

[TSA Searches Expand as Opposition Mounts](#)[Print](#)

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As travelers and state governments across America fight back against invasive screening by the Transportation Security Administration at airports, the TSA is actually expanding its operations covering busses, trains, ships, ferries, subways, and even highways. But critics, who say the methods are unconstitutional and often constitute sexual assault, are up in arms.

A popular movement that began picking up steam last year called for a boycott of air travel until the routine violations of Fourth Amendment rights were halted. "We will not be abused simply for the privilege of purchasing your services," a group known as We Won't Fly notes on its [website](#). "We are eager to fly again, but only when this invasive threat has been contained."

But now, that might be a moot point. Americans are increasingly likely to be subjected to groping, document checks, and the so-called "porno" naked body scanners no matter how they choose to travel.

Roving bands of TSA workers have been swarming bus stations and other transportation hubs since late 2005. But recently, the TSA has been expanding its use of what it dubs "Visible Intermodal Prevention and Response" (VIPR) teams nationwide. In fact, they are quickly becoming ubiquitous.

"The teams provide a random, announced, high-visibility surge into a transit agency, in addition to enhancing agency resources during special events," the TSA explains on its website. As early as 2007, the agency [threatened](#) to "expand the VIPR concept beyond the rail sector to other forms of mass transit."

In a bizarre show of force last week, the agency conducted what might have been one of its largest VIPR operations to date. According to a [report](#) in the *Marietta Times*, the exercise involved Blackhawk helicopters, airplanes, "waterborne and surface teams," and more, covering over 5,000 square miles. The military and the FBI participated, too, as did numerous state and local law enforcement agencies. And it's about to get worse.

TSA boss John Pistole, who columnist Becky Akers [referred](#) to as "the pervert most responsible for the agency's sexual violations of passengers," is now seeking to massively increase the budget for "VIPR" programs. Testifying before Congress earlier this month, Pistole [explained](#) that his 25 teams had performed more than 8,000 "operations" during the last year.

But more are needed to "deter" terrorists, he insists. The agency's 2012 budget request asks taxpayers to fund another 12 VIPR teams. In 2009, the 10 existing bands of roaming TSA workers were costing Americans \$30 million. If Pistole gets his way, the 37 squads will be charging taxpayers almost \$110 million next year.

And it's not just mass "transportation" that the agency aims to "secure." The TSA and its affiliates have reportedly been caught involved in [groping students](#) at high-school proms, [feeling up](#) 9-year-old passengers getting off trains, abusing sports fans, and more. They've also been [inspecting](#) private vehicles. Experts [say](#) shopping malls, grocery stores, and similar venues are not far behind.

Critics have also blasted the TSA's strategy of partnering with other government agencies to go far beyond simply searching for bombs. After a recent VIPR operation at a Greyhound bus station in Tampa, for example, an official with the Border Patrol [admitted](#) to looking for illegal immigrants. Meanwhile, an official with Immigration and Customs said the operation was also intended to prevent "cash smuggling." A Homeland Security spokesman promised: "We'll be back."

Of course, critics have been attacking the TSA, and the VIPR teams in particular, for years. The liberty-oriented Cato Institute's Jim

Harper [noted](#) years ago that VIPR was “sinking its fangs into Americans’ civil liberties,” citing a TSA “sting” operation against innocent Americans at a bus terminal in Florida.

“The natural illogic of VIPR stings is that terrorism can strike anywhere, so VIPR teams should search anywhere,” he wrote. “It’s the undoing of the Fourth Amendment, and it’s unwarranted counterterrorism because it expends resources on things that won’t catch or deter terrorists. Indeed, VIPR ‘stings’ may encourage terrorism because they show that terrorism successfully undermines the American way of life.”

But even as the TSA’s dubious role in the never-ending terror war continues to expand, opponents are stepping up the fight. In Texas, for example, state lawmakers [appear set](#) to pass legislation criminalizing federal workers’ violations of Fourth Amendment rights and groping as sexual assault. Screeners could even end up in jail for touching people’s private parts without probable cause. Numerous other states are working on similar efforts.

The federal government has [threatened](#) swift and fierce retaliation if Texas decides to protect the constitutionally protected rights of passengers by adopting the anti-groping legislation. If the courts do not strike down the bill, the Department of Justice warned that the feds could create a virtual “no-fly zone” over the state.

Analysts say the outcome of that battle may shape future efforts to rein in TSA abuses. How that showdown will turn out remains to be seen. But for now, Americans should expect unconstitutional gropings and searches to become a regular fact of life — anywhere and everywhere — unless something is done soon.