



June 2014

# COAST GUARD

## Resources Provided for Drug Interdiction Operations in the Transit Zone, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-527](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

One part of the U.S. National Drug Control Strategy is to disrupt the flow of cocaine through the transit zone. Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, the only U.S. territories located geographically within the transit zone, have served as entry points for cocaine destined for the continental United States. In recent years, federal and local government agencies have cited growing levels of violent crime in these territories and attribute this violence to illicit drug trafficking. Within DHS, the U.S. Coast Guard is the lead federal agency for maritime drug interdiction and a key provider of resources to support drug interdiction operations in the transit zone and the two territories.

GAO was asked to examine the Coast Guard's drug interdiction efforts in the transit zone, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. This report addresses (1) trends in the Coast Guard's deployment of resources in the transit zone and the extent to which the Coast Guard met its performance targets; and (2) actions taken by the Coast Guard to combat drug smuggling into Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and trends in vessel and aircraft deployments. GAO analyzed Coast Guard data for fiscal years 2009 through 2013 on drug interdiction resource deployments and mission performance, and interviewed Coast Guard and DHS officials involved in drug interdiction operations.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making recommendations in this report. DHS provided technical comments on a draft of this report, which were incorporated, as appropriate.

View [GAO-14-527](#). For more information, contact Stephen L. Caldwell at (202) 512-9610, or at [caldwells@gao.gov](mailto:caldwells@gao.gov).

June 2014

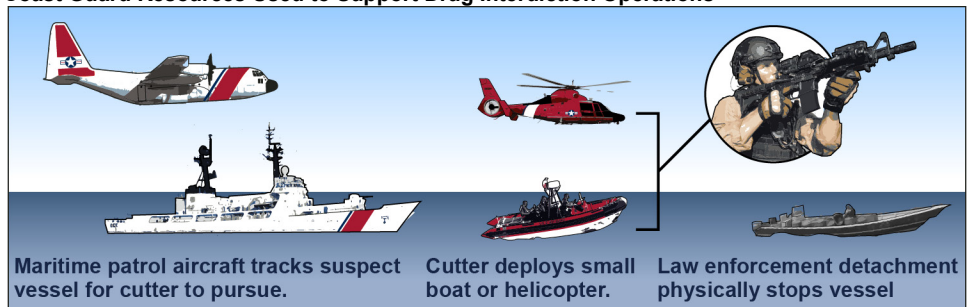
## COAST GUARD

### Resources Provided for Drug Interdiction Operations in the Transit Zone, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands

#### What GAO Found

The Coast Guard provided varying levels of resources for drug interdiction operations in the "transit zone"—the area from South America through the Caribbean Sea and the eastern Pacific Ocean that is used to transport illicit drugs to the United States—during fiscal years 2009 through 2013, and generally did not meet its performance targets for several reasons. As the figure shows, Coast Guard resources included vessels (cutters), aircraft, and law enforcement detachments. The number of cutter days, aircraft hours, and law enforcement detachment days the Coast Guard provided for drug interdiction operations in the transit zone varied during fiscal years 2009 through 2012, and then sharply declined in fiscal year 2013. For example, in fiscal year 2012, the Coast Guard provided 1,947 cutter days for transit zone operations and in fiscal year 2013 the Coast Guard provided 1,346 days—a 30 percent decline. During fiscal years 2009 through 2013, the Coast Guard met targets for its primary drug interdiction mission performance measure—the removal rate of cocaine from noncommercial vessels in the transit zone—once, in fiscal year 2013. Coast Guard officials cited the declining readiness of its aging vessels, delays in the delivery of replacement vessels, and sequestration as factors affecting Coast Guard resource deployments and the ability to meet its drug interdiction mission performance targets.

