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## Acting TSA head commends CHDS thesis

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Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California

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# Acting TSA head commends CHDS thesis

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 [chds.us/c/item/324](https://chds.us/c/item/324)

A gun smuggling ring operating out of Hartsfield Jackson Atlanta Airport has proved the salience of one graduate's Center for Homeland Defense and Security's master's degree thesis.

Alan Black, Vice President and Director of Public Safety at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport, wrote "Managing the Aviation Insider Threat" in 2010 based on his concerns that thousands of employees who work at airports could exploit identification systems to commit crimes or even attacks. After the Atlanta ring was busted, his work grabbed the attention of interim TSA administrator Melvin Carroway.

"Recent events within the aviation domain have caused the Transportation Security Administration via the Aviation Security Advisory Council (ASAC) to take a closer look at threats posed by aviation insiders," Carroway said. "Black's thesis, '[Managing the Aviation Insider Threat](#),' helped to provide perspective to the ASAC from a subject matter expert within the aviation domain."

## Download the paper: "[Managing the Insider Aviation Threat](#)"

1) Black's thesis recommend improvements to the employee screening process, including considering criminal convictions that occurred more than the 10 years prior to an application for a badge and, in some cases, considering a person's juvenile record.

"Clearly, the vast majority of perpetrators of terrorism are young men," he wrote. "Therefore, while the regulation allows an aviation security professional to consider the last 10 years of criminal history, a 20 year old individual would only have two years of data available for consideration."

The thesis further recommends examining factors such as credit history, travel habits and work record.

While a student at CHDS, Black also authored a paper in the Technology for Homeland Security course that focused on redesigning employee identification and access badges and coupling them with biometric verification, among other steps.

"What we are trying to do is catch the terrorists," Black noted. "The thesis was about trying to shore up gaps in the current system to prevent employees in the aviation domain who have unrestricted access from doing nefarious things."

2) For the TSA and airport security professionals, the Atlanta case exemplified a perfect example of insider threat – a current airline employee with identification and access to restricted areas would bring the guns to the airport. A former employee would purchase a passenger ticket to New York and the pair would meet in a restroom where a bag of guns would be exchanged.

Perhaps understandably, some powerful elected officials in response called for 100 percent screening of all federal and airline workers at airports. Though the Atlanta case was a criminal matter rather than a homeland security issue, the worry was that terrorists could use the same weaknesses to commit terrorist acts. The TSA's Aviation Safety Advisory Committee, on which Black serves, was assigned a 90-day period to advise on wholesale employee screening.

And therein lays the thrust of Black's message: "100 percent screening sounds good, but it is a farce."

The prospect is unworkable, he said, because tens of thousands of people work at major airports, about 32,000 in Dallas and more than 45,000 in Atlanta, for example. Those workers don't just pass through access points when checking in to work as some must traverse in and out of restricted areas throughout the day.

“I go through checkpoints about 30 times a day,” Black said. “Imagine 32,000 people doing that to already congested checkpoints. It would slow us down and at the end of the day there are still ways to get around screening.”

Gaining an employee badge requires FBI fingerprinting and a criminal history check with 28 offenses that disqualify an applicant. A vulnerability Black identified is that the criminal checks date back 10 years. One of the defendants in the Atlanta airport case had a prohibited offense on his record, but it was outside the 10-year window.

“What we are trying to do is catch the terrorists,” Black noted. “The thesis was about trying to shore up gaps in the current system to prevent employees in the aviation domain who have unrestricted access from doing nefarious things.”

3) The TSA’s Aviation Security Advisory Committee is amid a review of employee access policies and the potential impacts of requiring 100 percent screening. Congressional hearings are expected to follow the release of its review.

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Associated file: [Managing the Insider Aviation Threat](#)

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