



## Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Oceans,  
Fisheries, Climate Change, and  
Manufacturing, Committee on Commerce,  
Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

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# COAST GUARD

## Actions Needed to Address Persistent Challenges Hindering Efforts to Counter Illicit Maritime Drug Smuggling

Statement of Heather MacLeod, Director,  
Homeland Security and Justice

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-107785](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Oceans, Fisheries, Climate Change, and Manufacturing, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. government has identified illicit drugs, and criminal organizations that smuggle them, as significant threats. Many federal departments and agencies, particularly the Department of Defense and DHS, collaborate in efforts to reduce the availability of illicit drugs by countering their flow into the U.S. Given the federal government's challenges responding to the drug misuse crisis, GAO added national efforts to prevent, respond to, and recover from drug misuse to its High-Risk List.

This statement discusses (1) key federal coordination efforts to counter the maritime flow of illicit drugs and (2) challenges GAO has identified related to the Coast Guard carrying out its drug interdiction mission—and recommendations GAO has made to address these issues.

This statement is based on 36 prior GAO reports published from April 2010 through June 2024, along with selected updates on efforts to address previous GAO recommendations. For these reports, GAO reviewed agency documentation, analyzed data, and interviewed agency officials. For selected recommendation updates, GAO reviewed agency documentation and met with officials.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO made 105 recommendations in the reports covered by this statement. Agencies generally agreed with the recommendations. As of September 2024, 46 recommendations have been implemented. GAO continues to monitor the agencies' progress in implementing the remaining open recommendations.

View [GAO-24-107785](#). For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or [macleodh@gao.gov](mailto:macleodh@gao.gov).

September 19, 2024

## COAST GUARD

### Actions Needed to Address Persistent Challenges Hindering Efforts to Counter Illicit Maritime Drug Smuggling

## What GAO Found

Various federal agencies collaborate through task forces to detect and interdict the maritime flow of illicit drugs like cocaine and fentanyl. The task forces include members from Department of Defense and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) components, such as the Coast Guard. In 2019, GAO reported that the task forces generally coordinated effectively using mechanisms like working groups and liaison officers. However, task force agencies have not consistently assessed their efforts. GAO made 4 recommendations in this area.

#### Coast Guard Vessel and Aircraft Interdict Cocaine-laden Vessel Headed to U.S.



Source: U.S. Coast Guard courtesy photo. | [GAO-24-107785](#)

GAO has previously identified several challenges the Coast Guard faces that hinder its drug interdiction mission efforts. These include (1) asset readiness and availability, (2) acquisition challenges, and (3) workforce shortages.

- Coast Guard aircraft and vessels have not met availability targets. In 2023, GAO reported that Medium Endurance Cutters—a key asset for interdicting drugs—were not consistently meeting operational availability targets. The Coast Guard noted that the declining condition of the cutters risked decreased capability for meeting mission requirements.
- The Coast Guard faces persistent challenges managing acquisition program delays and affordability. For example, GAO found challenges with Coast Guard's acquisition of the Offshore Patrol Cutter that is intended to replace the Medium Endurance Cutter. This new cutter is essential for the service's drug interdiction mission, but acquisition delays are expected to create operational capability gaps through at least 2039.
- The Coast Guard reports having a shortage of about 10 percent of its enlisted workforce. However, as GAO found in 2020, the amount of the shortfall is unknown because the Coast Guard has not determined its service-wide workforce needs. As of November 2023, the Coast Guard reported that it completed workforce determinations for 15 percent of its workforce—as of September 2024, it had not implemented GAO's recommendation to develop a plan for doing so for the rest of its workforce. GAO has made 34 recommendations to address Coast Guard workforce issues; 28 have not yet been implemented.

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Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Sullivan, and Members of the Subcommittee:

