

Highlights of [GAO-11-602](#), a report to Subcommittee on Aviation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Since 2000, the annual number of new international parental child abduction cases reported to the Department of State—many of which likely involved air travel—has nearly tripled. Such abductions occur when a parent, family member, or person acting on behalf thereof, takes a child to another country in violation of the custodial parent's or guardian's rights. Once a child is abducted, the laws, policies, and procedures of the foreign country determine the child's return. Thus, preventing such abductions can help keep parents and children from being separated for a long period or indefinitely

As requested, this report addresses (1) the policies and measures airlines, federal agencies, and others have to prevent international parental child abductions on airline flights and (2) options federal agencies, airlines, and others could consider for helping prevent such abductions on airline flights, as well as the advantages and limitations of those options. To perform this work, GAO reviewed applicable laws and policies, interviewed government officials, and surveyed airlines and nonprofit associations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DHS consider creating a program similar to the child abduction component of its Prevent Departure program that would apply to U.S. citizens. DHS concurred with the recommendation, but cited challenges toward implementing it, such as potential constitutional, operational, privacy, and resource issues.

View [GAO-11-602](#) or key components. For more information, contact Gerald Dillingham at dillinghamg@gao.gov or (202) 512-2834.

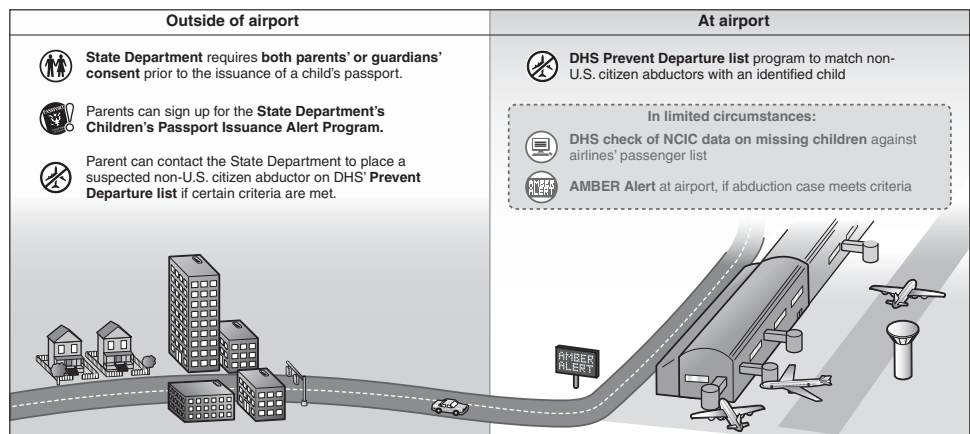
COMMERCIAL AVIATION

Program Aimed at High-Risk Parent Abductors Could Aid in Preventing Abductions

What GAO Found

As private sector entities, airlines do not have the authority to verify or enforce court and custody orders in an effort to prevent international parental child abductions and thus, upon request, work in cooperation with law enforcement. The Department of State has measures such as a dual-signature passport requirement and a passport notification program that are focused on preventing abductions before abductors reach an airport. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has measures that are focused on prevention when abductors reach the airport, such as a Prevent Departure list which prevents non-U.S. citizens from departing on an international flight with a child of concern, if certain criteria are met. DHS also checks the National Crime Information Center Missing Persons File and has partnered with other agencies to distribute AMBER Alerts at airports if child abductions meet certain criteria.

Federal Programs Aimed at Preventing International Parental Child Abductions



Source: GAO.

Two options—a parental-consent letter requirement and a high-risk abductor list—were cited by stakeholders (federal agency, airline, and nongovernmental organization officials) as having potential to prevent abductions, but consent letters may be impractical to adopt while a high-risk list may help prevent some abductions. A consent letter policy could require that children traveling alone, or without both parents, have a note of consent from the nonaccompanying parents authorizing the child to travel. Stakeholders GAO met with and surveyed noted that such consent letters may be effective in deterring some abductions, but the relative ease in forging a letter along with other significant issues indicate that such a requirement is not a practical option. A high-risk abductor list program could operate similarly to the Prevent Departure list program but would apply to U.S. citizens. While stakeholders pointed out certain limitations to such a high-risk abductor list—such as the relatively difficult and time-consuming steps needed to place a child and potential abductor on this list—such a list may be helpful in preventing abductions on airline flights.