



U.S. Security Screeners Must Improve Performance at Airport Checkpoints

A study of security-screening practices at airports in Belgium, Canada, France, Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States said that aptitude, job qualifications, pay and training influence screeners' effectiveness in detecting hazardous items in carry-on baggage.

—
U.S. General Accounting Office

The United States and other countries have a number of safeguards in place to prevent attacks against commercial aircraft. Among the most important of these are the checkpoints at airports where passengers and their carry-on items are screened for dangerous objects, such as guns and explosives.

Although more than a decade has passed since the last bombing of a U.S. airliner — the 1988 explosion on Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, that killed 270 people — U.S. aircraft are still believed to be a target for terrorist attacks.

Because of this threat to commercial aviation, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which is responsible for the safety and security of civil aviation in the United States, requires that various security measures be in place at [U.S.] airports. Over the past 25 years, FAA has directed that air carriers and airports control access to airport buildings, facilities and aircraft; question passengers to better ensure that their baggage and its contents have been solely under the passengers' control; scan the checked baggage of certain passengers; and in some cases, match the checked baggage onboard aircraft with enplaning passengers. Of the various security measures, one of the most crucial is the screening of passengers and their carry-on baggage before the passengers board their flights.



As part of its regulatory oversight of the screening operations, FAA tests screeners' ability to locate test objects placed in carry-on baggage or hidden on an FAA agent's person. Concerns have long existed over [U.S.] screeners' performance in these tests. In 1978, screeners failed to detect 13 percent of the objects during compliance tests, and in 1987, screeners were missing 20 percent of the objects during the same type of test.¹ Since 1997, FAA has designated data on test results as sensitive security information. Nevertheless, FAA acknowledges that screeners' performance in detecting dangerous objects during its testing is not satisfactory.

Concerned about the effectiveness of screening checkpoints and of the efforts to improve them, the [U.S.] Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation and its Subcommittee on Aviation requested that [the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO)] examine the causes of screeners' problems in detecting dangerous objects and the efforts of the FAA to address these problems, and the screening practices of selected [non-U.S.] countries and the potential for using these practices to help improve screeners' performance in the United States. [GAO] conducted [its] work from April 1999 through June 2000 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

[In the United States, GAO] met with representatives of five air carriers, seven security companies, two screening equipment manufacturers, and two aviation industry associations to obtain their perspectives on the performance of screeners and the actions being taken to improve performance. [GAO representatives] visited five large airports — Atlanta [Georgia] Hartsfield International Airport; Dallas/Fort Worth [Texas] International Airport; Los Angeles [California] International Airport; John F. Kennedy International Airport [New York] and Seattle/Tacoma [Washington] International Airport — to meet with screeners and to discuss screening with air carrier [officials] and security company officials.

Aviation terrorism is a concern not only in the United States but also in other countries, some of which have had more attacks than the United States, and virtually all countries conduct preboard screening operations before allowing passengers to board aircraft. In fact, far more incidents of aviation terrorism have occurred in other parts of the world than in the United States. For instance, during the one-year period ending December 1999, 13 hijackings of aircraft occurred; none of these incidents took place in the United States or involved a U.S. airline.

Because of their concern about aviation security, most nations have procedures for screening passengers and their bags before allowing them aboard commercial airliners. GAO examined preboard passenger screening practices in Belgium, Canada, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom — five countries recommended by FAA and industry representatives. In visits to [these] countries, [GAO] found that although passengers are screened there much as they are in the United States, some practices and policies differ. For example, in most of these countries, [GAO] found:

- More extensive qualifications and training for screeners;
- Higher pay for screeners;
- Screening responsibilities assigned to the airport or government; and,
- More stringent checkpoint operations, such as routine “pat down” searches of passengers.

