



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on December 9, 2011

Half of Americans Opposed to X-Ray Scanners, Says Poll

The question posed to the respondents states, "If a security scanner existed which would significantly help in preventing terrorists from boarding a plane with powder, plastic, or liquid explosives, do you think the TSA should still use it even if it could cause perhaps six of the 100 million messengers who fly each year to eventually develop cancer?"

Those figures seen in the question came from a study out of the University of California in San Francisco, which was conducted by a professor of radiology and epidemiology.



Just 36 percent of the nearly 3,000 respondents answered yes, while 46 percent responded in the negative, and 18 percent remained undecided.

When the results of this poll were presented to TSA spokesman Michael McCarthy, he stated that the X-Ray scanners are "well within national standards."

"TSA's top priority is the safety of the traveling public and the use of advanced imaging technology is critical to the detection of both metallic and non-metallic threats," he said. "All results from independent evaluations confirm that these machines are safe for all passengers."

ProPublica felt compelled to conduct this recent poll following assertions by the TSA that most Americans were in favor of the scanners. The TSA cited a number of polls which show that Americans favored the scanners, but those polls weighed privacy issues versus the benefits of the machines, not health concerns. ProPublica explains, "Only one of these polls — by CBS News — asked specifically about X-ray body scanners, finding that 81 percent of Americans thought that such X-ray scanners should be used in airports. But that poll — like all others — did not mention the risk of cancer."

For the most part, Americans have been kept in the dark regarding the potential health risks of the X-ray machines, but recently, PBS NewsHour featured a report entitled, "U.S. Government Glossed Over Cancer Concerns." According to [NewsHour](#):

On Sept. 23, 1998, a panel of radiation safety experts gathered at a Hilton hotel in Maryland to evaluate a new device that could detect hidden weapons and contraband. The machine, known as the Secure 1000, beamed X-rays at people to see underneath their clothing.

One after another, the experts convened by the Food and Drug Administration raised questions about the machine because it violated a longstanding principle in radiation safety — that humans shouldn't be X-rayed unless there is a medical benefit.

"I think this is really a slippery slope," said Jill Lipoti, who was the director of New Jersey's radiation protection program. The device was already deployed in prisons; what was next, she and others asked — courthouses, schools, airports? "I am concerned ... with expanding this type of



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product for the traveling public,” said another panelist, Stanley Savic, the vice president for safety at a large electronics company. “I think that would take this thing to an entirely different level of public health risk.”

The machine’s inventor, Steven W. Smith, assured the panelists that it was highly unlikely that the device would see widespread use in the near future. At the time, only 20 machines were in operation in the entire country.

Little did Watson know that by 2011, millions of American airline passengers would be put through the radiation-emitting machines.

ProPublica/PBS NewsHour concluded that the U.S. government believes that security issues outweigh health risks, even when those risks have been confirmed. This is clear by the simple fact that it was not the FDA which made the decision to allow widespread use of the machines, but the TSA, whose sole purpose is to “prevent” terrorist attacks.

There are approximately 250 X-ray scanners in American airports, along with an additional 250 body scanners that use low-energy radio waves called millimeter waves. The body scanners are safer to use; however, like the X-ray scanners, they raised issues regarding privacy because images taken by the machines revealed genitalia, as well as breasts and buttocks. The TSA eventually addressed those concerns by making the images less graphic, but concerns regarding the use of radiation by the X-ray machines has been virtually scoffed at by the TSA.

Robin Kane, TSA’s assistant administrator for security technology, essentially glossed over the cancer threats that the machines pose, asserting that it’s more important to have both types of scanners to create competition. “It’s a really, really small amount relative to the security benefit you’re going to get,” Kane said. “Keeping multiple technologies in play is very worthwhile for the U.S. in getting that cost-effective solution — and being able to increase the capabilities of technology because you keep everyone trying to get the better mousetrap.”

The TSA is hoping to see one of the machines operating in every security lane in American airports by the year 2014. Every passenger will be directed through either one of the scanners, or a metal detector, and the only other alternative passengers will have is the enhanced pat-down.

John Pistole, head of the TSA, attempted to assuage concerns regarding the safety of the X-ray machines by assuring the Senate that his agency would conduct new evaluations of the safety of the machines, but shortly after [renege](#)d on that promise.

Meanwhile, Europe has already moved past the X-ray machines in response to the health concerns. In November, the European Commission adopted guidelines which outright ban the machines in the airports.

A press release for the European Commission [read](#), “In order not to risk jeopardizing citizens’ health and safety, only security scanners which do not use X-ray technology are added to the list of authorized methods for passenger screening at EU airports.”

Ironically, when U.K. passengers were asked a question similar to the one posed in the Harris poll, they came out in favor of the machines regardless of the health risks.

Breaking Travel News [reports](#), “Sunshine.co.uk carried out a flash poll of 967 Britons and asked each respondent questions about their opinions of the airport scanners that are used for security reasons.... Respondents were asked, ‘Do you think airport ‘strip-search’ scanners should be banned, in light of the



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cancer risks they could pose?’ and the majority, 67%, said ‘no’. They were then asked to explain their reason for this decision, to which 54% said they would rather ‘risk their health and travel safe’, whilst a fifth, 22%, said they didn’t believe the health risks.”

The British government, in response to the people of Britain, has decided to disregard the EU order to ban the machines, and will maintain its policy of “no scan, no fly” for travelers who refuse to enter the machines when requested.

It seems the U.S government is falling in line with the British policy, even as the American people stand opposed to the use of the X-ray scanners.

Photo: AP Images



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