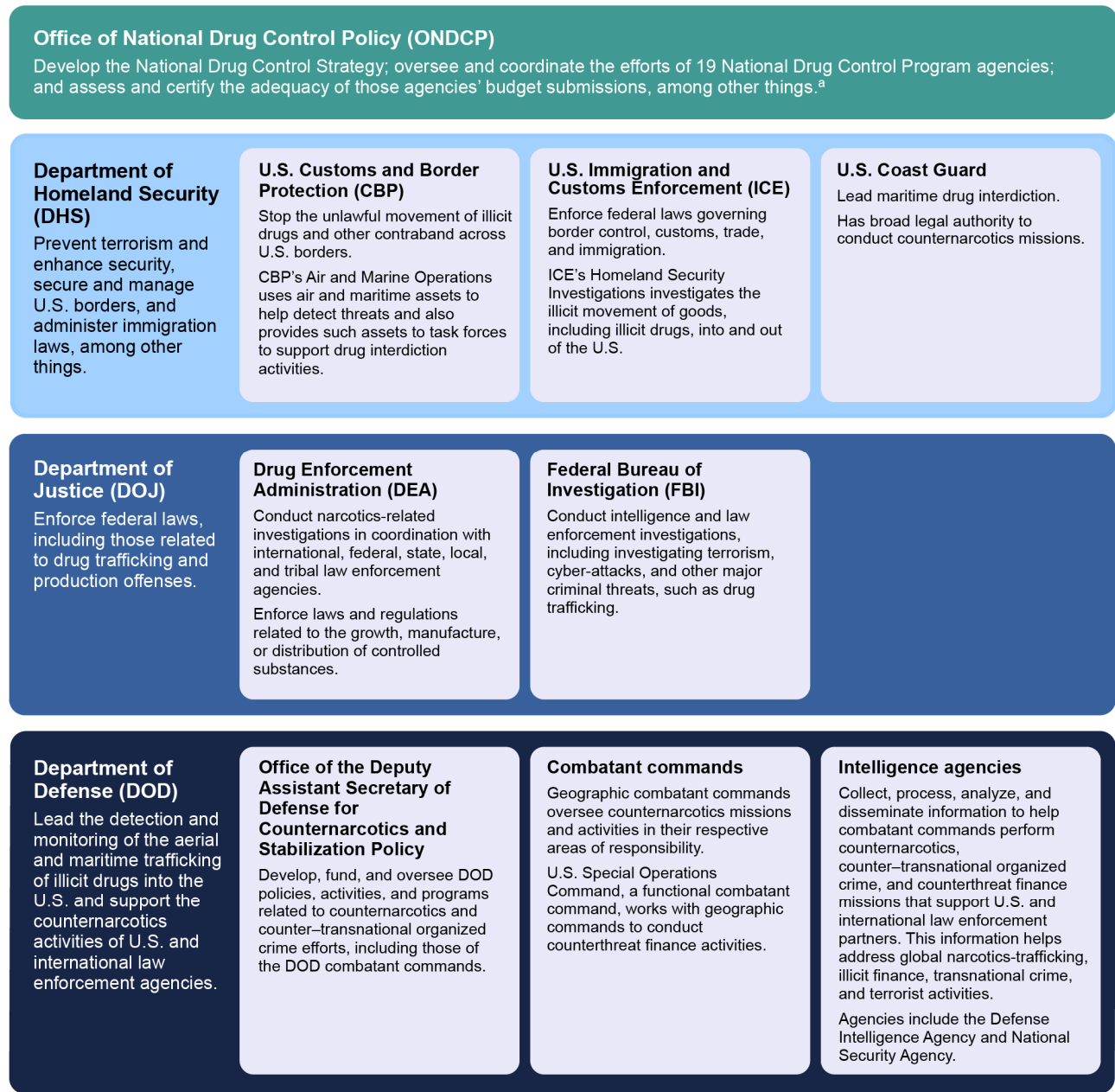
I am pleased to be here to today to discuss federal coordination efforts to counter illicit drugs and challenges the U.S. Coast Guard faces in carrying out its drug interdiction mission. The U.S. government has identified transnational and domestic criminal organizations trafficking and smuggling illicit drugs as a significant threat to the public, law enforcement, and national security. Provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show nearly 100,000 drug overdose deaths during the 12-month period ending in March 2024.<sup>1</sup>

As shown in figure 1, many federal departments and agencies coordinate on efforts to counter the flow of illicit drugs into the U.S. Among them are the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which is responsible for securing U.S. borders to prevent illegal activity while facilitating legitimate trade and travel, and the Department of Defense (DOD), which is the single lead agency responsible for detecting and monitoring the aerial and maritime transport of illegal drugs like cocaine and fentanyl into the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup>According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reported provisional counts for 12-month ending periods are the number of deaths received and processed for the 12-month period ending in the month indicated. Drug overdose deaths are often initially reported with no cause of death (pending investigation) because they require lengthy investigation, including toxicology testing. As a result, reported provisional counts may not include all deaths that occurred during a given time and are subject to change.

