

COLLATERAL EFFECTS OF COUNTERTERRORISM INTERVENTIONS: AIRPORT SECURITY SCREENING

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SUMMARY

Since September 11th, there has been a massive increase in spending on counterterrorism intervention development and implementation. Given this increase, there are two evidence-based policy questions which are central in this environment: (1) Are these programs effective – in other words, can they be shown to be linked to reducing terrorism, terrorist recruiting, or improving the response and management of terrorist events, and (2) Do these interventions have secondary or collateral effects that may be costly, harmful, illegal, beneficial, or otherwise? This research addresses concerns over the latter and explores empirical evidence regarding the collateral effects of one counterterrorism program that has been shown to be effective in reducing hijackings¹ – airport security.

DATA AND METHODS

A GMU research team² was granted access into a major East Coast international airport in March 2007 to conduct face-to-face surveys about the collateral effects of TSA-administered airport security. Our plan included a comprehensive survey distribution to passengers within all operational gates of an entire terminal (D) which consisted of domestic flights of major airline carriers (Airtran, America West, Continental, Midwest, Northwest, United, US Airways). Our survey is unique in that we administered it directly to passengers who had just experienced airport security by TSA, and also collected information about their race and ethnicity. These methods provided the research team with a high response rate and an ability to ascertain whether variations existed across race and ethnicity in terms of passengers' immediate experience going through TSA screening, and often-believed collateral effect of increased security. Of those surveyed, 75% of respondents described themselves as White or Caucasian, while 20% as races and ethnicities that were non-White (5% unknown).

FINDINGS

Despite findings of overall customer satisfaction, there were statistically significant differences between White and non-White passengers who answered this survey. In particular, non-White travelers were more likely to travel more frequently, were more likely to be subjected to additional TSA screening, were more likely to receive a higher number of additional screening actions, and were less likely than White passengers to receive a verbal explanation of why they were pulled aside for further screening. Non-White passengers also were slightly more likely to feel more inconvenienced and humiliated from experiences of additional screening than White passengers.

EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY

The TSA generally experiences high levels of customer satisfaction when it comes to security screening, which was confirmed by this survey. At the same time, this study indicates evidence of differences in the treatment of racial and ethnic groups as a collateral effect of this counterterrorism intervention. In combination, these findings suggest that the security screeners have some leeway (in terms of customer expectations) in taking more care and time in screening passengers, which should include improving the level of equality in the treatment of passengers, regardless of race. Such a policy change would allow TSA to more closely align its actions with its own policies of non-discrimination, and at the same time assist local and private airport authorities in customer service.

¹ See www.campbellcollaboration.org/doc-pdf/Lum_Terrorism_Review.pdf for a free copy of the Campbell Systematic Review on Counterterrorism Interventions which reviews scientific evidence on the outcome effectiveness of many counterterrorism interventions.

² Dr. Cynthia Lum, Dale Beech, Michael Connors, Peter (Zachary) Crafton, Rebecca Parsons and Tarren Smarr.