Coast Guard Resources Used to Support Drug Interdiction Operations



Source: GAO adaptation of U.S. Coast Guard images. | GAO-14-527

In support of a Department of Homeland Security (DHS) effort to address the increased violent crime associated with illicit drug smuggling into Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, the Coast Guard has increased vessel and aircraft operations for drug interdiction efforts in these territories by reallocating resources from elsewhere in the Coast Guard. According to Coast Guard officials, these additional resources are drawn from other missions, such as alien migrant interdiction. Beginning in September 2012, the Coast Guard implemented a surge operation to provide additional vessels and aircraft to regularly patrol Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. According to Coast Guard officials, the increased vessel and aircraft deployments have since become the new baseline level of resources to be provided for drug interdiction operations there. According to Coast Guard data, the number of vessel hours spent conducting drug interdiction operations in these territories more than tripled from fiscal years 2009 through 2013. Similarly, the number of maritime patrol aircraft hours spent conducting drug interdiction operations in the territories increased—from about 150 flight hours in fiscal year 2011 to about 1,000 hours in fiscal year 2013.

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### Abbreviations

AUF	airborne use of force
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
CCDB	Consolidated Counterdrug Database
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
FRC	fast response cutter
HEC	high endurance cutter
HIDTA	High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
JIATF-S	Joint Interagency Task Force South
LEDET	Law Enforcement Detachment
MEC	medium endurance cutter
MPA	maritime patrol aircraft
NSC	national security cutter
ONDCP	Office of National Drug Control Policy

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June 16, 2014

The Honorable Nick J. Rahall II  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Donna M. Christensen  
House of Representatives

The Honorable John L. Mica  
House of Representatives

The Honorable Pedro R. Pierluisi  
House of Representatives

One of the priorities of the U.S. National Drug Control Strategy is to disrupt the flow of illicit drugs to the United States. Within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the U.S. Coast Guard is the lead federal agency for maritime drug interdiction and a major contributor of U.S. government vessels and aircraft deployed for operations to disrupt the flow of illicit drugs smuggled from South America to the United States through the Western Hemisphere transit zone (the 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. The Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S), under the U.S. Southern Command, oversees detection and monitoring operations of drug smuggling in the transit zone, relying on the vessel and aircraft resources provided by the Coast Guard, other federal agencies and allied countries.<sup>1</sup> Cocaine interdiction is a U.S. National Drug Control Strategy priority, and according to the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), most of the cocaine being smuggled in the transit zone

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<sup>1</sup>The U.S. Southern Command is one of nine unified combatant commands in the Department of Defense. The Southern Command is a joint command comprised of more than 1,200 military and civilian personnel representing the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and several other federal agencies. It is responsible for providing contingency planning, operations, and security cooperation in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. The Key West, Florida-based JIATF-S, a direct-reporting unit of the Southern Command, is the primary operations center and coordinator for detecting and monitoring suspected air and maritime drug trafficking in the transit zone.

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is being done by noncommercial maritime vessels<sup>2</sup>—with over 80 percent of the estimated flow by way of routes in the eastern Pacific Ocean and western Caribbean Sea in fiscal year 2013.<sup>3</sup>

As the only U.S. territories located within the transit zone, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands have served as entry points for illicit drugs destined for the continental United States. In recent years, federal reports and officials from local government agencies have cited growing levels of violent crime in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands and linked this violence to illicit drug smuggling, particularly of cocaine. To reduce the supply of illicit drugs flowing into and through the territories and to address the growing violence, officials from the territories have sought increased assistance from federal agencies. The Coast Guard, in particular, has been tasked by DHS to increase vessel and aircraft deployments for drug interdiction operations in the area. However, the Coast Guard faces the challenge of balancing increasing drug interdiction resource demands for its limited vessels and aircraft in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands with demands for those it deploys across the transit zone, while also meeting resource requirements for its other missions, such as Alien Migrant Interdiction and Search and Rescue.

You asked us to review the Coast Guard's drug interdiction resource allocation and mission performance in the transit zone and in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. This report addresses the following questions:

- What were the trends in the Coast Guard's deployments of resources to the transit zone for drug interdiction operations during fiscal years 2009 through 2013 and to what extent did the Coast Guard meet its deployment and mission performance targets during this time period?
- What actions has the Coast Guard taken to combat illicit drug smuggling into Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands during fiscal years 2009 through 2013 and what have been the trends in vessel and aircraft deployments during this time period?

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<sup>2</sup>Noncommercial maritime smuggling involves the use of various vessels, including go-fast boats (speedboats), fishing vessels, semi-submersible vessels, and fully submersible vessels.

