

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-275](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Aviation workers using their access privileges to exploit vulnerabilities and potentially cause harm at the nation's airports is known as an "insider threat." TSA, airport operators, and air carriers share the responsibility to mitigate all insider threats at airports. In October 2019, TSA estimated there are about 1.8 million aviation workers at the nation's airports.

GAO was asked to review TSA's and aviation stakeholders' efforts to mitigate insider threats at airports. This report (1) discusses the efforts that TSA, airport operators, and air carriers have taken to help mitigate insider threats at airports and (2) evaluates the extent to which TSA's Insider Threat Program is guided by a strategic plan and has performance goals.

GAO reviewed TSA guidance; analyzed TSA data from a questionnaire sent to a representative sample of airport operators; and obtained information from TSA officials, officials from selected larger U.S.-based air carriers, and a nongeneralizable sample of seven airport operators, selected, in part, based on the number of aircraft take-offs and landings.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA develop and implement a strategic plan that has strategic goals and objectives, and develop performance goals to assess progress achieving objectives in the strategic plan. TSA agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-20-275](#). For more information, contact Triana McNeil at (202) 512-8777 or McNeilT@gao.gov.

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AVIATION SECURITY

TSA Could Strengthen Its Insider Threat Program by Developing a Strategic Plan and Performance Goals

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA), airport operators, and air carriers mitigate insider threats through a variety of efforts. TSA's Insider Threat Program comprises multiple TSA offices with ongoing insider threat mitigation activities, including long-standing requirements addressing access controls and background checks, and compliance inspections. TSA also initiated activities more recently, such as implementing TSA-led, randomized worker screenings in 2018. Airport and air carrier officials implement security measures in accordance with TSA-approved programs and may implement additional measures to further mitigate threats. For example, many airport operators reported using sophisticated access control technologies (e.g. fingerprint readers). Additionally, some air carriers reported conducting more rigorous background checks prior to issuing identification credentials to employees.

Examples of Methods to Mitigate Insider Threats at U.S. Airports



Source: GAO presentation of Transportation Security Administration information. | GAO-20-275

TSA's Insider Threat Program is not guided by a strategic plan with strategic goals and objectives nor does it have performance goals.

- TSA does not have an updated strategic plan that reflects the Program's current status. TSA officials said that the plan was not updated due to turnover of key senior leadership. As of January 2020, TSA officials said they were developing a roadmap that could serve as a new strategic plan for the Program. However, officials had not finalized the contents and were uncertain when it would be completed and implemented. Developing and implementing a strategic plan will help guide TSA's ongoing efforts and coordinate TSA's agency-wide approach.
- TSA has not defined performance goals with targets and timeframes to assess progress achieving the Program's mission. Without a strategic plan and performance goals, it is difficult for TSA to determine if its approach is working and progress is being made toward deterring, detecting, and mitigating insider threats to the aviation sector.