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Airport security expert: Here's what happened at Love Field and how to stay safe

Shooting highlights airport risks across the nation



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By Sheldon H. Jacobson

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I have studied aviation security for 25 years and my research contributed to the development of the Transportation Security Administration’s PreCheck program. The episode at Love Field on Monday, in which a woman discharged a firearm, holds several lessons for travelers.

First, the riskiest part of an airport is the section of the terminal outside the airport security checkpoints. In fact, in airport security parlance, this is labeled the “nonsecure area.” By contrast, the secure area is sufficiently hardened by physical screening and background checks, so that the risks in this area are significantly lower.

Second, airport security personnel mean business. Even in the nonsecure area, the response by Dallas law enforcement was quick and decisive, with only the shooter injured, according to early reports. Airports are a bad place for bad behavior.

Third, the disruption to passengers at the airport was significant. The airport was put under a ground stop, which means that no flights departed, with arriving flights unable to deplane for several hours. For all travelers connecting at Love Field Monday afternoon, this was a lost day of travel.

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Most of the time, there is sufficient security hardening at airports that potential perpetrators are deterred from acting. If one is sufficiently bold and motivated to act, then the detection layer comes into play, to stop any harm from being inflicted. If detection is circumvented, then any nefarious acts are mitigated. This is what occurred at Love Field when law enforcement responded to end the incident. Once the event ends, the system must recover and be restored to its pre-incident status.

Can such an event occur at other airports? Unfortunately, yes.

The nonsecure sides of airports often encompass large footprints that must be patrolled by law enforcement and with surveillance cameras. They can be difficult to protect.

So what can travelers do to protect themselves against the type of event that happened Monday?

First, pass through security checkpoints as quickly as feasible. Inside the secure area, the likelihood of a similar incident occurring is significantly lower.

wearing clothing that allows you to move freely.

The good news from Love Field is that no passengers were injured, and that after a few hours delay, operations were restored. The not-so-good news is that events like this have occurred in the past, such as at [Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport](#) in 2017, and may occur again in the future.

We know that the [TSA is on track to detect a record number of firearms in traveler carry-on bags at airport security checkpoints in 2022](#). This indicates that concealed firearms are present at airports.

As more is revealed about the shooter's situation Monday, such information will be invaluable to help address such incidents in the future. Until then, everyone must remain vigilant to stay safe even before they pass through security and get onto their flight.

Sheldon H. Jacobson is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He has studied aviation security for over 25 years, providing the technical foundations for risk-based security and TSA PreCheck. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.

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Sheldon H. Jacobson