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U.S.
**EXCLUSIVE: TRANSGENDER TRAVELERS
SINGLED OUT IN TSA SCREENINGS, DOCS SHOW**
ETHAN MILLER / GETTY IMAGES

Traveling while trans is particularly difficult, as sensitivity training is limited in the TSA

May 26, 2014 5:00AM ET

by **Alissa Bohling** - [@AlissaBohling](#)

Department of Homeland Security documents obtained last month reveal details of incidents in which transgender travelers were subjected to heightened scrutiny when passing through airport security checkpoints.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests netted civil rights complaints, incident reports and internal memos and emails from the DHS's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties and the Transportation Security Administration. They show that trans people have been required to undergo pat-down searches by officers of the opposite gender, reveal or remove items such as chest binders and prosthetic penises and defend challenges to their gender identities and their right to opt out of body scans, among other problems.

A [2011 UCLA study](#) estimated that about 700,000 U.S. adults are transgender, or 0.3 percent of the adult population. An [estimate by the Transgender Law Center](#) put the number higher, at 2 to 5 percent of the population. But gender identity and expression are not fixed categories, and many trans people choose to keep their gender identities private. Attempts to survey the transgender population have begun only recently. Data on trans children is even less certain, although a new study is underway at Case Western Reserve University.

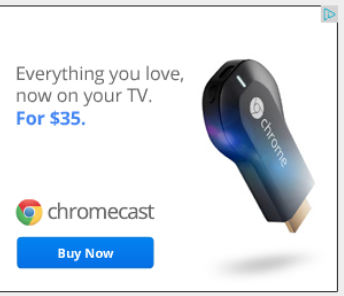
The body scan machines used at most airports nationwide feature pink and blue start buttons, which activate computer algorithms designed to screen female and male passengers. If a TSA officer presses the wrong button or if a passenger has body characteristics of more than one gender, unexpected body shapes may register as anomalies. These are considered potential threats and prompt an additional screening in the form of a pat-down. At Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) in 2012, a trans woman was selected for a secondary screening after the body scanner identified a "groin anomaly." During the pat-down search, drugs were found in her pocket, and she was arrested.

Groin anomaly triggers pat-down at LAX (p. 1)

TS PM shift -- a transgender male passenger alarmed the AIT for a groin anomaly. The male passenger had breast implants but also a penis which lead to the IO assuming it was a female with a groin anomaly. The passenger presented himself as female so the RPD was conducted by a female LTSD. During the RPD, drugs were discovered in the pocket. The passenger was ultimately arrested.

A trans passenger was selected for a pat-down after presenting with a "groin anomaly" and was arrested after drugs were discovered on the passenger's person.

The screening problems chronicled in the documents confirm concerns long held by transgender people and their supporters, like Portland, Oregon, resident Joy, who asked that her last name be withheld. Last year she took a long-



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awaited trip to Europe without her partner because he had fears about going through security. "Since he has not had bottom surgery," she said, "I think the fear was, 'What's going to happen when I don't have all the body parts that they expect?'" I got home, and I thought, he cannot be the only person that is concerned about this." She co-organized an informational session on trans people and the TSA held in March at the Portland branch of the Q Center, an LGBT organization.

The firsthand accounts in the TSA records include a complaint from a trans passenger who was searched by an officer of the opposite gender at Las Vegas' McCarran Airport in August 2012; the traveler called the incident "one of the most uncomfortable and terrifying experiences of my life."

Complaint about treatment of a trans passenger at Las Vegas McCarran Airport (p. 1)

I am writing to you in complaint that as a U.S. citizen and traveler, I was treated in an incorrect and discomforting manner by a TSA staff member at my most recent visit to the Las Vegas McCarran Airport while going through security. Since I identify as transgender, I asked to opt-out of the body scanners. In response, a TSA security staffer who was standing at the entrance at the metal detector doorway, asked me why I couldn't go through the scanner, saying it did not have x-rays. I said that I cannot [REDACTED] still inquisitively inquired as to why I couldn't go through the scanners. After a few asks, I told [REDACTED] I had confidentiality issues, which triggered [REDACTED] to look me a certain way, doubtfully, and make me feel uncomfortable [REDACTED] shouted [REDACTED] (loudly so that everyone could hear)

A trans passenger was searched by an officer of the opposite gender at Las Vegas McCarran Airport in August 2012 and later submitted a complaint to the TSA about the incident.

At Louisville International Airport in Kentucky the same month, a trans man who wore a brace around his chest missed his flight after being selected for a pat-down screening that the subsequent complaint described as inappropriate and exaggerated. At LAX, also in 2012, another trans man wearing a strap-on was required to remove it and put it through the X-ray machine despite his telling the TSA officer that "this item is as much a part of her [sic] as a prosthetic leg or arm would be to an amputee," according to an email the officer wrote to the airport's TSA customer-service manager.

