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GENERAL AVIATION

Security Assessments at Selected Airports

Why GAO Did This Study

General aviation accounts for three-quarters of U.S. air traffic, from small propeller planes to large jets, operating among nearly 19,000 airports. While most security operations are left to private airport operators, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), part of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), provides guidance on threats and vulnerabilities. In 2004, TSA issued suggested security enhancements that airports could implement voluntarily. Unlike commercial airports, in most cases general aviation airports are not required to implement specific security measures. GAO was asked to perform onsite assessments at selected airports with general aviation operations to determine what physical security measures they have to prevent unauthorized access.

With advance notice, GAO investigators overtly visited a nonrepresentative selection of 13 airports, based on TSA-determined risk factors. Three of the airports also serve commercial aviation and are therefore subject to TSA security regulations. Using TSA's voluntary recommendations and GAO investigators' security expertise, GAO determined whether certain security measures were in place. GAO also requested documentation of incidents of unauthorized access. Results of GAO's assessments cannot be projected to all general aviation airports and are not meant to imply that the airports failed to implement required security measures.

What GAO Found

The 13 airports GAO visited had multiple security measures in place to protect against unauthorized access, although the specific measures and potential vulnerabilities varied across the airports. The 3 airports also supporting commercial aviation had generally implemented all the security measures GAO assessed, whereas GAO identified potential vulnerabilities at most of the 10 general aviation airports that could allow unauthorized access to aircraft or airport grounds, facilities, or equipment. For example, 12 of the 13 airports had perimeter fencing or natural barriers as suggested by TSA; but at 6 of the airports fencing was partially bordered by bushes or trees or located next to a parking lot, which can obstruct surveillance or allow someone to scale or topple the fence. GAO found that none of the 10 general aviation airports had lighting along their perimeters. Perimeter lighting provides both a real and psychological deterrent, and allows security personnel to maintain visual assessment during darkness. However, officials at several airports stated that neighborhood street lights provided perimeter lighting, and all 13 airports had lighting around their hangars. The 10 general aviation airports' use of intrusion monitoring varied, with closed-circuit TV (CCTV) cameras and onsite law enforcement being more prevalent than an intrusion detection system, which can consist of multiple monitors including building alarms and CCTV. TSA guidance states that such systems can reduce or replace the need for physical security personnel to patrol an entire facility or perimeter.

Selected Security Measures in Place at 13 Airports

Security measure	General aviation airports (10)			Commercial and general aviation airports (3)		
	Yes	Partial	No	Yes	Partial	No
Perimeter fencing or natural barrier	4	5	1	2	1	0
Perimeter lighting	0	0	10	3	0	0
Lighting around hangars	10	0	0	3	0	0
CCTV cameras	6	3	1	3	0	0
On-site law enforcement or security	4	3	3	3	0	0
Intrusion detection system	0	1	9	3	0	0

Source: GAO.

According to airport officials, several incidents of unauthorized access have occurred within approximately the past 10 years at three of the airports, though they were unable to provide documentation in all cases. Three incidents did not involve access to aircraft, but rather to airport grounds. In separate incidents, two airplanes were stolen or taken from one airport but later recovered. Airport officials informed GAO that they took corrective actions in response to these incidents as appropriate.

DHS generally concurred with GAO's findings and indicated that TSA will work in partnership with the general aviation community to address vulnerabilities. DHS also noted that a lack of funding will be a challenge for most airports. GAO shared its findings with officials at the 13 airports it visited and incorporated their comments as appropriate.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**