**Figure 1: Selected Federal Departments and Components with Counter Drug Missions and Activities**



Source: GAO summary of information provided by the entities listed. | GAO-24-107785

<sup>a</sup>The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) is a component of the Executive Office of the President. In addition to the entities shown, ONDCP coordinates with the Departments of Health and Human Services, State, and the Treasury on counternarcotics activities.

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The Coast Guard—a multi-mission, maritime military service within DHS—is the lead federal agency for maritime drug interdiction. It coordinates with DOD in joint task forces to carry out its drug interdiction mission.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the Coast Guard is a major contributor of vessels and aircraft deployed to disrupt the flow of illicit drugs.<sup>3</sup> The Coast Guard shares maritime drug interdiction responsibility with U.S. Customs and Border Protection’s (CBP) Air and Marine Operations and Border Patrol. According to the Coast Guard Commandant, in fiscal year 2023, the agency intercepted more than 212,000 pounds of cocaine and 54,000 pounds of marijuana.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, the majority of the cocaine shipped to the U.S. travels on maritime routes from South America and through the eastern Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea.<sup>5</sup> Precursor chemicals may be shipped from Asia to Mexico, sometimes as legitimate commerce, where they may be combined into fentanyl or other controlled substances.<sup>6</sup> Figure 2 shows maritime and land routes for precursor chemical and illicit drug smuggling.

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<sup>2</sup>10 U.S.C. § 124 designates DOD as the single lead agency of the federal government for the detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs into the U.S. The Coast Guard, within DHS, is the lead federal agency for interdiction of maritime drug smugglers in international waters. This is because the Coast Guard may make inquiries, examinations, inspections, searches, seizures, and arrests upon the high seas and waters over which the United States has jurisdiction to prevent, detect, and suppress violations of U.S. laws. See 14 U.S.C. § 522.

<sup>3</sup>Coast Guard aviation and vessel assets include a fleet of about 200 fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, about 250 cutters, and more than 1,600 boats. As of July 2023, the Coast Guard had a workforce of about 57,000 personnel. GAO, *Coast Guard: Aircraft Fleet and Aviation Workforce Assessments Needed*, [GAO-24-106374](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 9, 2024).

<sup>4</sup>Admiral Linda L. Fagan, Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard, *The Coast Guard’s Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request*, testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., May 23, 2024.

<sup>5</sup>Drug Enforcement Administration, *2020 National Drug Threat Assessment*, DEA-DCT-DIR-008-21 (March 2021). The majority of known maritime drug flow is conveyed via noncommercial vessels through the Western Hemisphere Transit Zone—a 6 million square mile area of routes drug smugglers use to transport illicit drugs that includes the eastern Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean Sea. GAO, *Coast Guard: Resources Provided for Drug Interdiction Operations in the Transit Zone, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands*, [GAO-14-527](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 14, 2014).

<sup>6</sup>Precursor chemicals are chemicals or substances that may be intended for illicit drug production.

**Figure 2: Maritime and Land Routes for Precursor Chemical and Illicit Drug Smuggling**



Source: U.S. Coast Guard based on the Consolidated Counterdrug Database; Map Resources (Map). | GAO-24-107785

Note: Precursor chemicals are chemicals or substances that may be intended for illicit drug production.

Given challenges the federal government faces in responding to the drug misuse crisis, in March 2021, we added national efforts to prevent, respond to, and recover from drug misuse to our High-Risk List. We identified several challenges in the federal government’s response to drug misuse, such as the need for more effective implementation and

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monitoring, and related ongoing efforts to address the issue, including drug interdiction.<sup>7</sup>

My statement today discusses (1) key federal maritime coordination efforts to counter the flow of illicit drugs to the U.S. and (2) challenges we have identified related to the Coast Guard carrying out its drug interdiction mission. This statement is based primarily on 36 reports published from April 2010 to June 2024. For the reports we cite in this statement, among other methodologies, we analyzed DOD, DHS, and Coast Guard policy, documentation, and data, and interviewed officials from agency headquarters and selected field units. More detailed information on our scope and methodology can be found in the reports we cite in this statement.

For this statement, we reviewed documentation and met with officials to obtain updated information on the status of agency implementation of selected recommendations through September 2024. In addition, we reviewed Coast Guard budget and performance documents since 2018 to determine the extent the service reported meeting its drug interdiction performance goals from fiscal year 2014 through 2023.

We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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<sup>7</sup>See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Dedicated Leadership Needed to Address Limited Progress in Most High-Risk Areas*, [GAO-21-119SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 2021). We issue an update to the High-Risk List every two years at the start of each new session of Congress. The most recent update was issued in April 2023. See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to Be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, [GAO-23-106203](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 20, 2023).

