

OPINION

Aviation security does not end at airports

Increasing number of PreCheck screenings can better protect flights

By SHELDON H. JACOBSON

The recent incident on a United flight from Los Angeles to Boston highlights why aviation security does not end at airport security checkpoints.

The passenger managed to create a weapon using a broken metal spoon and hit a flight attendant with his makeshift weapon. The passenger also attempted to open a door on the airplane, according to law enforcement officials, and believed that a flight attendant was going to kill him.

If convicted, the passenger is subject to hefty fines (as much as \$250,000) and life in prison.

There is a high probability that this person suffers from mental illness. If that is the case, these penalties will serve little purpose. It may provide some deterrence benefit for someone with clear thinking but nefarious intent to see how they would be handled if they attempted such acts of violence on an airplane.

The Transportation Security Administration uses multiple layers to protect the nation's air system. The most visible layer is at airport screening checkpoints, where passengers, carry-on bags and checked baggage are screened using a variety of technology.

A far less visible layer is air marshals, who are strategically assigned to flights based on a variety of risk factors, including the collective risk profile of passengers on a flight. Air marshals are ready to respond if any passenger acts inappropriately and threatens the security of a flight, its crew or its passengers.

Air marshals are a means to buy down risk and make a flight more secure. However, the expense of placing air marshals on flights means that air marshals are not on most flights. Moreover, the collective risk profile of most flights makes it unnecessary to have an air marshal on them. It appears that the United flight did not have an air marshal, or such a person would have responded to the incident.

The biggest takeaway from the event is how the passengers responded. Several acted quickly and decisively to wrestle the person to the ground and keep him from further harming himself or others. This made these passengers de facto air marshals.

The basis of risk-based security, the strategy employed by the TSA, is to match security resources to security risk. The most effective program that the TSA employs to achieve this is



Elias Valverde II/Staff Photographer

Travelers made their way toward a TSA security checkpoint in Terminal C at DFW International Airport on March 1. The percentage of passengers screened through TSA PreCheck expedited screening lanes has been falling in recent years. In 2017, 55% of screenings were through PreCheck lanes. The number was 38% in 2021.

PreCheck. The background check that a PreCheck vetted passenger undergoes makes them known to the TSA, and known passengers carry with them far less risk than unknown passengers.

An entire airplane of PreCheck vetted passengers represents an extremely low-risk flight. As the number of non-PreCheck vetted passengers grows on a flight, the collective risk of a flight increases.

The simple solution is to encourage and facilitate more flyers to enroll in PreCheck. At present, over 15 million people have PreCheck, with 32 million people qualified for PreCheck expedited screening through programs like Global Entry and Nexus.

Unfortunately, the percentage of passengers screened through PreCheck expedited screening lanes has been falling in recent years. In 2017, 55% of screenings were through PreCheck lanes. This number dropped to

54% in 2018, 46% in 2019, 44% in 2020 and 38% in 2021. The TSA target is 50%, which would translate into around 1 million passengers screened at airport security checkpoint every day.

Yet more can be done.

Anything that the TSA can do to increase the number of PreCheck vetted passengers being screened makes the entire air system more secure, which benefits everyone. This is because it permits TSA officers to focus more attention on the remaining non-PreCheck-vetted passengers, who are in the unknown category. Reducing TSA officer distraction in this way is a win-win situation for the TSA and for air travelers.

Could the share of passengers screened through PreCheck expedited lanes be increased to 80%? This would be a game changer for airport security. It would probably require offering PreCheck at no cost to anyone willing

to undergo the background check. It would also require greater assurances that background information would be kept secure from breaches.

The recent incident on the United flight demonstrates that aviation security is more about people and less about items. It also demonstrates that some of the most effective security actions occur long after departing airport security checkpoints. Everyone has a role to ensure that their next flight remains safe and secure. Upping the number of PreCheck screenings is the most important thing that the TSA can do to achieve this.

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