

N.J. residents prefer full-body scanners over pat-downs, poll finds

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Steve Strunsky/The Star-Ledger



Enlarge

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Transportation Security Administration officials demonstrate the new Millimeter Wave Advanced Imaging Technology scanner at Newark Airport Terminal B on Oct. 28. (Ed Murray/The Star-Ledger)

Full-body scanners at Newark airport gallery (5 photos)

Amid concern over the intrusiveness of full-body scanners and enhanced pat-downs, New Jerseyans' support for airport screening measures in general varies depending upon how the question is asked, a new poll has found.

The Rutgers-Eagleton Institute of Politics poll released today found people are more likely to say some screening measures are too intrusive if first asked to think about scanners and patdowns.

In a polling experiment involving what political scientists call "priming," two groups of respondents were asked the same two questions: whether they supported "any airport security measure" and whether they believed some measures "go too far, violating personal privacy."

But while one group was asked the questions at the start of the poll, the other was first asked about their support for scanners and patdowns.

Among the first group, 50 percent of respondents said they supported any measure, while 41 percent said some measures go too far. Among the primed respondents, only 39 percent said they supported any measures, while 59 percent said some go too far.

"If you want to understand public opinion on this, I think the second version is better, in that the people have spent a moment thinking about the issue," said David Redlawsk, the poll director.

In a statement in response to the poll, the Transportation Security Administration said that over the Thanksgiving holiday, "air travelers

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nationwide continued to demonstrate their overwhelming support for TSA's security measures."

That support, the TSA said, represents "an understanding among travelers that the world we live in requires TSA employ the best available screening technology and methods to protect the traveling public."

Apart from the priming experiment, 62 percent of respondents said scans are necessary for airport security, while only 54 said the same was true of pat-downs.

Critics have derided the full-body scanners as "virtual strip searches" for their ability to see through passengers' clothes, and called the more aggressive pat-downs "grope" and even legalized "sexual assault," after complaints of screeners touching passengers' genitals. The scanners are optional, though passengers face an automatic pat-down if they opt out.

The telephone poll of 906 New Jersey residents, conducted over five days, has a margin of error of 3 percentage points.

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