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## Federal Agencies Coordinate to Counter Illicit Drug Flow in the Maritime Domain, but Could Better Assess Their Efforts

### Examples of Task Force Activity to Combat Illicit Drug Trafficking

**Department of Defense Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF)-South.** When JIATF-South received information about a potential illicit drug smuggling event, such as in the eastern Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, or the Caribbean Sea, it used available air and maritime assets to detect and monitor the suspect smuggling vessel. Once JIATF-South located the vessel and had assets in place, it turned over control of the assets to the relevant law enforcement agencies (e.g., the Coast Guard) to interdict the smuggling vessel and any illicit drugs on board.

**Department of Defense JIATF-West.** Task force shared intelligence on precursor chemicals with JIATF-South because precursor chemicals often pass from Asia to North America.

**Department of Homeland Security Joint Task Force-East.** Task force partner agencies conducted operations to counter threats from illicit pathways for drug and migrant smuggling in the eastern Caribbean.

Note: Each task force is directed by a member of the Coast Guard.

Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information. | GAO-24-107785

Federal agencies coordinate with international partners and each other to stem the flow of illegal drugs into the U.S through the maritime domain. For example, in 2018 we reported that federal agencies coordinated with foreign governments, such as China, Mexico, and Canada, as well as with international organizations, to limit the production of illicit synthetic opioids.<sup>8</sup> They did this by sharing information on emerging trends, helping to expand the regulation of illicit substances, and building capacity to thwart the distribution of illicit drugs. We reported that coordination could also include the sharing of international data to analyze vessel movements that may indicate illegal activity.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, military and federal law enforcement agencies coordinated through several task forces to detect and interdict illicit drugs, such as cocaine and fentanyl, and their precursors on maritime routes. DOD and DHS lead and operate certain task forces—Joint Interagency Task Force

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<sup>8</sup>GAO, *Illicit Opioids: While Greater Attention Given to Combating Synthetic Opioids, Agencies Need to Better Assess their Efforts*, [GAO-18-205](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 29, 2018).

<sup>9</sup>GAO, *Combating Illegal Fishing: Clear Authority Could Enhance U.S. Efforts to Partner with Other Nations at Sea*, [GAO-22-104234](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 5, 2021).



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(JIATF)-South, JIATF-West, and DHS Joint Task Force-East.<sup>10</sup> Each task force is directed by a member of the Coast Guard.<sup>11</sup>

In 2019, we reported that the task forces generally coordinated effectively using mechanisms that aligned with leading practices.<sup>12</sup> These mechanisms, such as working groups and liaison officers, helped to minimize duplication of missions and activities. Figure 3 shows a seizure of more than 12,000 pounds of cocaine in the Caribbean Sea in September 2023, which was the result of JIATF-South coordination between Coast Guard, CBP Air and Marine Operations, and international partners.

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<sup>10</sup>An additional task force—Joint Task Force-North—consists solely of DOD personnel and does not generally operate in the maritime domain.

<sup>11</sup>In 2019, task force officials told us that Coast Guard leadership encourages participation from both DOD and DHS because the Coast Guard is both a military and a law enforcement agency. GAO, *Drug Control: Certain DOD and DHS Joint Task Forces Should Enhance Their Performance Measures to Better Assess Counterdrug Activities*, [GAO-19-441](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2019).

<sup>12</sup>[GAO-19-441](#).

**Figure 3: Joint Interagency Task Force-South Cocaine Seizure in the Caribbean Sea, September 2023**



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Santiago Gomez. | GAO-24-107785

While such seizures anecdotally demonstrate the value of task force efforts, our recent work has shown that these task forces have not consistently assessed their efforts.<sup>13</sup> In 2024, we made four recommendations to improve agencies' assessment efforts. Fully implementing these recommendations is essential for making decisions about priorities, resource allocations, and strategies for improvements.

## Longstanding Challenges Hinder the Coast Guard's Drug Interdiction Mission Efforts

Challenges have hindered the Coast Guard's ability to meet drug interdiction mission demands. These challenges include (1) declining readiness of its vessels and aircraft, (2) acquisition associated delays in replacing them, and (3) workforce shortages and retention challenges. Notably, the Coast Guard has not met its annual primary drug interdiction

<sup>13</sup>GAO, *Counternarcotics: DOD Should Improve Coordination and Assessment of Its Activities*, [GAO-24-106281](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 16, 2024) and *Department of Homeland Security: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Oversight of Joint Task Forces*, [GAO-24-106855](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 7, 2024).

