RAIL SECURITY

Some Actions Taken to Enhance Passenger and Freight Rail Security, but Significant Challenges Remain

Why GAO Did This Study

Passenger and freight rail services are important links in the nation's transportation system. Terrorist attacks on passenger and/or freight rail services have the potential to cause widespread injury, loss of life, and economic disruption. The recent terrorist attack in Spain illustrates that rail systems, like all modes of transportation, are targets for attacks. GAO was asked to summarize the results of its recent reports on transportation security that examined (1) challenges in securing passenger and freight rail systems, (2) actions rail stakeholders have taken to enhance passenger and freight rail systems, and (3) future actions that could further enhance rail security.

What GAO Recommends

In our previous report on transportation security (GAO-03-843), we recommended that the Department of Homeland Security and Transportation use a mechanism, such as a memorandum of agreement, to clarify and delineate TSA's and DOT's roles and responsibilities in transportation security matters. DHS and DOT generally agreed with the report's findings; however, they disagreed with the recommendation. We continue to believe our recommendation has merit and would help address security challenges.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-598T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Peter Guerrero at (202) 512-2834 or guerrerop@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Securing the passenger and freight rail systems are fraught with challenges. Some of these challenges are common to passenger and freight rail systems, such as the funding of security improvements, the interconnectivity of the rail system, and the number of stakeholders involved in rail security. Other challenges are unique to the type of rail system. For example, the open access and high ridership of mass transit systems make them both vulnerable to attack and difficult to secure. Similarly, freight railroads transport millions of tons of hazardous materials each year across the United States, raising concerns about the vulnerability of these shipments to terrorist attack.

Passenger and freight rail stakeholders have taken a number of steps to improve the security of the nation's rail system since September 11, 2001. Although security received attention before September 11, the terrorist attacks elevated the importance and urgency of transportation security for passenger and rail providers. Consequently, passenger and freight rail providers have implemented new security measures or increased the frequency or intensity of existing activities, including performing risk assessments, conducting emergency drills, and developing security plans. The federal government has also acted to enhance rail security. For example, the Federal Transit Administration has provided grants for emergency drills and conducted security assessments at the largest transit agencies, among other things.

Implementation of risk management principles and improved coordination could help enhance rail security. Using risk management principles can help guide federal programs and responses to better prepare against terrorism and other threats and to better direct finite national resources to areas of highest priority. In addition, improved coordination among federal entities could help enhance security efforts across all modes, including passenger and freight rail systems. We reported in June 2003 that the roles and responsibilities of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the Department of Transportation (DOT) in transportation security, including rail security, have yet to be clearly delineated, which creates the potential for duplicating or conflicting efforts as both entities work to enhance security.