Countries Studied Have More Stringent Hiring Requirements

In each country [GAO] visited, [GAO representatives] met with government [officials] and airport officials to discuss the overall institutional framework for passenger screening; the procedures for conducting screening; the requirements for training and certifying screeners; and the compensation, benefits and career opportunities provided to screeners. [GAO representatives] toured major airports in each of these

countries and observed screening checkpoints in operation. In Canada and the Netherlands, [GAO representatives] also met with screeners to learn about the positive and negative aspects of their jobs. Because of the sensitive nature of security information, [GAO representatives] were unable to obtain data on screeners’ performance from these countries.

Most of the countries [GAO] visited had more stringent requirements for hiring and training individuals to become screeners. [The report’s discussion of U.S. screening practices begins on page 5.]

Most of the countries [GAO] visited had similar education and background-check requirements; however, in some countries, a screener must either be a citizen of the country or have resided in the country for a specific length of time.

Belgium requires screeners to be citizens and to be fluent in both French and Dutch. The Netherlands requires screeners to have resided in the country for at least five years and to be fluent in both Dutch and English. France requires screener candidates to be citizens of a European Union country; because of the close cooperation among police within the European Union, French officials believe this requirement provides assurance that they can obtain adequate background checks. Canada’s requirements are similar to those in the United States. Canada requires screeners to be citizens or permanent residents with valid employment authorization documents, and screeners must be able to read, write and speak either French or English.

The training required to become a screener is more extensive in four of the five countries.

The Netherlands requires candidates for screening positions to train first and become certified as general security officers and then take specialized training to be certified as checkpoint screeners. In the Netherlands, the 40 hours of specialized training for screeners includes classroom work, computer-based training and role-playing. This is followed by two months of on-the-job training and 24 hours of additional training each year for screeners to maintain certification.

In Belgium, the basic training for certification as checkpoint screeners includes 40 hours of training on aviation issues. In addition, Belgium requires training in various aviation security topics, such as operating X-ray machines, ranging from four [hours] to 64 hours.

Canada requires 20 hours of classroom training in addition to 40 hours of on-the-job training. After completing the training, Canadian screeners are certified by the government. Once certified, screeners must pass written [tests] and practical tests every two years to be recertified.

In France, screeners must complete 60 hours of training followed by 20 hours of on-the-job training, coupled with tasks such as checking tickets or doing guard duty. These

assignments give the screening company opportunities to observe and evaluate new staff and provide additional training if necessary. After completing on-the-job training, new screeners must pass tests administered by the French government.

Another major difference between the United States and most of the other countries [GAO] visited is the level of compensation screeners receive. In the European countries [GAO] visited, screeners' pay and benefits are higher.

For example, Belgian officials said screeners are paid the equivalent of about US\$14 to \$15 per hour and receive benefits, such as health care, as required by Belgian law.

In the Netherlands, screeners receive a minimum salary, based on a collective labor agreement, that is equivalent to about \$7.50 per hour, which Dutch screeners said is at least 25 percent higher than what fast-food restaurants pay and is sufficient to support a middle-income lifestyle. In addition, they receive health care [benefits], retirement [benefits] and vacation benefits.

At one screening company in France, screeners earn a starting salary equivalent to about \$5.80 per hour with an extra month salary for staying one year.

In the United Kingdom, screeners earn the equivalent of about \$8 per hour. Governments in [France and the United Kingdom] also provide health benefits.

In Canada, the starting wage for a screener is about \$5.34 per hour more than the starting salary at an airport fast-food restaurant. All Canadian screeners receive health benefits from their provincial governments, and many employers offer additional subsidized health insurance plans. The Canadian government requires that all employers provide paid vacations and paid holidays.

Making Non-airline Organizations Responsible Affects Performance

Most of the five countries [GAO] visited do not make air carriers responsible for screening passengers as the United States does, and so have more centralized screening operations. Most of the countries [GAO] visited assigned the responsibility for screening to the government or to the airport authority, putting one entity in charge of screening for an entire airport. In Belgium, France and the United Kingdom, the airports are responsible for screening.

In Belgium, the airport authority, [formerly] a government entity and now private, is responsible for hiring and managing screeners.

In France, an airport authority can hire one or more security companies approved by the Ministry of the Interior. The police

and customs officials supervise the security companies and their screeners, examining turnover rates and wages, analyzing incident reports and testing screeners.