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mission performance target in any of the past 10 fiscal years.<sup>14</sup> The Coast Guard's challenge of balancing its varied mission priorities has grown as it is called on to do more with its limited resources.

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## Coast Guard Faces Declining Asset Readiness and Challenges Acquiring Replacements

### Declining Availability and Readiness of Assets and Infrastructure

Our work has shown that the Coast Guard's aircraft and vessels have faced readiness and availability challenges, while its supporting shore infrastructure requires considerable repair. Coast Guard assets have been in a state of decline for decades. For example, the Coast Guard relies on its Medium Endurance Cutters for its drug interdiction mission.<sup>15</sup> However, we reported in July 2012 that Medium Endurance Cutters did not meet operational hours targets from fiscal years 2005 through 2011 and that declining operational capacity hindered mission performance.<sup>16</sup> In June 2023, we reported that Medium Endurance Cutters were not consistently meeting operational availability targets, and the Coast Guard noted that the declining physical condition of the cutters puts them at significant risk of decreased capability for meeting mission requirements.

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<sup>14</sup>The Coast Guard's primary drug interdiction performance measure is its removal rate for cocaine from noncommercial maritime vessels in the maritime transit zone. Noncommercial maritime smuggling involves the use of various vessels, including speedboats, fishing vessels, and submersible vessels. This performance measure assesses the percentage of cocaine directly seized or observed being jettisoned, scuttled, or destroyed as a result of Coast Guard actions relative to the total known flow of cocaine through the transit zone.

<sup>15</sup>The Coast Guard operates a fleet of 28 Medium Endurance Cutters, consisting of 14 210-foot and 13 270-foot Medium Endurance Cutters, along with the 282-foot Alex Haley Medium Endurance Cutter. These cutters are deployed for a wide range of mission operations, including search and rescue; interdicting illegal drugs and migrants; enforcing fishing laws; and securing ports, waterways, and coastal areas.

<sup>16</sup>GAO, *Coast Guard: Legacy Vessels' Declining Conditions Reinforce Need for More Realistic Operational Targets*, [GAO-12-741](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 31, 2012).

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We made five recommendations to improve the Offshore Patrol Cutter acquisition program to the Coast Guard in June 2023.<sup>17</sup>

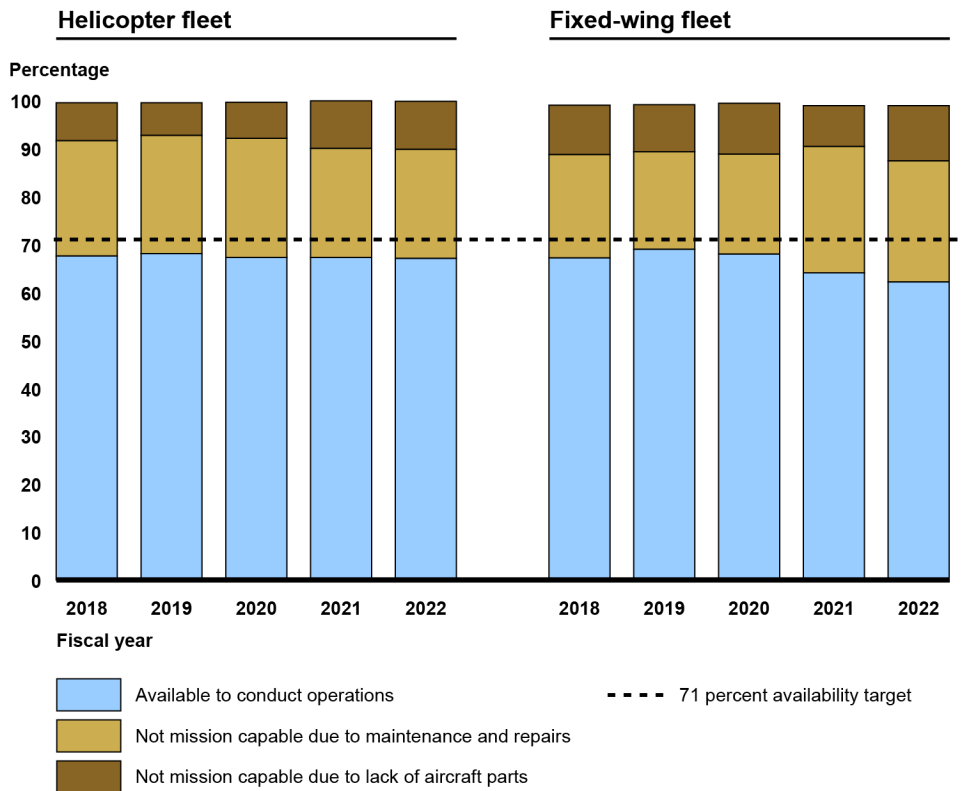
The Coast Guard's asset readiness challenges are not contained to its cutters. In April 2024, we reported that the Coast Guard's aircraft generally did not meet the Coast Guard's 71 percent availability target during fiscal years 2018 through 2022, as shown in figure 4.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Offshore Patrol Cutter Program Needs to Mature Technology and Design*, [GAO-23-105805](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 20, 2023) and *Coast Guard: Opportunities Exist to Reduce Risk for the Offshore Patrol Cutter Program*, [GAO-21-9](#) (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 28, 2020). In our June 2023 report, we also reiterated that eight recommendations we made in October 2020 to improve the program continued to have merit. As of August 2024, eight of these 13 recommendations were not implemented.

