

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-704T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, exposed vulnerabilities in the nation's aviation system, DHS has taken steps to vet airport workers to reduce the security risks they may pose at the approximately 450 commercial airports in the United States. According to TSA, the threat to civil aviation has not diminished—underscoring the need for effective airport worker screening programs. GAO previously reported on TSA's implementation of its Aviation Workers Program in which TSA and airports, in collaboration with the FBI, vet applicants against the FBI's criminal history records, terrorist watchlists and other databases, and issue credentials to qualifying airport workers.

This testimony describes the role of TSA and airports in assessing airport workers for potential security threats, as well as challenges and recent improvements in vetting airport workers. This statement is based on a report and testimonies issued from December 2011 through June 2015, and selected updates in June 2015. For prior work, GAO analyzed TSA documents and interviewed TSA officials. For DHS's recent efforts to vet airport workers, we reviewed applicable policies and an April 2015 report on improving airport employee access control.

What GAO Recommends

GAO previously made recommendations to DHS to strengthen TSA's implementation of its Aviation Workers Program. DHS agreed and took actions to address them. GAO is not making any new recommendations in this testimony.

View [GAO-15-704T](#). 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 Vetting of Airport Workers

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA), within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), requires that before airport operators issue credentials to applicants seeking unescorted access to secure areas of an airport, the applicant must be vetted in accordance with TSA requirements, which generally includes a Security Threat Assessment. GAO reported in December 2011 that this assessment includes checks of criminal history records and immigration status, as well as a check against terrorist databases. To initiate the Security Threat Assessment, airport operators collect applicant information and transmit the results to TSA. TSA adjudicates the immigration and terrorism checks, initiates an automated check of Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) criminal history records, and transmits the results of the criminal history record checks to the airport operators. The airport operators are responsible for adjudicating the criminal history to identify potentially disqualifying criminal offenses specified under TSA regulations, and making a final determination of eligibility for a credential.

TSA has taken steps to ensure that airport workers who require unescorted access to secure areas of commercial (i.e., TSA-regulated) airports are properly vetted to ensure they do not pose a security threat. However, GAO previously found that TSA faced challenges in ensuring it had the necessary criminal information to effectively conduct Security Threat Assessments for aviation workers. In December 2011, GAO found that limitations in TSA's criminal history checks increased the risk that the agency was not detecting potentially disqualifying criminal offenses as part of its Security Threat Assessments for airport workers. TSA reported that its ability to review applicant criminal history records was often incomplete due to its status as a noncriminal justice agency. GAO found that TSA and FBI had not assessed whether a potential security risk in TSA's Security Threat Assessment process could exist as a result. As a result, GAO recommended that the TSA and the FBI jointly assess the extent to which this limitation may pose a security risk, identify alternatives to address any risks, and assess the costs and benefits of pursuing each alternative. TSA and the FBI have since taken steps to address this recommendation. As of September 2014, TSA officials reported that the FBI has taken steps to expand the criminal history record information available to TSA when conducting its Security Threat Assessments for airport workers and others. In April 2015, the Secretary of DHS stated that until TSA establishes a system for "real-time recurrent" criminal history records checks for all airport workers beyond their time of initial employment, the agency shall require fingerprint-based criminal history records checks every two years for such workers with unescorted access to secure areas of the airport. TSA subsequently updated existing requirements to implement procedures consistent with the Secretary's statement.