In the United Kingdom, the airport company itself may contract the screening operations to one or more security companies or choose, as the two largest airports near London have done, to hire screeners directly and manage their work.

In the Netherlands, the government is currently responsible for passenger screening. It employs a security company to conduct the screening operations, and the Dutch Royal Marechaussee — a national police force — oversees the operations. However, the Netherlands is preparing legislation under which the responsibility for implementing checkpoint screening will be transferred to the airport.

In Canada, screening responsibility is vested in the air carriers, just as it is in the United States.

According to officials in some of these countries, assigning the responsibility for screening passengers to organizations other than airlines makes a significant difference. They said that air carriers have economic pressures that airports and governments face to a lesser degree. As a result, they said, airports or governments can provide better training and pay better wages than air carriers can.

According to officials in the United Kingdom, when an airport hires screeners directly, the screeners can be given a range of security duties beyond staffing the checkpoints and have a greater opportunity for career development. British officials noted that the varied duties and career opportunities improve motivation and performance.

Some [non-U.S.] government and airport officials also pointed out that when several air carriers and security companies are handling screening within one airport, as is the case in the United States, responsibility is fragmented, uniformity is lacking and competition among the security companies to be the low bidder for the air carriers' screening business puts downward pressure on screeners' wages, making it difficult to attract and retain good screeners.

Physical Searches of Passengers Differentiate European Screeners

[GAO] observed three differences in procedures that made screening more stringent at airports in the countries visited.

First, to help determine if dangerous items are present, screeners in some countries physically search passengers if they [activate] metal detector alarms. In the United States, screeners use hand-held metal detectors to identify potentially dangerous objects but generally avoid physically touching the passengers.

In contrast, screeners in three countries — Belgium, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom — routinely “pat down” passengers when the alarms on walk-through metal detectors [are activated].

Officials in these countries told [GAO] that if an alarm [is activated] as a passenger walks through a metal detector, screeners are required to physically search the passenger immediately to determine if a dangerous object is present. Officials from these countries said screeners there do not routinely use hand-held metal detectors because, if not used properly, they can fail to detect metal objects.

Dutch officials added that a hand-held metal detector can leave the impression that an item such as a belt buckle has caused the alarm, whereas a weapon could be hidden behind the buckle and not be detected by a screener unless touched.

Additionally, in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, screeners will randomly select passengers to be physically searched, even though they did not set off alarms. The random searches are conducted because nonmetallic objects can pose a substantial threat to the security of an aircraft; the searches may not only turn up specific items but also deter passengers from attempting to carry these items onto an aircraft.

The second difference in checkpoint operations [GAO] observed is that only ticketed passengers are screened and allowed to proceed beyond the checkpoints in all five countries. At most U.S. airports, nonpassengers as well as passengers are allowed through checkpoints and into the secure areas of airports.

Officials from some other countries gave a number of reasons for limiting access to checkpoints. Most significant, limiting access to passengers reduces the number of people entering secure areas and consequently reduces the risk that a dangerous object will be brought onto an aircraft. These officials also noted that limiting the number of people passing through the checkpoints reduces the burden on screeners, allowing them to be more thorough and minimizing screening costs.

The third difference in how checkpoints are operated is the more visible presence of police and military security personnel. At large airports in the United States, a police presence is required to respond to alerts from checkpoints within five minutes. But although uniformed police are stationed in the larger U.S. airport complexes, they are generally not posted at the screening checkpoints.

At large airports in the countries [GAO] visited, police or military personnel are either at the checkpoints or posted visibly nearby.

For example, at Belgium’s main airport, police maintain a constant presence in one of two glass-enclosed rooms directly behind the checkpoints.

In France and the United Kingdom, armed security forces — often carrying automatic weapons — patrol at or near the checkpoints. In the Netherlands, armed security forces are posted at screening checkpoints for flights that are deemed high risk — a category that includes flights to the United States.

