

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-107144](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard—a multi-mission, maritime military service within the Department of Homeland Security is the nation’s lead federal maritime law enforcement agency. Composed of more than 55,000 personnel, the Coast Guard is responsible for, among other things, protecting the country’s maritime borders from encroachment, defending against illicit activity, and suppressing violations of federal law on, under, and over the seas.

This statement discusses: (1) Coast Guard law enforcement missions related to homeland security, and (2) challenges we have identified and recommendations we have made to Coast Guard related to managing its assets, workforce, and technology.

This statement is based on prior GAO reports published from April 2010 through July 2023, along with selected updates on Coast Guard efforts to address previous GAO recommendations. For these reports, GAO reviewed Coast Guard documentation, analyzed data, and interviewed agency officials. For selected recommendation updates, GAO reviewed Coast Guard documentation and met with Coast Guard officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made 31 recommendations to the Coast Guard in the reports covered by this statement. The Coast Guard generally agreed with the recommendations. As of November 2023, four of the recommendations have been implemented, two have been partially implemented, and 25 remain open. GAO continues to monitor the agency’s progress in implementing them.

View [GAO-24-107144](#). For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or macleodh@gao.gov

November 14, 2023

COAST GUARD

Asset, Workforce, and Technology Challenges Continue to Affect Law Enforcement Missions

What GAO Found

The Coast Guard is responsible for conducting 11 statutory missions, including three maritime law enforcement missions—drug interdiction, migrant interdiction, and other law enforcement (which includes preventing illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing). IUU fishing encompasses many illicit activities, including under-reporting the number of fish caught and using prohibited fishing gear. In September 2021, we reported that almost one quarter of the Coast Guard’s total estimated operating expenses for fiscal years 2011 through 2020 were for these three missions (annually averaging more than \$1.5 billion).

Coast Guard Vessel and Personnel Conducting Drug Interdiction Operation



Source: U.S. Coast Guard. | GAO-24-107144

GAO has previously identified challenges with the Coast Guard’s management of its assets, workforce, and technology that have affected the service’s ability to carry out missions. For example,

- In multiple reports, we found challenges with the acquisition of the Coast Guard’s newest cutters—the Offshore Patrol Cutter and Polar Security Cutter—that are intended to support law enforcement missions. For example, [in 2023 GAO found](#) that these acquisitions are billions of dollars over initial cost estimates and over 2 years behind schedule, increasing the risk of capability gaps. We made seven recommendations, including that the Coast Guard update its acquisition policy. DHS and the Coast Guard agreed with five of our recommendations and have taken some steps to implement them.
- GAO has found that the Coast Guard has not adequately determined its workforce needs. The Coast Guard has reported to Congress that it faces challenges meeting its daily mission demands because of workforce shortfalls. For example, [in February 2020](#), GAO found that the Coast Guard had assessed a small portion of its workforce needs. GAO recommended that Coast Guard update its workforce plan with timeframes and milestones to meet its workforce assessment goals. As of May 2023, Coast Guard officials said they had not yet taken these steps but indicated it could be feasible to develop a rough estimate of how many positions it plans to assess in the next five years.