



Highlights of [GAO-04-505T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, resulted in fundamental changes in the way the United States screens airport passengers and their property. One of the most significant changes was the shift from using private screeners to using federal screeners at all but five commercial airports in the United States. These five airports are part of a pilot program, where private screeners perform screening functions. The mission of the Private Screening Pilot Program, as defined by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), is to test the effectiveness of increased operational flexibility at the airport level that contractors may provide. GAO was asked to describe (1) the challenges and limitations of the private screening pilot program, (2) the operational flexibilities TSA has provided to the private screening companies, and (3) the performance of private and federal screeners in detecting threat objects. This testimony is based on our prior and ongoing work on TSA airport passenger and baggage screeners.

## What GAO Recommends

In prior reports, GAO has made recommendations designed to strengthen airport passenger and baggage screening. GAO also has several ongoing reviews related to the issues addressed in this testimony, and will issue separate reports related to these areas at later dates, with additional recommendations as appropriate.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-505T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-505T).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Norman J. Rabkin at (202) 512-8777 or [rabkinn@gao.gov](mailto:rabkinn@gao.gov).

# AVIATION SECURITY

## Private Screening Contractors Have Little Flexibility to Implement Innovative Approaches

### What GAO Found

A key limitation of the private screening pilot program is that it was not established in a way to enable an effective evaluation of the differences in the performance of federal and private screening and the reasons for those differences. TSA provided the screening contractors with little opportunity to demonstrate innovations, achieve efficiencies, and implement initiatives that go beyond the minimum requirements of the Aviation and Transportation Security Act. TSA officials said they had not granted contract officials more flexibility because they wanted to ensure that procedures were standardized, well coordinated, and consistently implemented throughout all airports to achieve consistent security. However, TSA recently requested input from the private screening contractors about the additional flexibilities they would like to implement.

Although TSA has provided private screening contractors with only limited operational flexibility, it has allowed them to implement some airport-specific practices. These practices include screening candidates before they are hired through the assessment centers, hiring baggage handlers in order to utilize baggage screeners more efficiently, and, during the initial hiring, selecting screener supervisors from within their screener workforce rather than relying on the decisions of TSA's hiring contractors. These practices have enabled the private screening contractors to achieve efficiencies that are not currently available at airports with federal screeners.

Little performance data are currently available to compare the performance of private screeners and federal screeners in detecting threat objects. The primary source of available performance data is the results of the covert tests performed by TSA's Office of Internal Affairs and Program Review, in which TSA undercover agents attempt to pass threat objects through screening checkpoints. Although the test results cannot be generalized either to the airports where the tests have been conducted or to airports nationwide, they provide an indicator of screener performance in detecting threat objects and indicate that, in general, private and federal screeners performed similarly. Specifically, the testing identified weaknesses in the ability of both private and federal screeners to detect threat objects. TSA recognized the need to improve screener performance and has taken steps in this direction, including enhancing its training programs.

### Airports Participating in the Pilot Program and Contractors Responsible for Conducting Screening Operations

Airport	Contract screening company
San Francisco International	Covenant Aviation Security
Kansas City International	First Line Transportation Security
Greater Rochester International	McNeil Security
Jackson Hole	Jackson Hole Airport Board
Tupelo	Covenant Aviation Security

Source: TSA.