

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-526](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

On August 31, 2016, as part of a shift in U.S. policy toward Cuba, air carriers resumed scheduled commercial flights between the United States and Cuba, a route previously only open to public and private charter carrier operations. In June 2017, travel restrictions were revised to require U.S. travelers going to Cuba to travel as part of a licensed group. TSA, the agency responsible for securing the nation's civil aviation system, assesses Cuban airports and inspects air carriers operating U.S.-bound flights to ensure they have effective security measures in place.

GAO was asked to review TSA's assessments of Cuban aviation security. This report examines (1) the extent to which TSA followed its standard operating procedures when assessing aviation security at Cuban airports in fiscal years 2012 through 2017; (2) the results of TSA's Cuban airport assessments in fiscal years 2012 through 2017; and (3) the results of TSA's air carrier inspections for Cuba in fiscal years 2016—when commercial scheduled air service between the United States and Cuba resumed—and 2017. GAO reviewed TSA policies and procedures, observed TSA air carrier inspections in Cuba, and compared TSA data on assessments and inspections to data from the Department of Transportation.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that TSA improve its ability to identify all public charters requiring inspection in Cuba and develop and implement a tool that more reliably tracks public charter operations between the United States and Cuba. TSA concurred with our recommendation.

View [GAO-18-526](#). For more information, contact William Russell at (202) 512-6360 or RussellW@gao.gov.

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AVIATION SECURITY

Actions Needed to Better Identify and Track U.S.-Bound Public Charter Operations from Cuba

What GAO Found

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) generally followed its standard operating procedures when documenting and resolving findings from its foreign airport assessments and air carrier inspections at Cuban airports in fiscal years 2012 through 2017. However, TSA did not perform all the required inspections of air carriers operating U.S.-bound public charter flights from Cuba. Specifically, GAO found that for the five air carriers selected for analysis, TSA performed approximately half of air carrier inspections in Cuba at the frequency established in its standard operating procedures in fiscal years 2012 through 2016. Of the inspections TSA did not perform, over half were not performed because TSA was not able to identify or reliably track U.S.-bound public charter operations from Cuba. Improving TSA's ability to identify public charters requiring inspection in Cuba and implementing a tool it is currently developing that more reliably tracks air carrier operations would better position TSA to meet its goal of inspecting all air carriers operating U.S.-bound public charter flights from Cuba at the frequency established in its standard operating procedures.

Transportation Security Administration Inspectors Prepare to Board an Aircraft at Frank Pais Airport in Holguin, Cuba



Source: GAO. | GAO-18-526

Several of the Cuban airports TSA assessed in fiscal years 2012 through 2017 were fully compliant with International Civil Aviation Organization Standards at the time of assessment. The remaining airport assessments reported instances of noncompliance within the five categories: access control, quality control, aircraft and inflight security, passenger and baggage screening, and fencing.

The majority of air carrier inspections TSA performed for Cuba in fiscal years 2016 and 2017 resulted in no findings, meaning that TSA determined air carriers operating these flights fully implemented all requirements in their TSA-approved security program at the time of inspection. The remaining inspections resulted in findings, which TSA closed after air carriers took corrective action.

This is a public version of a sensitive report issued in May 2018. Information that TSA deemed to be sensitive is omitted from this report.