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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-05-851](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. passenger rail system is a vital component of the nation's transportation infrastructure, carrying more than 11 million passengers each weekday. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Transportation (DOT) share responsibility for ensuring the safety and security of rail systems.

In this report, GAO addressed (1) DHS actions to assess the risks to the U.S. passenger rail system in the context of prevailing risk management principles, (2) federal actions taken to enhance the security of the U.S. passenger rail system, and (3) security practices that domestic and selected foreign passenger rail operators have implemented.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending, among other things, that the Secretary of DHS direct the Assistant Secretary of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) to develop a plan with timelines for completing its methodology for conducting risk assessments and develop rail security standards that can be measured and enforced. The Secretary also should consider the feasibility of implementing certain security practices used by foreign operators. DHS, DOT, and Amtrak reviewed a draft of this report and generally agreed with the report's recommendations. DHS's detailed comments and GAO's response are contained in the report.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-851.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cathleen Berrick at (202) 512-8777 or JayEtta Hecker at (202) 512-2834

PASSENGER RAIL SECURITY

Enhanced Federal Leadership Needed to Prioritize and Guide Security Efforts

What GAO Found

Within DHS, the Office for Domestic Preparedness has completed 7 risk assessments of passenger rail systems around the country, with 12 more under way. TSA has begun to conduct risk assessments and to establish a methodology for determining how to analyze and characterize risks that have been identified but has not yet completed either effort or set timelines for doing so. TSA will not be able to prioritize passenger rail assets and help guide security investment decisions until these efforts are completed. At the department level, DHS has begun developing, but has not yet completed, a framework to help agencies and the private sector develop a consistent approach for analyzing and comparing risks to transportation and other sectors. Until this framework is finalized and shared with stakeholders, it may not be possible to compare risks across different sectors, prioritize them, and allocate resources accordingly.

The Federal Transit Administration and Federal Railroad Administration within DOT have ongoing initiatives to enhance passenger rail security. In addition, in 2004, TSA issued emergency security directives to domestic rail operators after terrorist attacks on the rail system in Madrid, Spain, and piloted a test of explosive detection technology for use in passenger rail systems. However, federal and rail industry officials raised questions about the feasibility of implementing and complying with the directives, citing limited opportunities to collaborate with TSA to ensure that industry best practices were incorporated. In September 2004, DHS and DOT signed a memorandum of understanding to improve coordination between the two agencies, and they are developing agreements to address specific rail security issues.

Domestic and foreign passenger rail operators we contacted have taken a range of actions to help secure their systems. We also observed security practices among certain foreign passenger rail systems or their governments that are not currently used by the domestic rail operators we contacted, or by the U.S. government, and which could be considered for use in the United States. For example, some foreign rail operators randomly screen passengers, and some foreign governments maintain centralized clearinghouses on rail security technologies and best practices.



Source: Developed by GAO with photo provided by Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.