Everyone Should Get Pre-Check Status at the Airport

Premium airport "pre-screening" doesn't make the rest of the line move any faster, and chips away at a chance at real security reform.

By Kriston Capps
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On Sunday, one of the busiest travel days of the year, security lines at Chicago Midway International Airport reportedly stretched a mile long. One-point-two miles, in fact, but never mind: The number needn't be precise to be petrifying. The mere fact that so many travelers were queuing up with a mile's worth of people to get through airport security gates is enough to make anyone turn back for home.

In fact, security screening can be so harrowing an experience that many never try the airport in the first place. According to the U.S. Travel Association, American travelers would fly two to three times more often every year if it weren't for the hassle of airline security screening. In the Northeast Corridor, for example, those travelers are skipping flights for trains. For airlines, airports, and retailers, this aversion translates into losses totaling billions. For the undeterred airline travelers, on the other hand, long security lines lead to airline rage and untold lost hours of productivity.

Pre-screening is the solution to U.S. Transportation Security Administration bottlenecks favored by the U.S. Transportation Security Administration. Some 600,000 people are enrolled in the TSA PreCheck program; 11 airlines participate in PreCheck through more than 120 airports. Still more travelers enroll through Global Entry, the expedited-clearance program run through U.S. Customs and Border Protection. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, more than 1.3 million people have enrolled in Global Entry.

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There are problems with pre-screening, though, namely in execution. Current enrollment figures don't justify security staffing for those envy-inducing separate lanes for PreCheck'd travelers, which are frequently empty. In theory, PreCheck is a great deal for frequent fliers who can afford its requirements: It's a privileged check-in lane, a way of performing pre-flight screening away from the airport. In practice, the high cost of maintaining an empty security lane just means that TSA agents are ushering normals through the dedicated PreCheck lanes, gumming up the perk for "trusted travelers."

"Privileged travelers" might be another way to refer to PreCheck and Global Entry users. The costs aren't enormous for pre-screening verification: an $85 application fee, a visit to an application center, and valid citizenship or immigration documents. Well worth the cost for a frequent flier—but perhaps out of reach for families or people who don't want to volunteer for federal background checks.

Granted, truly cost-conscious travelers probably aren't flying in the first place, so fretting over expressions of class in the airport security line amounts to grumbling over gradations of privilege. Still, there's something uncomfortable about a system that allows travelers to bypass the safeguards put in place for the commonweal. When journalists, capitalists, and politicos are able to opt out of the hassles of airport security, who presses for reforms of a system that leads to mile-long lines at the holidays?

One person calling for reforms is Kip Hawley, a former administrator of the TSA. He argues that the problem with airport and airline security is conceptual: Instead of implementing a system designed to guarantee the absolute safety of every passenger, the TSA should aim to guarantee that flying is a relatively safe form of transit.

"In attempting to eliminate all risk from flying, we have made air travel an unending nightmare for U.S. passengers and visitors from overseas, while at the same time creating a security system that is brittle where it needs to be supple," Hawley wrote in a [2012 *WSJ* editorial](#).

Hawley never got his way. As [*The New York Times*](#) reminds us, his efforts to drop the ban on certain prohibited items, including small scissors, led the Association of Flight Attendants to howl that airplane "aisles will be running with blood." PreCheck is the system put in place by Hawley's successor, John Pistole, who will retire as TSA chief this month.

The next TSA head should think squarely about the mile-long line at Midway and how to solve it. In a certain light, the current approach favored by the TSA appears to be to provide a service so badly to consumers that they are willing to pay again for another version of the same service that they've already paid for through tax dollars. That's far from a flattering way to think about this bureaucracy—which is [larger](#) than the Departments of Labor, Energy, Education, Housing and Urban Development, and State combined—and may explain why critics such as the [Cato Institute](#) think that privatized airport security services could be better delivered by airports themselves.

Since the TSA is probably here to stay, it's worth looking closely at the agency's priorities. Sure, [airport restaurant steak knives could be dangerous](#). But it's hard to justify building a national security apparatus designed to ensure that every one of 2 million passengers each day never poses the slightest hypothetical threat to anybody else. [Randomized belt and shoe checks](#) in place of routine screening would be a start. And if pre-screening really is the best way to ensure that terrorists don't sneak bombs aboard airlines, then the costs of PreCheck should be reduced to zero—in order to accomplish TSA goals for pre-screening, if not for the sake of fairness alone. PreCheck screening could be performed at the post office, and for an absolutely minimal fee.

And when this approach doesn't lead to gains in convenience—namely because Congress, which [cut TSA's budget by $530 million](#) in 2014, is not going to fund a better solution—then the agency should rethink risk itself. By securing pilot cabins, the TSA has eliminated the threat of another 9/11 attack. There are other threats out there, no question. But there are also costs to securing every traveler against every one of them.