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A Broken Model: Solving America's Airport Security System

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Introduction

In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the need for security heightened in all aspects, especially for airports, as resentful Americans looked to President George W. Bush for answers.

In response, body scanners arose with the intentions and promises offering speedy checking times and processing large volumes of people at once, however, the implementation of these scanners comes with a hefty list of consequences; they cause privacy, health, and efficacy concerns, and there are much better alternatives to add to and even replace them.

Although doing away with body scanners entirely is probably not feasible, we should limit and reduce their usage in the US airport security model because the costs outweigh the benefits.

In the meantime more research in high-tech solutions should continue appropriately so that these then-reliable techniques may be made for the future.

Ingested Explosive Materials[1]

Body scanners cannot detect explosives and triggers if they have been ingested or are within cavities of the body.

In July 2009, an Al-Qaeda member passed security checks and reached the Prince of Saudi Arabia, blowing himself up but only slightly injuring the prince, having inserted a half-kilo of explosives and a detonator in his anus (240).

The "underwear bomber," Al-Asiri, passed through security checks at two different airports before arriving at his target.

The manufacturers of the body scanners have admitted that they would not have been able to detect the explosives "because it was in a light powdered form and the detonator was hidden in a body cavity" (240).

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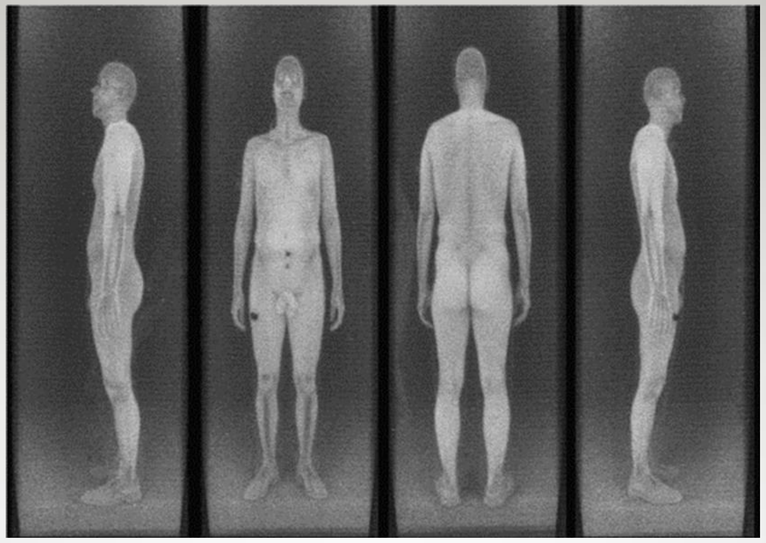


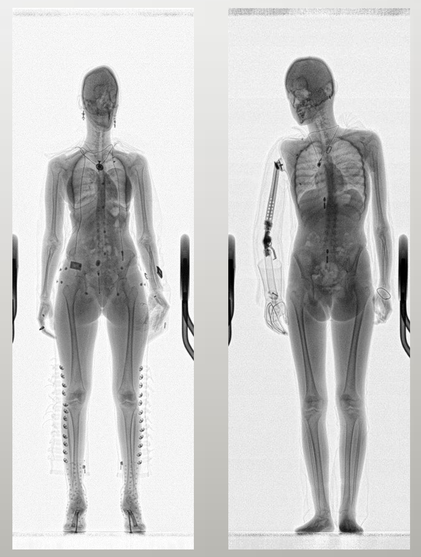
Figure 1. This is a detailed view of a man's body scanning photo[1]. It clearly shows the figure of the man naked, including his genitals and body size[1].

Health and Privacy[1]

Since the long-term health effects are still unknown, this is concerning for people with the frequent exposure to low-dose radiation, especially pregnant women, children, airport employees, and other people who have certain chronic health problems (235).

The body scanner images expose passengers' whole nakedness through their clothing, including breasts, genitalia, stomach girth, prosthetics, silicon breasts, diapers, menstrual pads and other highly private components as well.

Figure 2 (left). This shows a woman with silicon breasts[1].
Figure 3. This shows a woman with a prosthetic arm[1].



Systematic Components

According to the Department of Commerce, the customs processing times and clearance has seen a significant rise between the pre and post 9/11 periods, from 26 to 35 minutes, or 35% (8-13)[2].

The U.S. should not waste money on hiring 28,000 federal civil service screeners as planned, but should create higher and more effective regulations and enforce them when necessary (1-3). "You get what you pay for. Since America's Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has set no standards for training, does very little unannounced inspection, and issues only token, it is no wonder that today's airports use poorly trained, minimum-wage screeners" (2)[3].

Alternatives

In creating his profile, DEA Agent Paul Markonni observed certain key characteristics of people who fit in his profiles for drug trafficking or sky-jacking[4].

Future Attribute Screening Technology (FAST) will be used to discern a person's positive or negative intentions and deter terrorism[5].

Several different security techniques that are in use at U.S. airports could be reformed, including hand searches, explosive-sniffing dogs, explosive detection systems, and explosive trace detection machines[6].

Israel's security system began an "Express Entry" for frequent flyers in 1998, which reduces passenger screening time from two hours to 15 minutes (20)[7].

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