Turnover Rates Affect Average Screener’s Level of Experience

While officials were reluctant to give [GAO] detailed data on turnover rates for screeners, they did say that the rates were significantly lower there than in the United States. According to officials from these countries, their annual screener turnover rates were about 50 percent or less.

The lowest turnover rate was in Belgium, where officials at the country’s main airport said that it was less than 4 percent [in 1999].

Additionally, screeners in these countries may perform better in detecting dangerous objects. Because of security concerns, foreign country officials would not provide performance data during [GAO] visits. Consequently, little information is available to compare the effectiveness of the five countries’ screening operations with those in the United States. However, [GAO representatives] did find that in 1998, FAA and one of the countries [GAO] visited jointly tested screeners’ performance using the same objects and procedures at one or more airports in each country. In these tests, the detection rate for screeners in the other country was more than twice as high as the rate for screeners in the United States.

FAA has recognized that other countries have different screening practices that may lead to better performance by screeners. In its 1999 proposed rule for the certification of screening companies, FAA noted that experience in other countries seems to indicate that higher compensation and more training may result in lower turnover rates and more effective performance.

At this time, FAA is not considering any changes in U.S. screening practices based on the experiences of other countries. FAA looked at one of the differences [GAO] identified — the assignment of responsibility for conducting screening operations — and considered shifting it away from air carriers. However, FAA concluded in a 1999 report to the [U.S.] Congress that there was a lack of consensus in the civil aviation community on any changes in the current system of shared security responsibilities, and therefore, no change should be made.

FAA officials noted that some of the screening practices of other countries reflect cultural and other differences between these countries and the United States. In their view, such practices would not be acceptable in [the United States]. They pointed, in particular, to the routine and frequent patting down of passengers, which they believe the American public would not tolerate. The FAA officials said that protecting an

individual's civil liberties and taking into account the American public's low tolerance for what may be perceived as invasions of privacy are high priorities when considering checkpoint procedures and equipment. They added that there are fewer airports and screeners in these countries than there are in the United States. However, they provided no information on how these factors affect screeners' performance and turnover, or on how they influence human factors concerns.

Studies Over 20 Years Identify Same U.S. Screener Problems

In 1973, to counteract the then-growing number of aircraft hijackings, FAA directed that all passengers be screened, along with their carry-on baggage, before they board an aircraft. Since that time, all passengers have been screened at airport checkpoints, and today, [screeners] check over 2 million individuals and their bags each day for weapons, explosives and other dangerous articles that could pose a threat to the safety of an aircraft and those aboard it. At all commercial airports in the United States, screeners:

- Examine carry-on baggage with X-ray machines to locate any dangerous objects;
- Scan passengers with metal detectors to identify any hidden metallic objects; and,
- Conduct physical searches of items, including those that cannot be scanned by X-ray machines — such as baby carriers or lead-shielded containers — or bags that have been X-rayed and contain unidentifiable objects that could be a threat.

In addition to the routine checkpoint process used for screening every passenger, screeners select carry-on bags at random and search them or use explosive-detection equipment to determine if traces of explosives are present on the baggage.² After passing through a checkpoint, a person can move about freely in the airport's public secured areas.

Each year, the [U.S.] screeners detect thousands of dangerous objects that individuals intentionally or inadvertently attempt to carry through checkpoints. From 1990 through 1999, screeners located nearly 23,000 firearms and numerous explosive devices, resulting in over 9,400 arrests. Table 1 shows the number of firearms and explosive devices detected each year.

Among other things, [FAA] standards specify that screeners possess basic aptitudes and physical abilities, including color perception, visual [acuity] and aural acuity, physical coordination, and motor skills; know how to read, write and speak English; and complete 12 hours of classroom training and 40 hours of on-the-job training. Screeners do not need to be U.S. citizens or resident aliens, but if they are not, they