<sup>18</sup>[GAO-24-106374](#). Coast Guard officials attributed the aircraft fleet generally not meeting availability targets to maintenance and repair challenges for its aircraft.

**Figure 4: Coast Guard Helicopter and Fixed-wing Fleet Availability, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-24-107785

In April 2024, we reported the Coast Guard also faces key decisions in managing its aging aircraft fleet and implementing an extensive modernization program across all of its aircraft types.<sup>19</sup> In particular, the Coast Guard is embarking on a significant operational change from a largely short-range helicopter fleet to a medium-range fleet. However, we reported that its related planning efforts raised serious questions, including how the medium-range helicopters will interact with cutters for its drug interdiction operations.

The Coast Guard has not fully assessed whether this transition will result in the type and quantity of helicopters needed to meet its mission demands—including for drug interdiction—in the coming decades. We recommended the Coast Guard assess different helicopters and conduct

<sup>19</sup>GAO-24-106374.

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a fleet mix analysis to help ensure it identifies the necessary type and number of helicopters it requires to meet its mission demands. DHS concurred with this recommendation and we will continue to monitor Coast Guard's efforts to address it.

Notwithstanding the readiness of Coast Guard assets, our work has also found that the service faces tradeoffs when making decisions regarding its vast, aging portfolio of shore infrastructure. In February 2019, we found that the Coast Guard was confronted with a costly backlog of shore infrastructure projects related to docks, air stations, and other infrastructure from which missions such as drug interdiction begin.<sup>20</sup> This backlog totaled at least \$2.6 billion at that time. We made six recommendations to address these issues, two of which the Coast Guard has implemented.

## Acquisition Program Challenges

Our work has also found that the Coast Guard's declining asset readiness is exacerbated by persistent challenges it faces managing its planned \$40 billion acquisition programs to modernize its vessels and aircraft. These challenges include:

**Capability gaps from schedule delays.** Delays experienced by the Coast Guard's highest priority program—the Offshore Patrol Cutters—will exacerbate capability gaps.<sup>21</sup> The Coast Guard plans to replace the aging Medium Endurance Cutters with Offshore Patrol Cutters. The Commandant testified in July 2024 that Offshore Patrol Cutters are to be essential assets for JIATF-South and its drug interdiction mission.<sup>22</sup> However, in May 2024, we reported that the Coast Guard has delayed delivery of the first Offshore Patrol Cutter by 4 years, from fiscal year 2021 to 2025.<sup>23</sup> In June 2023, we reported that given the delays in

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<sup>20</sup>GAO, *Coast Guard Shore Infrastructure: Applying Leading Practices Could Help Better Manage Project Backlogs of At Least \$2.6 Billion*, [GAO-19-82](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 21, 2019).

<sup>21</sup>Offshore Patrol Cutters generally conduct the same range of missions as Medium Endurance Cutters, including search and rescue and interdicting drugs and migrants. Designed for long-distance transit, extended on-scene presence, and operations with deployable aircraft and small boats, these cutters are intended to provide offshore presence for the Coast Guard's cutter fleet.

<sup>22</sup>Admiral Linda L. Fagan, Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard, testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., July 24, 2024.

<sup>23</sup>GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Opportunities Exist to Improve Shipbuilding Outcomes*, [GAO-24-107488](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 7, 2024).

