

Highlights of [GAO-12-1024T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation Security, Committee on Homeland Security, U.S. House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Securing commercial aviation operations remains a daunting task, with hundreds of airports, thousands of aircraft, and thousands of flights daily carrying millions of passengers and pieces of carry-on and checked baggage. The attempted terrorist bombing of Northwest flight 253 on December 25, 2009, and the October 2010 discovery of explosive devices in air cargo packages on an all-cargo aircraft bound for the United States from Yemen highlight the continuing need for effective passenger, cargo, and baggage screening. This statement discusses actions TSA has taken to (1) validate the scientific basis of its behavior-based passenger screening program (the Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques, or SPOT); (2) strengthen the security of inbound air cargo (3) acquire checked baggage screening technology in accordance with established guidance; and (4) vet foreign nationals training at U.S. flight schools. This statement is based on GAO's work issued from September 2009 through July 2012, and includes selected updates on air cargo screening conducted from July through September 2012. For the selected updates, GAO interviewed TSA officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any new recommendations. GAO has previously recommended that TSA take actions to improve aviation security. In general, TSA concurred with the recommendations, and is taking actions to address them.

View [GAO-12-1024T](#). For more information, contact Stephen M. Lord at (202) 512-4379 or lords@gao.gov.

September 11, 2012

AVIATION SECURITY

9/11 Anniversary Observations on TSA's Progress and Challenges in Strengthening Aviation Security

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has taken actions to validate the science underlying its behavior-based passenger screening program, the Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques, or SPOT, program, but more work remains. GAO reported in May 2010 that (1) TSA deployed SPOT before first determining whether there was a scientifically valid basis for using behavior and appearance indicators to reliably identify passengers who may pose a risk; and (2) it is unknown if the SPOT program has ever resulted in the arrest of anyone who is a terrorist, or who was planning to engage in terrorist related activity, although there is other evidence that terrorists have transited through SPOT airports. GAO recommended in May 2010 that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) convene an independent panel of experts to review the methodology of the ongoing validation study on the SPOT program to determine whether it is sufficiently comprehensive to validate the program. DHS concurred and subsequently revised its validation study to include an independent expert review. DHS's study, completed in April 2011, found that SPOT was more effective than random screening to varying degrees; however, DHS noted limitations to the study, such as that it was not designed to comprehensively validate whether SPOT can be used to reliably identify individuals who pose a security risk. GAO is currently reviewing the program and will issue our report next year.

TSA has taken actions to enhance the security of cargo on inbound aircraft, but challenges remain. For example, TSA issued new screening requirements aimed at enhancing the security of cargo on aircraft, such as prohibiting the transport of air cargo on passenger aircraft from Yemen. In June 2010, GAO recommended that TSA develop a mechanism to verify the accuracy of all screening data. TSA concurred in part and required air carriers to report inbound cargo screening data, but has not yet fully addressed the recommendation. In June 2012, TSA required air carriers to screen 100 percent of inbound air cargo transported on passenger aircraft by December 3, 2012. However, air carriers and TSA face challenges in implementing this requirement and in providing reasonable assurance that screening is being conducted at reported levels.

DHS and TSA have experienced difficulties establishing acquisition program baselines, schedules, and cost estimates for the Electronic Baggage Screening Program (EBSP). For example, GAO reported in July 2011 that TSA had established a schedule for the acquisition of the explosives detection systems (EDS) TSA deploys to screen checked baggage, but it did not fully comply with leading practices. GAO recommended that DHS develop and maintain a schedule for the EBSP in accordance with leading practices. DHS concurred.

GAO reported in July 2012 that TSA has worked to enhance general aviation security, such as through issuing regulations, but there are weaknesses in its process for vetting foreign flight school student applicants, and in DHS's process for identifying flight school students who may be in the country illegally. For example, TSA's program to help determine whether flight school students pose a security threat does not determine whether they entered the country legally. GAO recommended actions that DHS and TSA could take to address these concerns, with which DHS and TSA have concurred, and are starting to take actions.