



Highlights of [GAO-06-869](#), a report to the Ranking Democratic Member, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is responsible for screening all checked baggage in U.S. airports for explosives and has deployed explosive detection systems and developed standard procedures for their use. TSA also allows alternative screening procedures to be used for short-term, special circumstances. This report addresses (1) how TSA prioritized the use of checked baggage screening procedures and identified trade-offs in security effectiveness and operational efficiencies; (2) how TSA reported use of the procedures and ensured that standard procedures are used whenever possible; and (3) what steps TSA took to reduce airports' need to use alternative screening procedures and to establish performance measures to monitor their use. To address these issues, GAO interviewed TSA officials, reviewed information from TSA's database on checked baggage screening operations; and conducted airport site visits.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that TSA use information on airport usage of alternative screening procedures in conducting covert testing; strengthen TSA's monitoring and tracking of the use of alternative screening procedures; and develop performance measures and targets for the use of alternative screening procedures. DHS reviewed a draft of this report and generally concurred with GAO's findings and recommendations. www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-869.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cathleen Berrick at (202) 512-3404 or berrickc@gao.gov.

AVIATION SECURITY

TSA Oversight of Checked Baggage Screening Procedures Could Be Strengthened

What GAO Found

TSA has prioritized standard and alternative checked baggage screening procedures based on legislative requirements and TSA officials' judgment of the procedures' effectiveness. Use of various procedures to screen checked baggage has involved trade-offs in security effectiveness, which vary by the type of procedure used and the circumstances of its use. It is TSA's policy to use standard procedures whenever possible because TSA officials determined that these procedures provide the most effective detection of explosives. TSA policy also allows the use of alternative screening procedures when volumes of baggage awaiting screening pose security vulnerabilities or when TSA airport officials determine that there is a security risk associated with large concentrations of passengers in an area waiting for their baggage to be screened. Regarding operational efficiencies, TSA has not fully determined the throughput and costs of the various alternative screening procedures in part because it does not count the number of bags screened using these procedures. TSA has conducted covert tests (undercover, unannounced) of standard procedures, but has not conducted this testing for alternative screening procedures. TSA cited logistical difficulties in conducting covert tests for alternative screening procedures. However, by not doing so, TSA is not collecting data that could provide useful information in determining the security effectiveness of the procedures in an operational setting and how to improve their effectiveness.

TSA cannot identify the percentage of checked baggage screened using standard versus alternative screening procedures because TSA records standard procedures in terms of the number of bags screened in its management information system, but records alternative procedures in terms of the number of occasions and hours of use. However, TSA officials estimated that a low percentage of checked baggage is screened using alternative screening procedures. To assess the extent that standard screening procedures are used whenever possible, TSA has established internal controls to monitor the use of standard and alternative screening procedures; however, these controls were not always implemented to ensure the gathering of complete and accurate information. This may limit TSA managers' ability to assess the effect of using alternative screening procedures and determine what should be done to minimize the use of the procedures. TSA headquarters officials stated that they are working with TSA airport staff to correct such reporting problems.

TSA has taken steps to reduce the need to use alternative screening procedures at airports, including anticipating factors that could increase passenger and baggage volume and acting to address these factors. However, TSA has not developed performance measures and targets to assess its progress in minimizing the need to use the procedures. By creating performance measures, TSA could gauge whether it is making progress toward minimizing the need to use alternative screening procedures at airports. Performance targets for the procedures would be an indicator of how much risk TSA is willing to accept in using the procedures.