

Is the TSA actually keeping us safe? - AvvoStories

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The recent crash of [EgyptAir flight 804](#), likely an act of terrorism, as stoked renewed fears about the safety of air travel. For a moment, complaints about long security lines at major US airports gave way to a sense that maybe it's worth standing in line for hours to keep the flying public safe. But is the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) actually making us safer?

The agency has long been accused of “security theater”—imposing burdensome restrictions to make people feel safe without actually improving safety. What if removing laptops from bags and taking off our shoes do nothing to increase security?

Pre-TSA

It's hard to remember now, but before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, airport security was managed by private companies who operated under contract to the airlines. In the wake of the attacks, it was believed a single federal agency should oversee the security of air and other modes of transportation that could be terrorist targets—highways, railroads, buses, mass transit systems, pipelines, and sea ports. The TSA was thus established, and by the end of 2001, air travel became a much more complicated process.

Suddenly, travelers had to wait in security lines that snaked up and down hallways. Toothpaste became contraband. Liquids were tightly regulated. These restrictions weren't reduced as time passed; instead, air travelers experienced an increase in security-related requirements. First, layers of clothing and then, shoes had to be removed. Eventually, full-body scans became standard practice. The TSA now advises travelers to budget hours for security screening when they plan their trips this summer.

Do TSA measures keep us safe?

Airport security is indeed necessary. Even after years of extreme screening and in the face of criminal prosecution and fines of up to \$11,000, people are still trying to bring dangerous items on planes. In 2014, TSA agents discovered 2,212 firearms in carry-on bags. In 2015, that number grew 20 percent to a record 2,653. And there is the simple fact that since the TSA was established, the United States has experienced no terrorist incidents like 9/11. So the TSA's tactics are working, right?

Unless no terrorist attacks have been attempted. As early as 2008, security experts were pointing out numerous flaws in the system—genuine challenges to safety unrelated to the elaborate processes that suck up travelers' time. In 2013 and again in 2015, internal investigations conducted by Homeland Security Red Teams found that TSA efforts were not enough. TSA agents failed 95 percent of the tests; 67 out of 70 attempts to get fake weapons and explosives through security were successful.

The number of people traveling is growing and so are security wait times. What is not growing is the number of screeners. In fact, the number of screeners has been dropping since 2013. But more screeners may not be the solution. In light of recent tests, it looks like the TSA needs to work smarter, not harder. There are a few tactics they could jettison right away, with no real increase in risk, like:

Banning jokes

Obviously, it's in bad taste to shout, "Hey, I got my gun through!" as you exit the security line, and it's equally obvious why TSA shouldn't waste time responding to the idiots who think it's funny, especially since it's unlikely that a real terrorist would do something so attention-grabbing. The first amendment protects free speech, but TSA agents still treat a wisecrack like a crime.

Hair pat-downs

In April 2015, after years of complaints, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the TSA reached an agreement that involved retraining TSA agents in Los Angeles and Minneapolis to stop targeting black women for hair pat-down searches. But it is still standard TSA procedure to pat down anyone's hair when needed. TSA defines "when needed" as

- The hair area alarms for a potential explosive
- An individual's hair looks like it could contain a prohibited item or is styled in a way an officer cannot visually clear it

The TSA claims, "You'd be surprised what can be hidden in hair," but declines to share whether any weapons have ever been found by patting down a passenger's hair.

Shoes off

In 2001, the English Islamist Richard Reid attempted to blow up a trans-Atlantic flight with explosives hidden in his shoes. Fifteen years later, no further attempts to use shoes to transport explosives have been reported, but almost all airline passengers still must remove their shoes and have them X-rayed during screening. (We should just be glad that TSA did not have a similar response to the 2009 underwear bomber.) Fortunately, this particular hassle may be nearing its end. Deployment of up to 500 more bomb-sniffing dogs may eliminate this step.

Other ideas

Since 2005, states have been required to update their driver's license identification standards to comply with a new national standard. Starting in 2018, residents of some states will no longer be allowed to board domestic flights by using their driver's license for ID.

Confirming the identity of passengers and having a national standard for proof of identification seem like good ideas. But although some of the 9/11 hijackers possessed fake IDs, they all entered the United States legally; shoe-bomber Reid was born in England and traveled on a legitimate British passport, and underwear bomber Abdul Mutallab held a valid visa for entry into the United States.

The problem with REAL ID is that in most cases it doesn't make obtaining a fake ID any harder—it just makes it impossible for undocumented immigrants to get a driver's license. So more people will be driving without a license,

even if it doesn't keep terrorists out of the country.

What about full-body scanners? The [TSA maintains](#) that the scanners are “the most effective and least intrusive” way to search travelers for weapons hidden under their clothes, despite ongoing concerns about privacy and possible health effects. They are also faster than a pat-down. Still, in seven years of operation, the scanners have not caught a single terrorist, though maybe they've dissuaded a few from trying in the first place. Of course, there's no way to reliably measure that possibility.

And finally, if we really want to increase security for passengers, making them wait in long lines is probably a bad idea. Because you know what makes a good terrorist target? Large groups of people tightly packed in small spaces—just like an airport security line.

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