In an incident described by an LAX transportation security manager in a July 2011 memo, another passenger at LAX told the manager she identified as female and "if he [sic] was to be screened by a male he would feel violated." The manager insisted three times that the passenger's gender presentation was male; the passenger was ultimately screened by a male.

July 2011 memo from a Transportation Security Manager at LAX (p. 1)

At approximately 2335 LTSC [REDACTED] approached me stating that there was male who's stating that he's identifying his self as a female. I told him that we have to screen him as he presents his self. I walked over to the screening area between lanes two and three. There was a white male between the age of 28 to 30 sitting in the chair wearing half button shirt on top of a white t-shirt and a pair of blue jeans. His face had hair on it as if he hadn't shaven in one to two days. He was speaking with LTSC [REDACTED] telling him that he wants to be screened by a female and that he identifies his self as a female. He also stated that if he was to be screened by a male he would feel violated. I explained to the male passenger that he would have to be screened by a male. He then stated who's to say who's a male and whose a female. And that he's identifying his self verbally as a female. I explained that I understood that he identified with females but he was presenting his self as a male. And that we would have to screen him as such. I asked him what time was his flight. He replied 0140.

A trans passenger who identified as female was ultimately screened by a male.

It is unclear whether TSA policy has changed since the filing of the FOIA request in September 2012 and the release of the documents this April. The documents include a page from a training manual on same-gender screening, which reads, "An individual's gender is what he or she purports himself or herself to be." According to TSA press secretary Ross Feinstein, that guideline is still in use. According to the [TSA's website](#), "Travelers should neither be asked to nor agree to lift, remove or raise any article of clothing to reveal a prosthetic and should not be asked to remove it." DHS spokesman S.Y. Lee said the agency couldn't comment on individual incidents or provide a timeline of any potential policy changes.

Feinstein said that the agency has no formal policy specific to transgender passengers and that there are no anticipated changes to TSA's policies and procedures at this time.

The National Center for Transgender Equality's policy director, Harper Jean Tobin, thinks the screening of trans passengers has improved. She said the NCTE has received "significantly fewer horror stories, significantly fewer anxious phone calls and emails" in the past two to three years. However, she said, "We still hear from people that they don't fly or they avoid flying whenever they can."

"There's no doubt that it impacts people's ability to visit family, vacation, travel for business," said Tobin.

“Anytime that the government sort of casts a wide net over Americans and subjects them to scrutiny of their bodies and their clothing, any group of people that is seen as somehow different is going to have problems in some significant number of cases.”

— Harper Jean Tobin
National Center for Transgender Equality

Feinstein said all TSA screening officers receive sensitivity training, though it does not generally include content

specific to transgender passengers. In fact, the NCTE offered to conduct training geared toward trans passengers for TSA officials for years but was rebuffed. Finally, in March, Tobin began doing Web-based training for 500 to 1,000 of the TSA's roughly 2,600 passenger-support specialists. She expects to complete it this summer. Travelers who would like help getting through security may request assistance from a specialist at the checkpoint or by calling the TSA Cares hotline 72 hours before their trip.

Tobin is optimistic about the current training but says it is a mitigation, not a solution. "Anytime that the government sort of casts a wide net over Americans and subjects them to scrutiny of their bodies and their clothing, any group of people that is seen as somehow different is going to have problems in some significant number of cases," she says.

Feinstein said transgender travelers concerned about communicating discreetly with TSA officers may use the [notification card](#) that is available to passengers with circumstances that may affect screenings, such as health conditions, disabilities and medical devices. He stressed that any passenger who is uncomfortable going through the body scanner may opt out and undergo a pat-down instead.

That option isn't always popular. "The pat-down is what I completely want to avoid," said Kole Myrick, a technology student who attended the Q Center event and is waiting to update the gender marker on his ID from F to M until he can afford the administrative costs to [change his name](#) at the same time. "What if I am packing [wearing a prosthetic] but I still have a female gender marker? They're going to think I'm hiding something down my pants to get through security."

According to Feinstein, TSA officers are trained not to ask for travel documents after the initial document check prior to the body scan.

Myrick is a vocal trans-rights activist who says he is comfortable speaking out on behalf of people who don't have a voice. But he's not interested in discussing the details of his identity with the TSA. "I'm kind of an open book ... [but] I want my privacy if it's a private matter."

TSA incidents at Las Vegas and Los Angeles airports

A transgender passenger complains about TSA at Las Vegas McCarran Airport

July 2011 TSA Memo about screening incident at LAX

Two incidents involving transgender passengers and the TSA at LAX

3 documents

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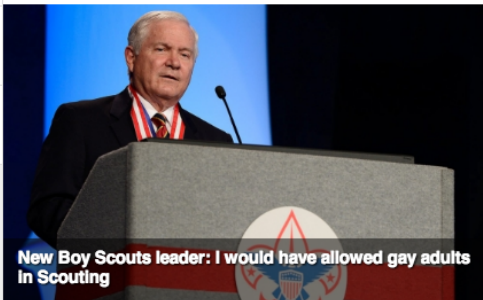


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