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delivery of the Offshore Patrol Cutters, the Coast Guard projects to have a reduction in asset availability—or a reduction in the number of cutters available for operations—starting in 2024 and through 2039.<sup>24</sup>

**Affordability concerns and difficult tradeoff decisions.** As we reported in June 2024, the Coast Guard will have to make difficult decisions to address the affordability concerns surrounding its acquisition portfolio.<sup>25</sup> These concerns affect how Coast Guard prioritizes spending on aging assets, including those currently performing the drug interdiction mission.<sup>26</sup> Specifically, for over a decade and most recently in 2024, we have reported that the Coast Guard’s short-term budget decisions have resulted in a buildup of near-term unaffordable acquisitions that have continued to put pressure on available resources.<sup>27</sup> In particular, we reported that the Coast Guard made short-term budget decisions that obscure the tradeoffs needed to balance the long-term affordability of the portfolio. In 2014, we recommended that the Coast Guard develop a long-term plan to manage its highest priority efforts. The Coast Guard agreed,

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<sup>24</sup>[GAO-23-105805](#). We found that ship design instability contributed to Offshore Patrol Cutter schedule delays and made five recommendations to address this challenge. Coast Guard agreed with three recommendations and as of September 2024, addressed one of them. Coast Guard disagreed with the other two recommendations, including a priority recommendation. We stand by this recommendation as it aligns with our leading practices in shipbuilding. We have ongoing reviews of the program and will continue to monitor its progress toward design completion.

<sup>25</sup>GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisition: Actions Needed to Address Affordability Challenges*, [GAO-24-107584](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 12, 2024).

<sup>26</sup>The Coast Guard’s planned investments for its portfolio of major acquisitions increased by \$8.2 billion since fiscal year 2018. The increase is primarily related to cost increases on the Offshore Patrol Cutter program and additional investments in medium-range MH-60T helicopters—both key assets for the drug interdiction mission.

<sup>27</sup>[GAO-24-107584](#); *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Actions Needed to Address Longstanding Portfolio Management Challenges*, [GAO-18-454](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 24, 2018); *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Limited Strategic Planning Efforts Pose Risk for Future Acquisitions*, [GAO-17-747T](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 25, 2017); *Coast Guard Recapitalization: Matching Needs and Resources Continue to Strain Acquisition Efforts*, [GAO-17-654T](#) (Washington D.C.: June 7, 2017); and *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Better Information on Performance and Funding Needed to Address Shortfalls*, [GAO-14-450](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 5, 2014).

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and subsequent statute directed it to develop such a plan.<sup>28</sup> However, as of June 2024, it had yet to produce one.

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## Coast Guard Faces Workforce Shortages and Retention Challenges

Our work has shown that staffing shortfalls and poor workforce planning have affected the Coast Guard's ability to meet its mission needs, including for drug interdiction. Since October 2023, the Coast Guard has reported a nearly 10 percent shortfall in its enlisted personnel, due in part to having missed its recruiting targets in recent years, prompting it to reduce operational activities. In response, the Coast Guard has implemented plans to take several cutters out of active service, including three Medium Endurance Cutters—a mainstay of its drug interdiction efforts. Moreover, it has closed boat stations around the country due to a lack of personnel needed to staff them.

In May 2023, we reported that the Coast Guard's workforce challenges have persisted, and that the service may miss key opportunities to tackle these issues unless it implements plans to address future workforce needs and sets goals for retaining personnel.<sup>29</sup> In 2010, 2020, 2022, and 2024 we found that the Coast Guard had not adequately determined its workforce needs.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, in 2020 we found that the Coast Guard had assessed a small portion of its workforce needs through the workforce requirements determination process it began using in 2003. We recommended that the Coast Guard develop a plan for how it will meet its workforce assessment goals and this recommendation remained open as

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<sup>28</sup>Pursuant to 14 U.S.C. § 5103(a), a status report on the Coast Guard's major acquisition programs is to be submitted to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation of the Senate and the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure every 2 years. Each report is to include certain information for each major acquisition program, as well as a long-term plan for the upcoming fiscal year, and for each of the 20 fiscal years thereafter. 14 U.S.C. § 5103(b), (e). In addition, the Commandant of the Coast Guard is to submit each long-term major acquisitions plan to the House Committee on Homeland Security. 14 U.S.C. § 5110 note.

<sup>29</sup>GAO, *Coast Guard: Recruitment and Retention Challenges Persist*, [GAO-23-106750](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2023).

