TSA is wrong agency for enforcement of mask mandate at nation's airports

Your Turn
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Guest columnist

Anyone who has flown in the past year knows that face coverings are required in airports and on commercial flights. This has become the standard for air travel. Yet a mandate is only as good as its compliance and enforcement.

Forbes recently reported that the Transportation Security Administration has fined less than 1% of those reported to be noncompliant. The TSA even increased the fine for violators in September, as a deterrent to those unwilling to comply.

But is the TSA the right agency to enforce the mandate? The short answer is "no," but it's not that simple. It's important to fully understand and appreciate the spectrum of security responsibilities already placed on the TSA before adding to it. It also requires one to look more closely at the profile of face-covering violators.

I'm a computer science professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and my research focuses on collecting and analyzing data. I have also researched aviation security for over 25 years.

During a recent rain delay at one of the Chicago airports, I decided to collect data on how people at the airport were wearing their face coverings. Positioning myself at a single point in a concourse eliminated double-counting people and kept me away from eating establishments where masks are routinely removed. Only adults were included in my data collection exercise.

Around 85% to 90% of the people were fully compliant, wearing a face covering correctly over mouth and nose. The range provides a measure of uncertainty given the limited number of data points collected. The split between men and women was fairly even. Around 10% to 14% were wearing a face covering, but it did not cover their nose. The remaining 1% to 2% wore no face covering, including those who tied it around their neck like a bandanna.

Of those who wore their face covering without covering their nose, or were not wearing any face covering, around 75% to 80% percent were men.

The good news from this data collection exercise is that the majority of people are following the federal mandate. For those not compliant, men are the most prevalent violators. These observations are by no means conclusive, given that the sample size was just a few hundred people, on a specific day, at a specific airport. However, it does provide some information that may be useful for all airports across the nation and who should be enforcing the federal mandate.

This past October, around 1.8 million people flew each day on average. If just 1% were not wearing a face covering, this translates to around 18,000 maskless travelers every day. This is in contrast to over 4,000 face-covering violations reported to the TSA in seven months between February 2021 and September 2021, or around 20 violators per day.

This presents a quandary in multiple ways.

Every face-covering violator reported may correspond to over 900 who go unreported but are in violation of the federal mandate. This means that the vast majority of such people remain unidentified.

The TSA recently reported that they found almost 4,500 firearms at security checkpoints through Oct. 3, or around 16 firearms per day on average. Most people would agree that detecting people not wearing a face covering is significantly easier than detecting a firearm in a carry-on bag. Yet firearm detection and face-covering violator reports are occurring at similar rates, even though the number of such mask violators is much larger. Chasing passengers for violating the face-covering mandate is a distraction that the TSA should not be required to enforce. Even reporting such a violation to the agency is inappropriate. However, the potential revenue is sufficient to warrant large airports creating a staff of law enforcement officers that would easily pay for itself.

Increasing the fine for repeat violators is acceptable. However, banning them from traveling by air by not permitting them to pass through airport security checkpoints for a specified time period would serve as a more effective deterrent for future violations.

Asking the TSA to enforce the mandate is misguided, inappropriate and dangerous. Let airport-staffed law enforcement do the job, and the problem of face mask violations would get resolved more effectively.

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