AVIATION SECURITY

Further Steps Needed to Strengthen the Security of Commercial Airport Perimeters and Access Controls

Why GAO Did This Study

In the 2 years since passage of the Aviation and Transportation Security Act (ATSA), the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has primarily focused its efforts on improving aviation security through enhanced passenger and baggage screening. The act also contained provisions directing TSA to take actions to improve the security of airport perimeters, access controls, and airport workers. GAO was asked to assess TSA's efforts to: (1) evaluate the security of airport perimeters and the controls that limit access into secured airport areas, (2) help airports implement and enhance perimeter security and access controls by providing them funding and technical guidance, and (3) implement measures to reduce the potential security risks posed by airport workers.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that the Secretary of Homeland Security direct TSA's Administrator to develop and provide Congress with a plan for meeting the requirements of the Aviation and Transportation Security Act and taking other actions to improve airport security.

TSA reviewed a draft of this report and generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations. Technical comments were incorporated as appropriate.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-728.

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.

What GAO Found

TSA has begun evaluating the security of airport perimeters and the controls that limit access into secured airport areas. Specifically, TSA is conducting compliance inspections and vulnerability assessments at selected airports. These evaluations—though not complete—have identified perimeter and access control security concerns. While TSA officials acknowledged that conducting these airport security evaluations is essential to identifying additional perimeter and access control security measures and prioritizing their implementation, the agency has not determined how the results will be used to make improvements to the entire commercial airport system.

TSA has helped some airport operators enhance perimeter and access control security by providing funds for security equipment, such as electronic surveillance systems. TSA has also begun efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of security-related technologies, such as biometric identification systems. However, TSA has not begun to gather data on airport operators' historical funding of security projects and current needs to aid the agency in setting funding priorities. Nor has TSA developed a plan for implementing new technologies or balancing the costs and effectiveness of these technologies with the security needs of individual airport operators and the commercial airport system as a whole.

TSA has taken some steps to reduce the potential security risks posed by airport workers. However, TSA had elected not to fully address all related ATSA requirements. In particular, TSA does not require fingerprint-based criminal history checks and security awareness training for all airport workers, as called for in ATSA. Further, TSA has not required airport vendors to develop security programs, another ATSA requirement. TSA said expanding these efforts would require a time-consuming rulemaking process and impose additional costs on airport operators. Finally, although not required by ATSA, TSA has not developed a plan detailing when and how it intends to address these challenges.

Airport Perimeter Access Gate at a Large Commercial Airport

Source: GAO.

United States General Accounting Office