

THE VERGE

What can airports do to prevent another LAX shooting?

Union calls for some TSA agents to be armed, but experts say there's no easy solution to random violence

By: Amar Toor - November 5, 2013

Last week's shooting at Los Angeles International Airport has sent shockwaves across the nation, and it's left many wondering how airports, law enforcement, and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) will respond. The attack, carried out by a lone suspect in front of a security checkpoint on Friday morning, left two TSA employees wounded and another dead, marking the first time that an agent has been killed in the line of duty. Authorities say suspected gunman Paul Anthony Ciancia explicitly targeted TSA screeners as he entered the area, pointing to a handwritten note found in his duffle bag.

The TSA has responded to past incidents with very specific, and sometimes controversial policy changes. An attempted shoe bombing in 2001 prompted rule changes requiring all passengers to remove their shoes at security checkpoints, and the agency introduced full-body scanners at US airports following the foiled "underwear bombing" of 2009.

Critics have assailed these policies as reactionary and invasive, though it's not clear whether the LAX shooting will result in similar changes to security protocol. Given the unique nature of the attack, experts say it's unlikely that the agency's response will have a direct impact on passenger screening, suggesting that it will instead focus on strengthening coordination with local law enforcement and airport security — the bodies responsible for securing pre-checkpoint areas.

"Obviously this gives us great concern," TSA Administrator John Pistole told reporters at a press conference in Los Angeles on Saturday. "We will look at what our policies and procedures are and what provides the best possible security."

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), a union representing the nation's 45,000 airport screeners, is calling for a more controversial solution: a new class of armed TSA officers.

TSA agents are currently responsible for keeping weapons off planes, and are not authorized to make arrests or use weapons. Airport authorities and local police are tasked with securing all public areas in front of security checkpoints, but the AFGE says Friday's shooting underscores the need to expand the TSA's authority.

"We want to make sure we are doing everything possible to secure screening areas at our nation's airports," AFGE President Jeffrey David Cox Sr. said in a statement Monday. "At this time, we feel a larger and more consistent armed presence in screening areas would be a positive step in improving security for both TSOs and the flying public. The development of a new class of TSA officers with law enforcement status would be a logical approach to accomplishing this goal."

Aviation security experts acknowledge that a greater armed presence could protect TSA agents from future attacks, though they say training TSA agents to use weapons and authorizing them to make arrests would be costly and ineffective.

"This is really an issue for airport law enforcement," says Jeff Price, an aviation security expert and professor at the Metropolitan State University of Denver. Price, who has written a book about airport security and trained LAX officers, says it would be "incredibly costly and likely overkill" to arm TSA agents themselves, and that expanding the presence of local law enforcement would be a "safer and more cost-effective" strategy.

"Screening and law enforcement are two separate functions and should be treated as such," he tells *The Verge*.

Pre-checkpoint areas have proven to be somewhat vulnerable, as evidenced by a 2002 attack at a ticketing counter at LAX. In that incident, later deemed an act of terrorism, an Egyptian gunman opened fire in front of a counter for Israel-based airline El Al, killing two and injuring three before being shot dead by airport security.

"It's hard to prevent this kind of random attack from happening," Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute, says of the Friday shooting. "It's an unfortunate axiom of security that risks that are too costly to prevent must be accepted. That's just an unfortunate truth."

Harper, who has criticized TSA screening policy in the past, says the agency could enhance law enforcement or expand car surveillance programs that scan vehicles as they enter airports; but the costs would be high, and the likelihood of deterring another shooting — already a rare occurrence — would be low. Still, considering the way the agency has responded to crises in the past, he doesn't expect the TSA to skimp on security.

"That's not the nature of the organization," Harper says. "It's not cost-sensitive, and I wouldn't expect it to be cost-sensitive when it comes to protecting its own employees."

LAX has spent \$1.6 billion on enhancing security since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, adding about 250 personnel and expanding the airport's surveillance systems. A 2011 study found that the investment made the venue safer, but called for stronger coordination between airport authorities and local law enforcement.

Armed police officers were stationed at TSA checkpoints until earlier this year, when they shifted to patrolling within and outside terminals as part of an initiative to make the force more dynamic and less predictable. Marshall McClain, a former LAPD officer and president of the Los Angeles Airport Peace Officers Association, told the *Los Angeles Times* this week that patrolling officers were not near the security checkpoint at the time of Friday's shooting. McClain added that it's impossible to say whether stationed checkpoint officers would have made a difference in combating the attack, though he said they could have served as a deterrent.

Price says the airport "has excellent policing and had a rapid response" to last week's shooting, though he, like Harper, expects to see changes in the wake of this month's tragedy.

"Los Angeles and other airports will take a look at their tactical deployment of the police force to ensure maximum coverage," Price tells *The Verge*, saying he would expect greater police presence at checkpoints and perhaps new directives calling for shorter response times.

He also says training TSA agents in self-defense tactics would be less costly and more effective than arming them with weapons, though when confronted with a lone, deranged gunman, there's only so much authorities can do to secure public spaces.

"Short of everybody having a personal bodyguard there is not much we can do to protect every single individual from a gunman who just walks up and starts shooting," he says. "Your best defense in these situations is awareness of suspicious activity, and immediate and rapid response."