

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-236](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

TSA employs about 43,000 TSOs who screen over 2 million passengers and their baggage each day at airports in the United States. TSA allocates TSOs to airports using both a computer-based staffing model and information from airports that are intended to provide each airport with the optimum number of TSOs. In the spring of 2016, long screening checkpoint lines at certain U.S. airports raised questions about TSA's process for allocating TSOs to airports.

The Aviation Security Act of 2016 includes a provision for GAO to review TSA's process for allocating TSOs. This report examines how (1) TSA modifies staffing assumptions and tailors staffing levels to airports' needs, (2) TSA monitors wait times and throughput and adjusts resources accordingly, and (3) TSA shares information with stakeholders about staffing and related screening procedures at airports. GAO reviewed TSA documentation describing how the agency modifies staffing assumptions and manages stakeholder coordination. GAO also analyzed passenger wait time and throughput data from January 2015 through May 2017 for the 28 airports monitored by headquarters. GAO visited eight airports selected on the basis of passenger volume and other factors and interviewed TSA officials and stakeholders at those locations.

GAO is not making any recommendations.

View [GAO-18-236](#). For more information, contact Jennifer A. Grover at (202) 512-7141 or groverj@gao.gov.

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AVIATION SECURITY

TSA Uses Current Assumptions and Airport-Specific Data for Its Staffing Process and Monitors Passenger Wait Times Using Daily Operations Data

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) modifies staffing assumptions used in its computer-based staffing model (model) and tailors staffing levels to individual airport needs. Specifically, TSA works with a contractor annually to evaluate the assumptions used in the model and modifies the model's assumptions as needed. For example, TSA adjusted its model after contractor evaluations conducted in fiscal years 2016 and 2017 found that transportation security officers (TSO) needed more time to screen passengers and their baggage when using one type of screening equipment. Moreover, in 2016, TSA began using forecasts on the number of passengers screened at each airport's checkpoints (throughput) to better allocate staff commensurate with the expected rate of increase in passenger throughput at each airport. Furthermore, prompted by the long wait times at some airports in 2016, for the 2017 model TSA officials used actual expedited screening data, specific to each individual airport, rather than relying on the system-wide estimate used in 2016. TSA officials also use other information specific to each airport—such as staff training needs—to further tailor the TSO allocation because the initial allocation resulting from the model does not reflect the full range of operating conditions at individual airports.

TSA uses data to monitor passenger wait times and throughput on a daily basis and responds to increases. For example, TSA's Airport Operations Center (AOC) monitors daily wait times and passenger throughput from 28 airports that TSA officials say represent the majority of passenger throughput nationwide or are operationally significant. Furthermore, TSA officials at airports are required to report to the AOC when an event occurs—such as equipment malfunctions—that affects airport screening operations and results in wait times that are greater than 30 minutes in standard screening lanes. GAO analyzed wait time data for the AOC-monitored airports for the period of January 2015 through May 2017 and found that TSA's reported wait times met its standard of less than 30 minutes in standard screening 99 percent of the time. Within that time frame, two airports accounted for the longest wait times in the spring of 2016. TSA officials identified several tools, such as passenger screening canines, that they use to respond to increases in passenger wait times at these airports.

TSA has taken steps to improve information sharing with airline and airport officials (stakeholders) about staffing and related airport screening operations, and most stakeholders GAO interviewed reported improved satisfaction with information sharing. However, some stakeholders noted differences in the type and extent of information shared. According to TSA officials, stakeholders can elevate any problems they experience with information sharing within TSA to ensure information is shared regularly with stakeholders.