**Table 1
Firearms and Explosive Devices
Detected by U.S. Airport Screeners
1990–1999**

| Year | Number of Firearms Detected | Number of Explosive Devices Detected* |
|--------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1990 | 2,853 | 15 |
| 1991 | 1,919 | 94 |
| 1992 | 2,608 | 167 |
| 1993 | 2,798 | 251 |
| 1994 | 2,994 | 505 |
| 1995 | 2,390 | 631 |
| 1996 | 2,155 | 353 |
| 1997 | 2,067 | 2,764 |
| 1998 | 1,515 | N/A |
| 1999 | 1,570 | N/A |
| Total | 22,869 | 4,780 |

*The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) believes that the data for explosive devices may be misleading because these items have not been reported consistently. The 1997 data are particularly unreliable because they include mace or pepper-spray canisters, fireworks, flares and other items that, while dangerous on an aircraft, likely would not be used to hijack or damage an airplane. Because of the inconsistencies and irregularities in the data reported by airports, FAA no longer reports these data.

N/A = Not available

Source: U.S. General Accounting Office

must have an authorization from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service to work in the United States. Screeners are required to have completed high school, have an equivalency degree or have an adequate combination of education and experience.

Air carriers are responsible for conducting screening operations that meet FAA's requirements. Some air carriers use their own employees to operate screening checkpoints. Most, however, hire independent security firms to do the screening. Currently, almost 100 security companies, employing an estimated 18,000 screeners, are operating at U.S. airports. FAA conducts [compliance] tests without notice, using a standard set of test objects, such as guns, or other objects called improvised explosive devices, that are more difficult to detect.³ FAA special agents pose as passengers and attempt to get weapons and other dangerous objects through checkpoints by concealing the items either in carry-on baggage or on their own bodies. Any time a screener fails to detect a standard test object or follow the approved procedures during its tests, FAA can issue a violation to the air carrier responsible for the checkpoint and assess a fine of up to \$11,000. FAA regards improvised explosive devices as a tool for training screeners to detect devices that mimic those used by terrorists and does not impose any fines if screeners fail to detect them.

Long-standing problems with U.S. screeners' performance are attributable to a number of causes. Foremost among these is the rapid turnover of screeners. Because turnover occurs so often, few experienced screeners staff the checkpoints. Turnover was cited as a concern in studies as early as 1979. The studies have found that the high turnover rate means that checkpoints are rarely staffed by screeners with much experience. For instance, one study found that about 90 percent of all screeners at any given checkpoint had less than six months' experience.⁴ At one [U.S.] airport [GAO] visited, [GAO representatives] found that, during a three-month period in 1999, 114 of the 167 screeners (68 percent) hired had quit their jobs. Furthermore, of the 993 screeners trained at this airport over about a one-year period, only 142 (14 percent) were still employed at the end of that year.

Not only has turnover been a historical problem, but it is worse today than it was in the past. In 1987, [GAO] reported that turnover among screeners at some airports was about 100 percent in a 12-month period;⁵ by 1994, FAA was reporting that the turnover at some airports was 100 percent in a 10-month period.⁶ For the 12 months from May 1998 through April 1999, turnover averaged 126 percent among screeners at 19 large airports, according to data the airports reported to FAA. Five of the airports reported turnover of 200 percent or more, with one reporting turnover of 416 percent.

Both FAA and the aviation industry attribute the high turnover to the low wages screeners receive, the minimal benefits and the daily stress of the job. [GAO] found that some of the screening companies at many of the nation's largest airports paid screeners a starting salary of \$6 an hour or less, and at some airports, the starting salary was the minimum wage — \$5.15 an hour. It is not unusual for the starting wages at airport fast-food restaurants to be higher than the wages screeners receive. For instance, at one airport GAO visited, screeners' wages started as low as \$6.25 an hour, whereas the starting wage at one of the airport's fast-food restaurants was \$7 an hour.

By Its Nature, Screening Duty Involves Distractions, Monotony

Screening duties require repetitive tasks as well as intense monitoring for the very rare moment when a dangerous object may be observed. Too little attention has been given to factors such as individuals' aptitudes for effectively performing screening duties, the sufficiency of the training provided to screeners and how well they comprehend it, and the monotony of the job and the distractions that reduce screeners' vigilance.

