AVIATION SECURITY

9/11 Anniversary Observations on TSA’s Progress and Challenges in Strengthening Aviation Security

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has taken actions to validate the science underlying its behavior-based passenger screening program, the Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques, or SPOT, program, but challenges remain. For example, TSA issued new screening requirements aimed at enhancing the security of cargo on aircraft, such as prohibiting the transport of air cargo on passenger aircraft from Yemen. In June 2010, GAO recommended that TSA develop a mechanism to verify the accuracy of all screening data. TSA concurred in part and required air carriers to report inbound cargo screening data, but has not yet fully addressed the recommendation. In June 2012, TSA required air carriers to screen 100 percent of inbound air cargo transported on passenger aircraft by December 3, 2012. However, air carriers and TSA face challenges in implementing this requirement and in providing reasonable assurance that screening is being conducted at reported levels.

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TSA and DHS have experienced difficulties establishing acquisition program baselines, schedules, and cost estimates for the Electronic Baggage Screening Program (EBSP). For example, GAO reported in July 2011 that TSA had established a schedule for the acquisition of the explosives detection systems (EDS) TSA deploys to screen checked baggage, but it did not fully comply with leading practices. GAO recommended that DHS develop and maintain a schedule for the EBSP in accordance with leading practices. DHS concurred.

GAO reported in July 2012 that TSA has worked to enhance general aviation security, such as through issuing regulations, but there are weaknesses in its process for vetting foreign flight school student applicants, and in DHS’s process for identifying flight school students who may be in the country illegally. For example, TSA’s program to help determine whether flight school students pose a security threat does not determine whether they entered the country legally. GAO recommended actions that DHS and TSA could take to address these concerns, with which DHS and TSA have concurred, and are starting to take actions.