AVIATION SECURITY

TSA Improved Covert Testing but Needs to Conduct More Risk-Informed Tests and Address Vulnerabilities

Why GAO Did This Study

TSA uses covert testing to identify potential vulnerabilities in checkpoint and checked baggage screening systems at U.S. airports. In 2015, TSA identified deficiencies in its covert testing process, and in 2017, the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General's covert testing identified deficiencies in screener performance. Since these findings, TSA has taken steps intended to improve its covert test processes and to use test results to better address vulnerabilities.

GAO was asked to review TSA's covert test programs, including how the results are used to address vulnerabilities. This report analyzes the extent to which (1) TSA covert tests are risk-informed, (2) TSA covert tests for fiscal years 2016 through March 2018 produced quality information, and (3) TSA uses covert test results to address any identified security vulnerabilities.

GAO observed 26 TSA covert tests, reviewed TSA guidance, analyzed test data for fiscal years 2016, 2017, and through March 2018, and interviewed TSA officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making nine recommendations, including that TSA use a risk-informed approach for selecting covert test scenarios, take steps to improve the quality of airport covert test results, and establish time frames and milestones for the key steps in its vulnerability management process. TSA concurred with all nine GAO recommendations.

What GAO Found

Two offices within the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) conduct covert tests at U.S. airports—Inspection and Security Operations. The Department of Homeland Security requires that agencies use risk information to make decisions, and TSA issues annual risk assessments of threats that its program offices should consult when making risk-based decisions, such as what covert tests to conduct. Of the two TSA offices that conduct covert tests, Inspection officials used TSA's risk assessment to guide their efforts. However, Security Operations officials relied largely on their professional judgment in making decisions about what scenarios to consider for covert testing. By not using a risk-informed approach, TSA has limited assurance that Security Operations is targeting the most likely threats.

Both Inspection and Security Operations have implemented processes to ensure that their covert tests produce quality results. However, GAO found that only Inspection has established a new process that has resulted in quality test results. Specifically, for the two reports Inspection completed for testing conducted in fiscal years 2016 and 2017 using its new process, GAO found that the results were generally consistent with quality analysis and reporting practices. On the other hand, Security Operations has not been able to ensure the quality of its covert test results, and GAO identified a number of factors that could be compromising the quality of these results. Unless TSA assesses the current practices used at airports to conduct tests, and identifies the factors that may be impacting the quality of covert testing conducted by TSA officials at airports, it will have limited assurance about the reliability of the test results it is using to address vulnerabilities.

In 2015, TSA established the Security Vulnerability Management Process to leverage agency-wide resources to address systemic vulnerabilities; however, this process has not yet resolved any identified security vulnerabilities. Since 2015, Inspection officials submitted nine security vulnerabilities identified through covert tests for mitigation, and as of September 2018, none had been formally resolved through this process. GAO found that in some cases, it took TSA officials overseeing the process up to 7 months to assign an office responsible to begin mitigation efforts. In part, this is because TSA has not established time frames and milestones for this process or established procedures to ensure milestones are met, in accordance with best practices for program management. Without doing so, TSA cannot ensure efficient and effective progress in addressing security vulnerabilities.

This is a public version of a classified report that GAO issued in January 2019. Information that TSA deemed classified or sensitive security information, such as the results of TSA's covert testing and details about TSA's screening procedures, have been omitted.