



Highlights of [GAO-08-958](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) uses undercover, or covert, testing to approximate techniques that terrorists may use to identify vulnerabilities in and measure the performance of airport security systems. During these tests, undercover inspectors attempt to pass threat objects through passenger and baggage screening systems, and access secure airport areas. In response to a congressional request, GAO examined (1) TSA's strategy for conducting covert testing of the transportation system and the extent to which the agency has designed and implemented its covert tests to achieve identified goals; and (2) the results of TSA's national aviation covert tests conducted from September 2002 to June 2007, and the extent to which TSA uses the results of these tests to mitigate security vulnerabilities. To conduct this work, GAO analyzed covert testing documents and data and interviewed TSA and transportation industry officials.

What GAO Recommends

To ensure that TSA is more fully using the results of covert tests, GAO recommends that TSA document causes of test failures; as TSA explores the use of covert testing in non-aviation modes of transportation, coordinate with transportation organizations that conduct covert tests; and develop a systematic process to evaluate covert testing recommendations. DHS and TSA reviewed a draft of this report and concurred with GAO's recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-958](#). For more information, contact Cathleen A. Berrick at (202) 512-3404 or berrickc@gao.gov.

TRANSPORTATION SECURITY

TSA Has Developed a Risk-Based Covert Testing Program, but Could Better Mitigate Aviation Security Vulnerabilities Identified Through Covert Tests

What GAO Found

TSA has designed and implemented risk-based national and local covert testing programs to achieve its goals of identifying vulnerabilities in and measuring the performance the aviation security system, and has begun to determine the extent to which covert testing will be used in non-aviation modes of transportation. TSA's Office of Inspection (OI) used information on terrorist threats to design and implement its national covert tests and determine at which airports to conduct tests based on the likelihood of a terrorist attack. However, OI did not systematically record the causes of test failures or practices that resulted in higher pass rates for tests. Without systematically recording reasons for test failures, such as failures caused by screening equipment not working properly, as well as reasons for test passes, TSA is limited in its ability to mitigate identified vulnerabilities. OI officials stated that identifying a single cause for a test failure is difficult since failures can be caused by multiple factors. TSA recently redesigned its local covert testing program to more effectively measure the performance of passenger and baggage screening systems and identify vulnerabilities. However, it is too early to determine whether the program will meet its goals since it was only recently implemented and TSA is still analyzing the results of initial tests. While TSA has a well established covert testing program in commercial aviation, the agency does not regularly conduct covert tests in non-aviation modes of transportation. Furthermore, select domestic and foreign transportation organizations and DHS components use covert testing to identify security vulnerabilities in non-aviation settings. However, TSA lacks a systematic process for coordinating with these organizations.

TSA covert tests conducted from September 2002 to June 2007 have identified vulnerabilities in the commercial aviation system at airports of all sizes, and the agency could more fully use the results of tests to mitigate identified vulnerabilities. While the specific results of these tests and the vulnerabilities they identified are classified, covert test failures can be caused by multiple factors, including screening equipment that does not detect a threat item, Transportation Security Officers (TSOs), formerly known as screeners, not properly following TSA procedures when screening passengers, or TSA screening procedures that do not provide sufficient detail to enable TSOs to identify the threat item. TSA's Administrator and senior officials are routinely briefed on covert test results and are provided with test reports that contain recommendations to address identified vulnerabilities. However, TSA lacks a systematic process to ensure that OI's recommendations are considered and that the rationale for implementing or not implementing OI's recommendations is documented. Without such a process, TSA is limited in its ability to use covert test results to strengthen aviation security. TSA officials stated that opportunities exist to improve the agency's processes in this area.

In May 2008, GAO issued a classified report on TSA's covert testing program. That report contained information that was deemed either classified or sensitive. This version of the report summarizes our overall findings and recommendations while omitting classified or sensitive security information.