



Highlights of [GAO-10-763](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

To enhance aviation security, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) began initial testing in October 2003 of its Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques (SPOT) program. Behavior Detection Officers (BDO) carry out SPOT's mission to identify persons who pose a risk to aviation security by focusing on behavioral and appearance indicators. GAO was asked to review the SPOT program. GAO analyzed (1) the extent to which TSA validated the SPOT program before deployment, (2) implementation challenges, and (3) the extent to which TSA measures SPOT's effect on aviation security. GAO analyzed TSA documents, such as strategic plans and operating procedures; interviewed agency personnel and subject matter experts; and visited 15 SPOT airports, among other things. Although the results from these visits are not generalizable, they provided insights into SPOT operations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA, among other things, use an independent panel of experts to assist in validating SPOT, enhance SPOT data collection and analysis, fully utilize TSA resources to identify possible threats, and establish a plan to develop more outcome-oriented measures for SPOT. DHS reviewed a draft of this report and generally concurred with our recommendations although its plans do not fully address one of our recommendations.

View [GAO-10-763](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Stephen M. Lord at (202) 512-4379 or lords@gao.gov.

AVIATION SECURITY

Efforts to Validate TSA's Passenger Screening Behavior Detection Program Underway, but Opportunities Exist to Strengthen Validation and Address Operational Challenges

What GAO Found

Although the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is in the process of validating some aspects of the SPOT program, TSA deployed SPOT nationwide without first validating the scientific basis for identifying suspicious passengers in an airport environment. A scientific consensus does not exist on whether behavior detection principles can be reliably used for counterterrorism purposes, according to the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. According to TSA, no other large-scale security screening program based on behavioral indicators has ever been rigorously scientifically validated. DHS plans to review aspects of SPOT, such as whether the program is more effective at identifying threats than random screening. Nonetheless, DHS's current plan to assess SPOT is not designed to fully validate whether behavior detection can be used to reliably identify individuals in an airport environment who pose a security risk. For example, factors such as the length of time BDOs can observe passengers without becoming fatigued are not part of the plan and could provide additional information on the extent to which SPOT can be effectively implemented. Prior GAO work has found that independent expert review panels can provide comprehensive, objective reviews of complex issues. Use of such a panel to review DHS's methodology could help ensure a rigorous, scientific validation of SPOT, helping provide more assurance that SPOT is fulfilling its mission to strengthen aviation security.

TSA is experiencing implementation challenges, including not fully utilizing the resources it has available to systematically collect and analyze the information obtained by BDOs on passengers who may pose a threat to the aviation system. TSA's Transportation System Operations Center has the resources to investigate aviation threats but generally does not check all law enforcement and intelligence databases available to it to identify persons referred by BDOs. Utilizing existing resources would enhance TSA's ability to quickly verify passenger identity and could help TSA to more reliably "connect the dots." Further, most BDOs lack a mechanism to input data on suspicious passengers into a database used by TSA analysts and also lack a means to obtain information from the Transportation System Operations Center on a timely basis. TSA states that it is in the process of providing input capabilities, but does not have a time frame for when this will occur at all SPOT airports. Providing BDOs, or other TSA personnel, with these capabilities could help TSA "connect the dots" to identify potential threats.

Although TSA has some performance measures related to SPOT, it lacks outcome-oriented measures to evaluate the program's progress toward reaching its goals. Establishing a plan to develop these measures could better position TSA to determine if SPOT is contributing to TSA's strategic goals for aviation security. TSA is planning to enhance its evaluation capabilities in 2010 to more readily assess the program's effectiveness by conducting statistical analysis of data related to SPOT referrals to law enforcement and associated arrests.