

OPINION

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How to Shorten Lines and Make Time Fly at Airport Security Checkpoints

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We're all familiar with the saying, "time flies," but perhaps the only place that's not the case is while passing through an airport security checkpoint this summer.

Flying commercially requires us to undergo perfunctory airport security screening procedures. For travelers enrolled in the [Transportation Security Administration's \(TSA\) PreCheck](#) program or are eligible for PreCheck benefits through programs like [Global Entry](#), the expedited screening process is quicker, more efficient and more convenient for travelers, resulting in less time spent at checkpoints.

Yet, the expedited screening numbers have moved in the wrong direction in recent years. In 2017, [55% of airport screenings](#) were expedited through PreCheck lanes. This number [dropped to 38%](#) in 2021. Whether the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated this drop or it is the result of some other unknown factor, this trend makes air travel less secure for all.

The good news is that [over 32 million people are now qualified for expedited screening](#), which should push the number of expedited screenings higher today and in the future.

Some PreCheck-qualified travelers think of such expedited screening as a privilege that benefits them when only a small number of travelers are enrolled. This is not the case.

Being PreCheck-qualified makes a traveler [known to the TSA](#). Such information reduces their risk to the air system, making it possible to offer such travelers expedited screening, which involves a lower level of physical screening at

airports. Such people may be randomly selected for [standard screening](#), to maintain the integrity of the screening process. However, most of the time, PreCheck-qualified travelers pass through security with minimal inconvenience and delay.

Everyone benefits when more travelers are qualified for such screenings. Economically, fewer TSA officers are required at airport security checkpoints, with fewer screening technologies needed to maintain the security of the air system.

In an ideal world, all air travelers would be PreCheck-qualified. In the real world, some may be unwilling to subject themselves to the requisite background check to make them known travelers to the TSA. A very small group of people would not be eligible.

So, what would airport security checkpoints look like if 80% or more of all airport screenings were expedited through PreCheck lanes?

In smaller airports, with just one or two security lanes, most screenings would be expedited, and the few that were not would be subject to the standard screening procedures that are necessary for unknown-risk travelers.

In large airports with multiple security lanes, like Chicago O'Hare, Atlanta Hartsfield, New York LaGuardia, or Los Angeles International, the total number of screening lanes could be reduced, with the majority configured for expedited screening designated for PreCheck-qualified passengers.

All this means is that airport checkpoints would require fewer TSA officers and fewer advanced imaging technologies like [millimeter wave machines](#) for full body scanning. Airport security checkpoints would be leaner, more efficient and less costly to operate, savings taxpayers millions of dollars.

Wouldn't that mean security is weaker? To the contrary, it would be strengthened.

With more travelers known to the TSA, the air system would be better protected. Moreover, TSA officers would be less distracted by the PreCheck-qualified passengers. For the relatively small number of unknown-risk passengers, the TSA officers will be able to give them the undivided security attention that their unknown risk demands.

Everyone wins in such an environment.

So, what is preventing more people from becoming PreCheck-qualified?

One is the cost. For travelers who travel once or twice a year, shelling out [\\$78 for a five-year membership](#) is too high a bar to jump. Yet, such people represent the very travelers that can move the needle on expedited screening volume to where it must be.

The PreCheck vetting process can potentially be used for other purposes. For example, access to government facilities, something that [REAL IDs](#) are designated to provide.

If [universal background checks](#) ever become mandatory for purchasing firearms, the PreCheck vetting process can fulfill this requirement.

With the TSA responsible for security at [nearly 440 federalized airports](#), standardized procedures are critical to offering a consistent product for travelers and TSA officers. Moving the default security lane configuration to expedited screening from standard screening demands a commitment to [risk-based security](#) that has not been demonstrated by the TSA since [PreCheck was first announced in late-2011](#).

To make this a reality, airport security strategy needs to change. Increasing the number of expedited screenings to the vast majority of travelers is imperative to facilitate such changes.

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