As a result, [U.S.] screeners are being placed on the job without having the abilities or knowledge required to perform the work effectively. Such screeners then find their duties tedious and unstimulating. [Problems include] inattention to "human factors" issues, such as the repetitive tasks and stress involved ... in spotting concealed objects that may be dangerous.

Concerns have long existed over [U.S.] screeners' ability to detect weapons and other dangerous objects. In 1978, FAA's tests indicated that 13 percent of the test objects concealed in carry-on bags passed through X-ray examination without being detected — a rate that was considered "significant and alarming" by both FAA and the airline industry at that time.

An FAA-industry task force in 1979 attributed this level of missed objects to personnel factors such as high employee turnover, low pay and inadequate training. In two 1987 reports, [GAO] pointed out that about 20 percent of test objects were still not being identified during the screening process, in large part because of the same personnel factors — turnover, pay and training. According to additional studies conducted in the mid-1990s to late 1990s by FAA, the [U.S.] National Research Council and university researchers, concerns [have continued] about screeners' pay, turnover and training, and the [influence] of these factors on screeners' performance. Moreover, some of these studies indicated that screeners' poor performance was a principal weakness of the passenger-screening system.

FAA has undertaken several separate initiatives that are designed to address the rapid turnover and human factors problems affecting screeners and thus improve their performance.

First, FAA is developing standardized selection tests to help screening companies identify applicants who have natural aptitudes for checkpoint screening tasks. The selection tests will assess applicants' spatial memory and visual perception, among other things. After validating one or more selection tests, FAA will offer them to air carriers and screening companies for their use.

Second, to improve the quality and consistency of screeners' training, FAA has been deploying computer-based training systems at [U.S.] airports. These systems instruct trainees in all aspects of checkpoint screening, including how to interpret X-ray images of carry-on baggage and how to screen passengers. An FAA study determined that screeners who had computer-based training detected dangerous objects more accurately than screeners who had traditional classroom instruction.

Third, FAA is developing three [computer-based] tests to measure screeners' mastery of critical job elements. Screeners will be required to take a readiness test after their initial training and before they begin on-the-job training, a training test after they complete 40 hours of on-the-job training, and a review test after they complete required recurrent training. The agency is developing specific requirements and guidelines for the tests, but it will not require them until it begins certifying screening companies in 2002.

To help screeners remain alert, train them to become more adept at detecting harder-to-spot objects such as improvised

explosive devices, and continuously measure their performance, FAA is deploying a threat-image projection system. This automated system is an enhancement to the X-ray machines used at checkpoints.

As checkpoint personnel routinely scan passengers' carry-on bags, the system occasionally projects images of dangerous objects, including guns and explosives, on the X-ray machines' screens. Screeners are expected to identify the generated images as dangerous objects. The system records the screeners' responses to the projected images, providing a measure of their performance while keeping them more alert.

The data from the system can also be used to tailor recurrent training to meet individual screeners' needs. In addition, the system's data are critical to FAA's efforts to establish the performance standards that screening companies will be expected to meet in order to be certified.

Deployment of the threat-image projection system, however, is behind schedule. As of March 2000, FAA had deployed 30 of these machines at six large airports for testing, and beginning in mid-2000, [FAA began] purchasing and deploying another 1,380 such machines. FAA expects to have the system in place at the largest airports by the end of fiscal year 2001 and at all airports by the end of fiscal 2003.

As currently proposed, [FAA's] certification program [for screening companies] will establish performance standards that the screening companies will have to meet to earn and retain certification; require that all screeners pass computer-based tests after initial [training], on-the-job [training] and recurrent training; and require that all air carriers have the threat-image projection system on the X-ray machines at their checkpoints so that screeners' performance can be measured to ensure that FAA's standards are met.

FAA plans to issue a regulation establishing the certification program by May 2001.

FAA believes these efforts will improve the quality of the personnel hired for screening positions, provide them with better training, and give the screening companies greater incentive to retain their best screeners longer in order to meet FAA's new performance standards for certification. Most of these efforts, however, are behind schedule. For example, FAA is two years behind schedule in issuing its regulation requiring the certification of screening companies.

