

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-76](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Airlines recently came under scrutiny for their treatment of passengers—including a high-profile incident in which a passenger was forcibly removed from an overbooked flight. However, airlines maintain that service has improved, citing better on-time performance and lower airfares. DOT has the authority to issue and enforce certain consumer protection requirements. DOT also educates passengers about their rights.

GAO was asked to examine airline consumer protection issues. This report examines, among other issues, (1) trends in DOT's data on airline service; (2) the effectiveness of DOT's compliance efforts; and (3) the extent to which DOT's passenger education efforts align with key practices for consumer outreach. GAO reviewed DOT data on airline service and analyzed passenger complaint data for the 12 largest domestic airlines from 2008 through 2017; reviewed relevant documents and data on DOT's compliance program; assessed DOT's educational efforts against key practices for successful consumer outreach; and interviewed DOT officials. GAO interviewed or obtained written information from 11 of the 12 airlines.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that DOT: develop performance measures for compliance activities, improve its procedures for coding airline passengers' complaints, and improve how passenger education aligns with GAO's key practices. DOT concurred with our recommendations and provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-19-76](#). For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (202) 512-2834 or vonaha@gao.gov.

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AIRLINE CONSUMER PROTECTIONS

Additional Actions Could Enhance DOT's Compliance and Education Efforts

What GAO Found

The Department of Transportation's (DOT) data offered mixed information on whether airlines' service improved from 2008 through 2017. While DOT's operational data on rates of late flights, denied boardings, and mishandled baggage generally suggested improvement, the rate of passenger complaints received by DOT increased about 10 percent—from about 1.1 complaints per 100,000 passengers to 1.2 complaints per 100,000 passengers.

DOT conducts five key activities to ensure airlines' compliance with consumer protection requirements (see table). However, GAO found that DOT lacked performance measures to help it evaluate some of these activities and that it could improve its procedures (i.e., guidance documents and training materials), that analysts use to code passenger complaints.

- **Performance measures:** DOT has established objectives for each of its five key compliance activities that state what it seeks to achieve; however, DOT lacks performance measures for three objectives. For example, DOT lacks a performance measure for conducting inspections of airlines' compliance with consumer protection requirements at airlines' headquarters and at airports. As a result, DOT is missing opportunities to capture critical information about airlines' compliance with consumer protection requirements.
- **Procedures:** DOT has procedures to help analysts code passenger complaints and identify potential consumer protection violations. GAO found that DOT's guidance for coding passenger complaints did not consistently include definitions or examples that illustrate appropriate use or help analysts select among the various complaint categories. Additional procedures would help DOT ensure that complaints are consistently coded and that potential violations are properly identified.

Department of Transportation's (DOT) 2017 Key Compliance Activities

Providing compliance assistance to airlines	DOT staff issued guidance and consulted with airlines to promote an understanding of consumer protection requirements.
Processing passenger complaints	Staff received and responded to more than 18,000 passenger complaints and elevated potential consumer protection violations.
Inspecting airlines	Staff conducted inspections in 2017 of U.S. airlines' compliance with certain consumer protection requirements at 18 airports.
Investigating potential violations	Staff initiated 287 investigations of potential consumer protection violations in 2017.
Taking enforcement action	DOT issued 58 warning letters and 13 consent orders for consumer protection violations found in investigations it started in 2017.

Source: GAO analysis of DOT documents and data extracted in August 2018. | [GAO-19-76](#)

GAO found that while DOT has taken steps to educate passengers on their rights, its efforts did not fully align with four of nine key practices GAO previously identified for conducting consumer education. For example, while DOT has defined the goals and objectives of its outreach efforts, it has not used budget information to prioritize efforts or established performance measures to assess the results. DOT has also not solicited input directly from passengers to understand what they know about their rights. Taking such actions would provide DOT with greater assurance that its efforts are meeting passengers' needs.