



Highlights of [GAO-07-634](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Transportation Security Administration's (TSA) most visible layer of commercial aviation security is the screening of airline passengers at airport checkpoints, where travelers and their carry-on items are screened for explosives and other dangerous items by transportation security officers (TSO). Several revisions made to checkpoint screening procedures have been scrutinized and questioned by the traveling public and Congress in recent years.

For this review, GAO evaluated (1) TSA's decisions to modify passenger screening procedures between April 2005 and December 2005 and in response to the alleged August 2006 liquid explosives terrorist plot, and (2) how TSA monitored TSO compliance with passenger screening procedures. To conduct this work, GAO reviewed TSA documents, interviewed TSA officials and aviation security experts, and visited 25 airports of varying sizes and locations.

## What GAO Recommends

In the March 2007 report that contained sensitive security information, GAO recommended, and the Department of Homeland Security concurred, that TSA develop sound methods to assess whether proposed screening changes would achieve their intended purpose and generate complete documentation on proposed screening changes that are deemed significant.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-634](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-634).

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](mailto:berrickc@gao.gov).

## AVIATION SECURITY

# Risk, Experience, and Customer Concerns Drive Changes to Airline Passenger Screening Procedures, but Evaluation and Documentation of Proposed Changes Could Be Improved

## What GAO Found

Between April 2005 and December 2005, proposed modifications to passenger checkpoint screening standard operating procedures (SOP) were made for a variety of reasons, and while a majority of the proposed modifications—48 of 92—were ultimately implemented at airports, TSA's methods for evaluating and documenting them could be improved. SOP modifications were proposed based on the professional judgment of TSA senior-level officials and program-level staff. TSA considered the daily experiences of airport staff, complaints and concerns raised by the traveling public, and analysis of risks to the aviation system when proposing SOP modifications. TSA also made efforts to balance the impact on security, efficiency, and customer service when deciding which proposed modifications to implement, as in the case of the SOP changes made in response to the alleged August 2006 liquid explosives terrorist plot. In some cases, TSA tested proposed modifications at selected airports to help determine whether the changes would achieve their intended purpose. However, TSA's data collection and analyses could be improved to help TSA determine whether proposed procedures that are operationally tested would achieve their intended purpose. For example, TSA officials decided to allow passengers to carry small scissors and tools onto aircraft based on their review of threat information, which indicated that these items do not pose a high risk to the aviation system. However, TSA did not conduct the necessary analysis of data it collected to assess whether this screening change would free up TSOs to focus on screening for high-risk threats, as intended. TSA officials acknowledged the importance of evaluating whether proposed screening procedures would achieve their intended purpose, but cited difficulties in doing so, including time pressures to implement needed security measures quickly. Finally, TSA's documentation on proposed modifications to screening procedures was not complete. TSA documented the basis—that is, the information, experience, or event that encouraged TSA officials to propose the modifications—for 72 of the 92 proposed modifications. In addition, TSA documented the reasoning behind its decisions for half (26 of 44) of the proposed modifications that were not implemented. Without more complete documentation, TSA may not be able to justify key modifications to passenger screening procedures to Congress and the traveling public.

TSA monitors TSO compliance with passenger checkpoint screening procedures through its performance accountability and standards system and through covert testing. Compliance assessments include quarterly observations of TSOs' ability to perform particular screening functions in the operating environment, quarterly quizzes to assess TSOs' knowledge of procedures, and an annual knowledge and skills assessment. TSA uses covert tests to evaluate, in part, the extent to which TSOs' noncompliance with procedures affects their ability to detect simulated threat items hidden in accessible property or concealed on a person. TSA airport officials have experienced resource challenges in implementing these compliance monitoring methods. TSA headquarters officials stated that they are taking steps to address these challenges.