



Academic Paper Suggests Additional Airport Security Not 'Sensible'

By Megan Gates

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A new academic paper released this month suggests that additional security measures to protect airports are not “sensible expenditures” because the likelihood of an attack is low. The paper, “Cost-benefit analysis of airport security: Are airports too safe?” was published in the March issue of the *Journal of Air Transport Management*. It assessed the risks and cost-effectiveness of security measures designed to protect airport terminals and associated facilities, such as car parks, from terrorist attacks in the United States, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific area.

The authors, John Mueller, a political science professor and security studies expert at Ohio State University, and Mark G. Stewart, a civil engineering professor at Australia’s University of Newcastle, found that relaxing security measures already in place at airports may make sense because the number of attacks on airports doesn’t justify the security expense.

According to their analysis, airports can be attractive targets for terrorists, but are less so than other busy public locations because people are more spread out. “Compared with many other places of congregation, people are more dispersed in airports, and therefore a terrorist attack is likely to kill far fewer than if, for example, a crowded stadium is targeted,” the paper said.

Additionally, between 1998 and 2011, the Global Terrorism Database recorded 20 attacks on airports in the United States and Europe, which killed 64 people. Over the same period, there were 31 attacks on aircraft, making the total number of attacks on aviation only 0.5 percent of all terrorist attacks over the 13-year period. “This experience has led the 2007 U.S. National Strategy for Aviation Security to conclude that ‘reported threats to aviation infrastructure, including airports and air navigation facilities are relatively few,’” according to the paper.

Along with that assessment, Mueller and Stewart examined 53 cases since 9/11 where Muslim terrorists planned, or “vaguely imagined, doing damage in the United States” and found that there were only two plots where an airport facility was on the target list.

Despite these findings, a majority of the literature on homeland security “dwells on vulnerabilities and recommends enhanced security measures with little or no attention paid to how much security measures will actually cost,” the paper said.

For example, Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) might consider adding additional security measures in its facilities, including permanent vehicle search checkpoints with bomb detection capability, more TSA lines, enhanced training of airport police rapid reaction teams to SWAT standards, eliminating traffic lanes closest to the airport's terminals, and other changes for the cost of roughly \$124 billion.

In comparison, the September 11, 2001, attack killed almost 3,000 people with an associated loss of \$20 billion. Additionally, 9/11 caused "approximately \$30 billion in physical damage," [and] an impact on the U.S. economy of \$50- to \$150 billion, and global airline losses from 9/11 of at least \$100 billion. However, these losses were mainly due to a drop in airline passengers in 2001 and 2002 and the "next attack is unlikely to cause the same response," which was also "magnified by the recession" in 2008.

Because of this, the authors rationalize that the "assessed security measures would only begin to be cost-effective if the current rate of attacks at airports in the United States, Europe, and the Asia-Pacific increases by a factor of 10 to 20."

The paper was completed prior to the shooting at LAX last year that killed a TSA agent, but the report did address a ground shooting attack, saying it is "much easier to accomplish as semi-automatic weapons and ammunition in the United States are relatively easy to acquire" and a "well trained and coordinated shooting and/or grenade attack has high chance of success," as compared to a bombing.

Furthermore, if a bombing occurred at an airport, the paper suggests that the consequences would be "comparatively easier to deal with" than if a shooting or another incident occurred. The authors rationalized this by acknowledging that airports sprawl and are only two or three stories high, passengers can be rerouted around the damage area, and the impact on the essential function of the airport would be modest.