that its process for hiring TSES staff is fair and open.

Comparison of Attrition Rates among Executives at TSA, DHS, and Cabinet-level Agencies (Fiscal Years 2004 through 2008).



Source: GAO analysis of data from OPM's Central Personnel Data File.