[GAO is] encouraged that FAA is taking actions to improve the management of its screener initiatives. These actions — adopting performance goals to measure its progress, developing and implementing an integrated plan to better focus and manage its checkpoint-screening improvement initiatives, and consolidating these initiatives under a single program manager — will be crucial to guiding the implementation of FAA's initiatives.

To better implement FAA's efforts to improve screeners' performance and to provide a valid basis for evaluating FAA's progress in achieving its performance goals for screeners, [GAO recommended] that the [U.S.] secretary of transportation direct the [FAA] administrator to take the following actions:

- Require that FAA's integrated checkpoint-screening management plan, which ties together the various initiatives for improving screeners' performance, be promptly completed, implemented, continuously monitored and updated, and evaluated for effectiveness; [and,]
- For reporting under the Government Performance and Results Act, establish separate goals for the detection of standard test objects and improvised explosive devices concealed in carry-on baggage.

FAA pointed out that the plan is now essentially complete except for cost data, and that these data [were] expected to be completed by the end of 2000. However, [FAA] added that the plan is an iterative working document that changes as projects and activities are added or finished, and in that sense, the plan, when completed, will never be finalized.

FAA commented that, although it agreed with the intent of the [second] recommendation, it nevertheless believes that it is reasonable to aggregate the test results for assessments under the Results Act, since the [U.S.] Department of Transportation, as the reporting agency, tries to limit the number of goals established under the act.

In light of the limited data on the [influence] of other countries' screening practices on screeners' turnover and performance, FAA's ongoing efforts to improve screeners' performance and legislation proposed to increase screeners' training requirements, [GAO does] not believe it is necessary to add or revise other screening practices at this time. However, if these initiatives do not bring about satisfactory improvements or if progress is too slow, it may be necessary to consider pursuing some of the strategies and practices other countries use to operate screening checkpoints. The root causes of screeners' problems in [the United States] — frequent turnover and inadequate attention to human factors concerns such as training — do not appear to be as prevalent in some other countries.

GAO provided a draft of this report to the [U.S.] Department of Transportation for its review and comment. GAO met with FAA officials, who were responding for the Department of Transportation. These officials generally agreed with the facts presented in the draft report and acknowledged that screeners' performance needs to improve. The officials agreed with the recommendation to promptly complete the agency's integrated checkpoint-screening management plan. However, they disagreed with the need to revise FAA's goal for reporting improvements in screeners' performance under the Results Act.◆

[Editorial note: The U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) report "Aviation Security: Long-Standing Problems Impair Airport Screeners' Performance," GAO/RCED-00-75, was published in June 2000, and was edited by FSF staff as noted. The 46-page report contains tables and photographs. A related GAO report containing security-sensitive data about the performance of U.S. airport screeners since 1997 — "Aviation Security: Screeners Continue to Have Difficulty Detecting Dangerous Objects," GAO/RCED-00-159, June 2000 — was not released publicly. GAO is an independent and nonpartisan federal agency that studies for the U.S. Congress the programs and expenditures of the federal government. GAO evaluates federal programs, audits federal expenditures, issues legal opinions, recommends actions and advises members of Congress and the heads of executive agencies, including the U.S. Department of Transportation.]

Notes and References

1. U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO). "Aviation Security: FAA Preboard Passenger Screening Test Results." GAO/RCED-87-125FS. April 30, 1987. "Aviation Security: FAA Needs Preboard Passenger Screening Performance Standards." GAO/RCED-87-182. July 24, 1987.
2. The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) had deployed this equipment, referred to as explosive trace detectors, to 84 domestic airports as of April 2000, and it plans deployments to additional airports.
3. Improvised explosive devices consist of simulated explosives and various modular, off-the-shelf components.
4. FAA. "Development of Decision-centered Interventions for Airport Security Checkpoints." DOT/FAA/CT-94/27. August 1994. FAA. "Review of the Literature Related to Screening Airline Passenger Baggage." DOT/FAA/CT/94/108. October 1994.
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