<sup>30</sup>[GAO-24-106374](#); GAO, *Coast Guard: Workforce Planning Actions Needed to Address Growing Cyberspace Mission Demands*, [GAO-22-105208](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2022); *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Enhance IT Program Implementation*, [GAO-22-105092](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 28, 2022); *Coast Guard: Increasing Mission Demands Highlight Importance of Assessing Its Workforce Needs*, [GAO-22-106135](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2022); *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Organizational Changes and Determine Workforce Needs*, [GAO-20-223](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 26, 2020); and *Coast Guard: Deployable Operations Group Achieving Organizational Benefits, but Challenges Remain*, [GAO-10-433R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 7, 2010).



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of September 2024.<sup>31</sup> Further, as of November 2023, the Coast Guard reported that it had completed workforce requirements determinations for 15 percent of its workforce. Without this information, it does not have a sound basis for prioritizing resources effectively.

More specifically, we have previously reported on Coast Guard resource shortfalls and incomplete workforce planning for various units the service relies on to support its drug interdiction mission, such as its aviation workforce and specialized forces. Specifically, in April 2024, we reported that the Coast Guard had 387 of 4,134 (9 percent) of its authorized military aviation workforce positions vacant, as of July 2023.<sup>32</sup> However the Coast Guard had not assessed and determined necessary staffing levels and skills for a large portion of its aviation workforce, including all 25 of its air stations and its major aircraft repair facility.

In November 2019, we found that the Coast Guard had not used data and evidence to fully assess its Deployable Specialized Forces. These are teams that deploy aboard Coast Guard cutters or U.S. Navy or Allied vessels to provide specialized capabilities for offshore drug interdiction and vessel interception operations, primarily in the Caribbean Sea and Eastern Pacific Ocean.<sup>33</sup> We recommended that Coast Guard assess its Deployable Specialized Forces' workforce needs. We continue to monitor Coast Guard's efforts to address this recommendation.

Challenges related to quality of life factors in health care and housing, among others, may affect the Coast Guard's ability to retain personnel. In April 2023, we found that Coast Guard personnel stationed in remote areas may experience challenges accessing medical care.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, we found that 17 of 43 Coast Guard clinics were located in medically underserved areas and 11 of 43 were located in at least one type of health provider shortage area. We recommended the Coast Guard obtain and monitor health care access data. Doing so would better position the

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<sup>31</sup>[GAO-20-223](#).

<sup>32</sup>[GAO-24-106374](#).

<sup>33</sup>GAO, *Coast Guard: Assessing Deployable Specialized Forces' Workforce Needs Could Improve Efficiency and Reduce Potential Overlap or Gaps in Capabilities*, [GAO-20-33](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 21, 2019).

<sup>34</sup>GAO, *Coast Guard Health Care: Additional Actions Could Help Ensure Beneficiaries' Access*, [GAO-23-105574](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 4, 2023).

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Coast Guard to identify and address potential access concerns, which could affect retention.

We made 34 recommendations in our workforce reports, 28 of which remain unaddressed. We continue to monitor the Coast Guard's progress in implementing them.

In conclusion, federal interagency collaboration, and Coast Guard's drug interdiction efforts in particular, are critical efforts to reduce the maritime flow of illicit drugs into the U.S. Defining and measuring what success looks like is essential to ensure that federal efforts achieve the desired outcomes and resources are allocated efficiently. Further, the Coast Guard's challenge of balancing its varied mission priorities has grown as it is called on to do more with its limited resources. In this way, it is critical for the Coast Guard to address the longstanding challenges facing its drug interdiction mission—including better managing its acquisition efforts to replace aging assets and infrastructure and assessing its workforce needs.

Overall, we made 105 recommendations in the reports covered by this statement. Agencies generally agreed with the recommendations. As of September 2024, agencies had implemented 46 of them. Fully addressing our recommendations will help ensure that the service efficiently uses its available resources to carry out its drug interdiction and other missions. We will continue to monitor the agencies' progress in implementing them.

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Chair Baldwin, Ranking Member Sullivan, and Members of the Subcommittee, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

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## GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Heather MacLeod, Director, Homeland Security and Justice at (202) 512-8777 or [macleodh@gao.gov](mailto:macleodh@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this statement are Jason Berman (Assistant Director), Mary Pitts (Analyst-in-Charge), Carissa Bryant, Andrew Curry, Eric Hauswirth, Sierra Hicks, Paul Hobart, Briana Lalman, Hugh Paquette, and Kevin Reeves.

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