

Why GAO Did This Study

The global terrorist threat to surface transportation – freight and passenger rail, mass transit, highway, maritime and pipeline systems – has increased in recent years, as demonstrated by the 2017 London vehicle attacks and a 2016 thwarted attack on mass transit in the New York area. TSA is the primary federal agency responsible for securing surface transportation in the United States.

GAO was asked to review TSA surface inspector activities. This report addresses (1) how TSA surface inspectors implement the agency's surface transportation security mission, and (2) the extent to which TSA has used a risk-based approach to prioritize and implement surface inspector activities. GAO analyzed TSA data on surface inspector activities from fiscal year 2013 through March 24, 2017, reviewed TSA program and risk documents and guidance, and observed surface inspectors conducting multiple activities. GAO also interviewed TSA officials in 17 of 49 surface field offices and 15 industry stakeholders.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA (1) address limitations in its data system to collect complete information, (2) ensure inspector activities more closely align with the results of risk assessments, (3) identify and prioritize entities and locations for its risk mitigation program, and (4) define measurable and clear objectives for the program. TSA concurred with these recommendations.

View [GAO-18-180](#). For more information, contact Jennifer Grover at (202) 512-7141 or groverj@gao.gov.

December 2017

TRANSPORTATION SECURITY ADMINISTRATION

Surface Transportation Inspector Activities Should Align More Closely With Identified Risks

What GAO Found

Transportation Security Administration (TSA) surface transportation security inspectors—known as surface inspectors—conduct a variety of activities to implement the agency's surface security mission, including:

- **Regulatory Inspections:** Surface inspectors enforce freight rail, passenger rail, and maritime security regulations. GAO found that, according to TSA data, surface inspectors reported spending approximately 20 percent of their time on these activities from fiscal years 2013 to 2017.
- **Non-regulatory assessments and assistance:** Surface inspectors conduct voluntary assessments and provide training to surface transportation entities, among other things. GAO found that, according to TSA data, inspectors reported spending approximately 80 percent of their time on these activities.

In addition to mission-related activities, surface inspectors can assist with aviation-related activities. However, GAO found that TSA has incomplete information on the total time surface inspectors spend on these activities because of limitations in TSA's data system. Addressing these limitations would provide TSA with complete information when making decisions about inspector activities.

GAO also found that TSA prioritized inspector activities in the surface transportation mode with the lowest risk because TSA did not incorporate risk assessment results when planning and monitoring activities. Specifically, in fiscal year 2016, the last full year for which data on inspectors' activities in the surface modes was available, surface inspectors reported spending more than twice as much time on the lowest risk surface transportation mode according to TSA risk assessments than on the highest risk surface transportation mode. Incorporating risk assessment results when prioritizing inspector activities would help TSA ensure that its surface security resources address the highest risks.

In fiscal year 2017, TSA fully implemented a new risk mitigation program—Risk Mitigation Activities for Surface Transportation (RMAST)—intended to focus time and resources on high-risk surface transportation entities and locations. However, GAO found that TSA has not identified or prioritized these high-risk entities and locations, or defined the RMAST program's objectives and associated activities in a measurable and clear way. According to TSA officials, they have not done so because there are too many potential entities to list them all for prioritization and TSA has not identified an approach for determining the effectiveness of activities under the program. However, prioritizing high-risk entities, such as by type, characteristics, or location does not require a complete list of entities. By identifying and prioritizing high-risk entities and locations for RMAST, and clearly defining the program's activities and objectives, TSA would be better able to implement RMAST activities in a risk-based manner and measure their effectiveness.

This is a public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in October 2017. Information that TSA deemed sensitive has been omitted.