



Highlights of [GAO-11-461T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The attempted passenger aircraft bombing of Northwest flight 253 on December 25, 2009, provided a vivid reminder that the civil aviation system remains an attractive terrorist target. To enhance aviation security, in October 2003 the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Transportation Security Administration (TSA) began testing of its Screening of Passengers by Observation Techniques (SPOT) program to identify persons who may pose a risk to aviation security. The SPOT program utilizes behavior observation and analysis techniques to identify potentially high-risk passengers. This testimony provides information on (1) the extent to which TSA has validated the scientific basis for SPOT and (2) other operational challenges. This statement is based on a prior report GAO issued in May 2010 on SPOT, including selected updates made in March 2011. For the updates, GAO reviewed documentation on TSA's progress in implementing the report's recommendations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO has made recommendations in prior work to strengthen TSA's SPOT program. TSA generally concurred with the recommendations and has actions under way to address them. GAO provided the updated information to TSA. TSA had no comment.

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AVIATION SECURITY

TSA Is Taking Steps to Validate the Science Underlying Its Passenger Behavior Detection Program, but Efforts May Not Be Comprehensive

What GAO Found

As GAO reported in May 2010, TSA deployed its behavior detection program nationwide before first determining whether there was a scientifically valid basis for the program. According to TSA, the program was deployed before a scientific validation of the program was completed in response to the need to address potential security threats. However, a scientific consensus does not exist on whether behavior detection principles can be reliably used for counterterrorism purposes, according to a 2008 report of the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. DHS is conducting a study on the scientific basis of SPOT. Thus, in May 2010, GAO recommended that DHS convene an independent panel of experts to review the methodology of its study. DHS concurred and stated that it is convening an independent panel to review its current efforts to help validate the scientific basis for the program, which is expected to complete its work by early April 2011. Nonetheless, DHS's study 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 behavior detection officers (BDO) 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. The results of a panel to review DHS's methodology could help ensure a rigorous, scientific validation of SPOT.

As GAO previously reported, TSA experienced SPOT operational challenges, including not systematically collecting and analyzing information obtained by BDOs on passengers who may pose a threat to the aviation system. Better utilizing existing resources would enhance TSA's ability to quickly verify passenger identity and could help TSA to more reliably "connect the dots" with regard to persons who pose a threat. Thus, GAO recommended that TSA clarify BDO guidance for inputting information into the database used to track suspicious activities, and develop a schedule to expand access to this database across all SPOT airports. TSA agreed and in March 2011 stated that it has revised the SPOT standard operating procedures on how BDOs are to input data into the database used to report suspicious activities. TSA plans to implement these revised procedures in April 2011. TSA also reported that all SPOT airports have access to this database as of March 2011. In addition, GAO reported that individuals allegedly involved in six terrorist plots transited SPOT airports. GAO recommended in May 2010 that TSA study the feasibility of using airport video recordings of the behaviors exhibited by persons transiting airport checkpoints who were later charged with or pleaded guilty to terrorism-related offenses. GAO reported that such recordings could provide insights about behaviors that may be common among terrorists or could demonstrate that terrorists do not generally display any identifying behaviors. TSA agreed that studying airport videos could be a useful tool in understanding terrorist behaviors in the airport environment and in March 2011 reported that it is exploring ways to better utilize such recordings.