

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-16-704](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

TSA trains TSOs to screen passengers and baggage for items that could pose a threat at nearly 440 airports across the country. One way TSA and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) measure TSO performance is through covert testing of TSA screening operations. In response to the findings from recent DHS OIG covert testing, the Secretary of DHS directed TSA in June 2015 to conduct further training for all TSOs and supervisors. GAO was asked to review TSA's efforts to train and test TSOs. This report examines (1) how TSA trains TSOs and evaluates the training; (2) how TSA measures TSO performance and what the data show; and (3) to what extent TSA uses TSO performance data to enhance TSO performance. GAO analyzed TSO performance data from 2009 through 2015, reviewed documents regarding TSA training and testing, and interviewed TSA officials at headquarters and 10 airports. GAO selected these airports based on airport risk categories, among other things. Information from these airports was not generalizable, but provided insights into TSO training and testing. This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in May 2016.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA (1) collect complete data on assessments of X-ray machine operators, (2) analyze these data nationally for opportunities to enhance TSO performance, and (3) track the implementation of covert testing recommendations. TSA concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-16-704](#). For more information, contact Jennifer Grover, 202-512-7141, groverj@gao.gov

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AVIATION SECURITY

TSA Should Ensure Testing Data Are Complete and Fully Used to Improve Screener Training and Operations

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) uses a variety of programs to train and evaluate Transportation Security Officers (TSO) who are responsible for screening passengers and baggage for threats to aviation security. For example, by law, TSOs must complete 40 hours of classroom training, 60 hours of on-the-job training, and certification tests before performing screening. Once certified, TSA requires TSOs to complete annual training under the National Training Plan. Since 2013, TSA has been phasing in a program to evaluate its training to inform use of training resources. TSA expects that this evaluation program should help the agency determine how well training meets TSOs' needs, provides them with needed knowledge and skill, and has an impact on their performance.

TSA measures TSO performance in various ways, including (1) annual proficiency reviews, which certify TSOs by evaluating their ability to carry out screening standard operating procedures; (2) assessments of X-ray machine operators' ability to identify prohibited items by displaying fictional threat items, such as guns or explosives, onto X-ray images of actual baggage; and (3) covert testing programs that use role players to take prohibited items through screening checkpoints to test TSOs or determine how TSOs interact with the public, among other things. Over the time periods GAO reviewed, TSA data on the results of annual proficiency reviews and covert testing on how TSOs interact with the public show that TSOs' scores (pass rates) varied by airport security risk category. GAO is not providing TSOs' scores for annual proficiency reviews, X-ray machine operator assessments, or covert testing for prohibited items at checkpoints in this report due to the sensitive or classified nature of the data or the data reliability concerns discussed below.

TSA has made use of annual proficiency review data to enhance TSO training, but its use of other testing data is constrained by incomplete and unreliable data. Specifically, due to software compatibility issues and a lack of automatic uploading capability, airport reporting on assessments of X-ray machine operators was not complete, as required by TSA policy, for each year of data GAO examined (fiscal years 2009 through 2014), limiting their reliability and use to enhance TSO training. In addition, for the data it does collect on these assessments, TSA has not taken steps to analyze these data nationwide, which could help the agency identify potential trends or opportunities to improve TSO performance. Furthermore, in 2015, TSA determined that prior year results of one of its two covert testing programs to assess TSOs' ability to identify prohibited items at checkpoints were unreliable, resulting in pass rates that were likely higher than actual TSO performance. TSA has since taken steps to enhance reliability by hiring a contractor to perform independent validation testing, among other things. Finally, TSA does not require or track implementation by field personnel of national recommendations related to these covert tests, thereby limiting the agency's ability to take advantage of the corrective actions identified from the tests.