

Why GAO Did This Study

Within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) manages several credentialing programs, which include background checking (known as Security Threat Assessments) and issuing credentials to transportation workers requiring unescorted access to the nation's transportation facilities. The number of TSA programs and their potential for redundancy with state and local government programs has raised questions about these credentialing programs. In response to a mandate in the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2010, GAO examined TSA credentialing programs to identify (1) the roles and responsibilities of federal and nonfederal government entities related to TSA's transportation worker credentialing programs and how they compare, and (2) any key challenges TSA faced in ensuring the effectiveness of its credentialing programs. GAO reviewed program documentation, such as program processes, and conducted structured interviews with selected airports, port authorities, and state agencies. GAO selected nonfederal government entities based on volume of passengers, truckers, and cargo.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that (1) TSA and the FBI conduct a joint risk assessment of TSA's access to criminal history records, (2) TSA assess costs and benefits of using state-provided criminal history information, and (3) TSA develop a workforce staffing plan to address its growing Adjudication Center workload.

DHS and DOJ concurred with GAO's recommendations.

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TRANSPORTATION SECURITY

Actions Needed to Address Limitations in TSA's Transportation Worker Security Threat Assessments and Growing Workload

What GAO Found

Nonfederal government entities have varying roles and responsibilities under three TSA transportation worker credentialing programs we reviewed—the Transportation Worker Identification Credential program (TWIC) for maritime workers; the Hazardous Materials Endorsement program (HME) for truckers seeking a commercial drivers license endorsement to carry hazardous materials; and the Aviation Workers program for airport workers. TSA administers the TWIC credentialing process, with no role for maritime port facility operators outside of verifying issued credentials. Under HME, state licensing agencies issue endorsements based on whether TSA reports favorable background checking results. In contrast, under the Aviation Workers program, TSA and airports share responsibility for the vetting process for airport workers, with airports responsible for enrolling applicants, adjudicating criminal history results TSA provides, and issuing, and if necessary, revoking airport badges. Eleven of 17 selected maritime ports—including 4 of the top 10 largest ports—reported implementing additional credentialing requirements to those under TSA regulations, which generally included requirements for applicants to obtain and present local port identification—in addition to a TWIC—to gain unescorted access. At three of these ports, local agencies conducted additional criminal history checks. In addition, 4 of 6 selected state licensing agencies responsible for issuing commercial drivers licenses were conducting additional criminal history checks on HME applicants. Some programs included applicant fees which added to the costs already incurred by applicants in obtaining TSA credentials. However, port officials reported their programs provided additional benefits over TSA's programs. The state and local credentialing programs we reviewed complemented the existing credentialing programs administered by TSA.

TSA faces challenges in ensuring it has the necessary information and appropriate staffing to effectively conduct Security Threat Assessments for applicants to its transportation worker credentialing programs. First, in general, the level of access that TSA credentialing programs receive to Department of Justice (DOJ) Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) criminal history records is the level of access accorded for noncriminal justice purposes (e.g., equal to that of a private company doing an employment check on a new applicant, according to TSA) which limits TSA in accessing certain criminal history data related to charges and convictions. While TSA is seeking criminal justice type access to FBI systems, the FBI reports that it is legally unable to provide this access. The FBI and TSA are collaborating on options, but have not identified the extent to which a potential security risk may exist under the current process, and the costs and benefits of pursuing alternatives to provide additional access. Second, TSA officials reported the agency was not reviewing some state-provided criminal history for HME applicants because TSA did not have a mechanism to efficiently capture the data in its case system. Identifying a solution may help TSA better identify HME applicants posing security threats. Third, the TSA Adjudication Center relies on contractors for adjudicating applicant cases, and contractor turnover has affected the agency's ability to meet its growing workload. Developing a workforce staffing plan that considers the costs and benefits of using contractors will help ensure that TSA meets its growing credentialing workload.