

# Airport security: an exercise in absurdity

Our reactionary approach toward policing air travel comes at a cost and distracts from more pressing issues.

*Marcus Gee, The Globe and Mail, August 11, 2018*

The couple in front of me in the security line at Vancouver's airport looked to be about 70. He was a big sunburned guy in cargo shorts and floppy hat. She wore a sleeveless blouse and sandals. A less threatening pair would be hard to imagine. Unless I was off the mark and these were diabolical masters of disguise, they were just a man and woman on vacation.

Yet after they filed through the scanner and their carry-on stuff reached the end of the conveyor belt, an official pulled the woman aside and, asked her to open her orange cloth backpack. Flustered, she emptied out the contents, including a plastic bag with a collection of medicine bottles. The official proceeded to peer through them before letting her go on her way.

A minor inconvenience, in the end, and she didn't offer a peep of complaint. But, really, how ridiculous. Every day at Canadian airports, travelers in their thousands line up for the familiar ritual of clearing airport security. We empty our pockets. We surrender the potentially lethal bottles of Aunt Sue's homemade jam that we forgot to pack in our checked luggage. We take off our coats and our

belts. We give over our phones. We pile all our junk on a plastic tray. And we wait.

Add up the wasted time, the annoyance and the gigantic cost, and you end with quite a toll. The price tag for all the gadgets and guards runs to three-quarters of a billion a year. The money comes straight from the pockets of the weary flyers in those security lines. They pay a surcharge to fund the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority, the federal agency established after the Sept 11 attacks to handle security screening.

Despite an, extra quarter billion from Ottawa in the last budget, CATSA struggles to do its job. As *The Globe* reported last week, the National Airlines Council of Canada says the security system is "bursting at the seams." CATSA aims to screen passengers in 15 minutes or less, % per cent of the time, on average. The agency said last year that it can't possibly meet that standard with its current resources.

And so the lines stretch on. Air travel was no picnic to begin with. Now it is often a misery. Security checks have added so much time to the average air journey that unless if you are going somewhere more than, say, half a day's drive away, taking the car makes more sense.

Every scare leads to a new security check.

One foiled plot led to-a ban on carry-on liquids in containers of more than 100 ml - all those dangerous hair gels and yogurt drinks. The pathetic attempt by the "underwear bomber" to bring down an airliner led to stepped up pat-downs and scanners that can see through passengers' clothes. An even sorer try by the "shoe bomber" ended with millions of passengers padding unshod through security. Even lacrosse sticks are on the prohibited-items list at Canadian airports.

Why fliers need to endure all this is unclear. As the late Hans Rosling noted in his bestselling book *Factfulness*, "Since 2001, no terrorist has managed- to kill a single individual by hijacking a commercial airliner."

While deaths from terrorism have been rising in countries such as Afghanistan and Nigeria, they have been falling in rich countries such as Canada and the United States.

Terrorism on U.S. soil has killed about 159 people a year over the past 20 years, while alcohol contributed to the deaths of about 69,000 a year.

We lavish far too much money and attention on preventing dramatic rare events, far too little on fighting everyday flights. The airport security lineup may the most visible example of this unfortunate tendency.

Some degree of airline security

is necessary, of course. The simple measure of barring and reinforcing cockpit doors on airliners did much to thwart Sept. 11-style hijackers. But should Canada be spending hundreds of millions screening old ladies with backpacks? Wouldn't that money be better spent on collecting intelligence that might reveal actual plots by real terrorists? Wouldn't we be wiser to expand trusted-traveller

programs that relieve security of examining every straw in the haystack?

Yet another hurdle at airport security is "enhanced screening measures of electronic devices."

Vancouver security selected me for this random check. A pleasant woman in white uniform took my laptop and examined it with a sleek, no doubt enormously expensive

machine. They put my ordinary black laptop through the conveyor-belt scanner anyway. Then, when I took it out of the tray, they asked me to open it, just for good measure.

I didn't mind, really. I just wondered what possible good it was doing. Ottawa should be asking the same question.