GAO
Highlights

INTERNATIONAL AVIATION SECURITY

TSA Should Improve Industry Coordination and Its Security Directive and Emergency Amendment Review Process

Why GAO Did This Study

Approximately 300 airports in foreign countries offer last point of departure flights to the United States. When threat information or vulnerabilities at foreign airports indicate an immediate need for air carriers to implement additional security measures, TSA may issue new or revise existing security directives (for domestic air carriers) and emergency amendments (for foreign air carriers).

The TSA Modernization Act includes a provision for GAO to examine TSA's review process for directives that apply at last point of departure airports. This report (1) identifies key characteristics of the TSA directives and (2) assesses TSA's process to review directives. GAO reviewed TSA policies and procedures, analyzed TSA program information, and interviewed TSA officials and representatives from a nongeneralizable sample of 10 air carriers, selected to represent carriers with high numbers of U.S.-bound flights, and three industry associations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA (1) better define how to coordinate with air carriers when reviewing directives, (2) document air carrier input, and (3) define a process, including time frames, for cancelling or incorporating security measures from directives into security programs. DHS concurred with all three recommendations.

View GAO-20-7. For more information, contact William Russell at (202) 512-8777 or russellw@gao.gov.
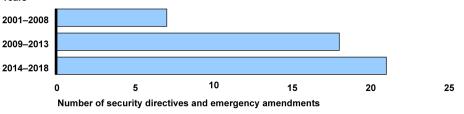
What GAO Found

As of March 2019, there were 46 Transportation Security Administration (TSA) security directives and emergency amendments (i.e., directives) in effect related to air carrier operations at foreign airports. Twenty-eight directives addressed threats (e.g., explosives in laptops) and 18 pertained to vulnerabilities identified at foreign airports (e.g., inadequate perimeter fencing).

TSA reviews directives, but its process does not fully define how to coordinate with industry representatives and TSA has not incorporated the security measures of many longstanding directives into air carrier security programs in accordance with TSA policy. Representatives from four domestic air carriers stated that coordination with TSA on directives has improved. However, representatives from six air carriers and two associations indicated that TSA has issued revised directives that are vague or difficult to implement—which, for example, contributed to TSA officials offering different interpretations of aircraft cabin search requirements—because TSA did not sufficiently include them in the review process. Better defining how TSA coordinates with air carriers and other stakeholders would help ensure that TSA issues directives that enable air carriers to effectively secure their operations against the identified threats or vulnerabilities. In addition, when TSA officials have coordinated with air carriers, they have not documented the input provided. Documenting the input could help ensure that TSA is consistently addressing air carrier concerns and retaining knowledge about who, what, when, where, and why coordination occurred.

Further, TSA policy states that directives are not intended to be permanent and are expected to eventually be canceled or incorporated into security programs. GAO analysis found that TSA issued more than one half (25) of the directives prior to 2014, meaning they have been in effect for more than 5 years. Several have been in effect for more than 10 years (see figure).

Years the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) Issued Security Directives/Emergency Amendments
Years

Source: GAO analysis of TSA security directives and emergency amendments. | GAO-20-7

As of July 2019, TSA officials had begun the process to migrate directives into security programs as deemed appropriate, but had not yet finalized their plans for doing so. Defining the process for incorporating directives into security programs, including expected timeframes, and taking actions to implement this process, as applicable, could better ensure that TSA clarifies and streamlines security requirements in a timely manner.