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Democracy Dies in Darkness

TSA caught people trying to fly with more guns than ever in 2019. Experts have questions.

By **Kim Bellware**

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The Transportation Security Administration intercepted a record number of firearms at airport security checkpoints last year in what the agency's leader called a "deeply troubling" trend.

Officers found 4,432 guns — most of them loaded — in carry-on bags or on passengers moving through checkpoints, the TSA said in a report released last week.

"The continued increase in the number of firearms that travelers bring to airport checkpoints is deeply troubling," TSA Administrator David Pekoske said in the report. He reminded travelers that they may bring a legal firearm provided it is unloaded, locked in a hard-side case and declared as part of checked luggage.

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While the number of guns discovered last year represents a nearly 5 percent increase from the year before and the highest overall levels in the agency's 18-year history, University of Illinois professor Sheldon Jacobson cautioned that what the 2019 figures really mean isn't exactly clear. Jacobson, who has studied aviation security system analysis for 25 years and is among the researchers whose work led to the development of the TSA PreCheck screening system, told The Washington Post that TSA's concerns over the 2019 increase come without context.

“What if they found 10 firearms, or what if they found 10,000? Yes, it's a big number, but it's inconclusive what it means,” Jacobson said. “If it's increased, that means the TSA is doing a better job, potentially, of finding firearms. But it could be bad, because why are more firearms being brought to checkpoints?”

The TSA keeps data on the number of recovered guns going back to 2005, but Jacobson notes that the number of security checkpoints was significantly lower than current levels in the first several years of the agency's existence. It's not clear how many checkpoints the TSA operates; that number is among the few operational statistics that the agency excludes from its public-facing information.

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Yet it's an important data point for understanding the rate of firearms discovered annually.

“Is the number of guns being detected commensurate with the number of screenings at security checkpoints?” Jacobson said. He said the TSA declined to provide him with that data after it released the Jan. 15 report.

The TSA also declined to make a representative available to The Post to discuss its report.

Along with missing the full context of the numbers, the TSA report lacks other useful information such as the number of passengers at the airports flagged with the most weapons. In its collection of the top 10 airports where the most firearms were found, Tampa International Airport was least among the worst offenders with 87 guns discovered last year. Atlanta's airport had roughly four times as many firearms with 323 — and is also the busiest airport hub in the world that records more than five times the number of annual passengers in Tampa.

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Along with certain points of context, the TSA report lacks an explanation for the record-high firearm number. In the past, officers attributed the increase in passengers bringing guns to checkpoints — most commonly with the excuse “I forgot” — to the growing number of concealed-carry permit holders.

For David Chipman, the TSA report says little about airport security but a lot about what he sees as weaknesses of the pro-gun rights “good guy with a gun” narrative. Chipman, a former special agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives who now serves as a senior policy adviser with the gun-control group Giffords, said he doubts most travelers are intentionally trying to get firearms through security, and that what the TSA report really reveals is a level of carelessness among gun owners.

“When I see that now, as a matter of routine, people are carrying guns and don’t even remember they’re carrying them, it says everything about the reality of the concealed-carry movement,” Chipman told The Post. “There are probably a small percentage of people who carry and are trained, like we expect from law enforcement or military. The rest are untrained or irresponsible.”

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Even if a firearm is caught at a checkpoint, the fact that an owner is carrying a loaded and unsecured gun while being unaware creates a situation that could harm others if the gun were unintentionally fired or stolen.

Jacobson, the researcher, said it's difficult to assess causality between increased firearm ownership and the levels of weapons found in airports without knowing how many gun owners use air travel. He offered a more cynical lens through which to read the report: image-burnishing by an agency that has generated plenty of negative media coverage over its performance.

In 2015, ABC News reported that officers from the Department of Homeland Security posing as passengers exposed staggering vulnerabilities in the TSA's screening practices that enabled officers to smuggle fake bombs and illegal weapons through checkpoints in 95 percent of their trials. After the report, the acting head of the TSA was removed and Homeland Security pledged reforms.

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Even additional security measures, including the full-body scanners that were introduced in 2015, haven't eliminated security breaches such as the passenger who got a loaded gun through security in Atlanta and landed with it in Tokyo.

“TSA uses its blog as a conduit for communicating their successes. Any time they’re preventing a firearm from entering a sterile area, that’s a success,” Jacobson said. For the traveling public, the agency’s recent report is just a number. “The TSA is demonstrating that they’re doing *a* job.”

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