<sup>3</sup>ONDCP oversees and coordinates implementation of the U.S. National Drug Control Strategy, including interdiction efforts in the transit zone.

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To determine the trends in the Coast Guard's deployments of resources to the transit zone, we reviewed Coast Guard documents, including memorandums and guidance describing the Coast Guard's drug interdiction mission and its process for allocating resources to JIATF-S. We reviewed Coast Guard-provided data on deployments of resources to JIATF-S during fiscal years 2009 through 2013, which included vessel and aircraft hours provided for the drug interdiction mission and resource deployment targets. We also reviewed and analyzed Coast Guard drug interdiction mission performance data for fiscal years 2009 through 2013 and compared the performance data against mission performance targets. In addition, we interviewed Coast Guard officials at Coast Guard headquarters and at field units that are responsible for planning and conducting drug interdiction operations and tracking deployment and mission performance. Specifically, we met with officials from the Coast Guard's Atlantic and Pacific Area Commands, and the Coast Guard's Seventh District (Miami, Florida) and Eleventh District (Alameda, California).<sup>4</sup> We met with officials from these two districts because these two districts are the only Coast Guard districts that have operational roles for drug interdiction and apprehension in the transit zone—with the Seventh District responsible for Caribbean Sea operations and the Eleventh District responsible for eastern Pacific Ocean operations. We also met with officials from the Coast Guard's Intelligence Coordination Center, in Suitland, Maryland, which tracks information on illegal smuggling events. Further, we met with officials from the DHS Office of Policy's Counter Illicit Trafficking Section, which is responsible for coordinating DHS's counterdrug strategy, and officials from ONDCP. We also met with officials from the Department of Justice, who were responsible for providing prosecutorial and law enforcement assistance for drug interdiction operations in the transit zone. Finally, we also visited Key West, Florida, to meet with officials from JIATF-S to obtain information on U.S. government-wide drug interdiction planning and

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<sup>4</sup>The Coast Guard is divided into two theater commands: Atlantic Area and Pacific Area. The area commands are responsible for Coast Guard operations, and they develop and implement operational objectives for Coast Guard missions, including developing schedules for icebreakers, major cutters, long-range surveillance aircraft, and deployable specialized forces. District commands are responsible for regional operations and assume tactical control of allocated assets in their respective areas of responsibility, including scheduling of patrol boats, and air stations that operate maritime patrol aircraft and helicopters. Sector commands are responsible for subregional and local operations within each district. They assume tactical control of allocated assets, such as patrol boats, and execute operations in their respective areas of responsibility through tasking of such assets.



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operations in the transit zone. We assessed the reliability of Coast Guard drug interdiction resource deployment and mission performance data we obtained and analyzed in this report by reviewing the Coast Guard's data management practices and interviewing knowledgeable officials about how the respective data were compiled and the systems that produced the data. On the basis of our assessments, we determined that the data provided to us were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

To determine the actions the Coast Guard has taken to combat illicit drug trafficking in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, including resource deployments during fiscal years 2009 through 2013, we relied on data prepared by the Coast Guard that tabulate vessel and aircraft mission hours provided for drug interdiction operations in the Sector San Juan area of responsibility. We reviewed Coast Guard documents, including memorandums and operational orders regarding Coast Guard drug interdiction operations in these territories. We also reviewed Consolidated Counterdrug Database (CCDB) estimates of the flow of cocaine in the transit zone provided by the Coast Guard.<sup>5</sup> In prior work, we reported on the inherent difficulty in obtaining reliable data on an illegal activity.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding such limitations, on the basis of conversations with cognizant Coast Guard officials, we determined that the data provided to us were sufficiently reliable to provide estimates of the magnitude of cocaine destined for the United States (including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands) from fiscal years 2009 through 2013. We identify relevant limitations where we present CCDB data later in this report. We interviewed Coast Guard headquarters officials and commanders from field units including Coast Guard Sector San Juan—the field unit with responsibility for conducting drug interdiction and other operations in the maritime area of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands—and the Coast

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<sup>5</sup>The CCDB is the U.S. government's authoritative database for illicit drug movement in the Western Hemisphere. The Coast Guard and other federal government agencies use the CCDB to capture all known and suspected drug movement. During quarterly interagency conferences, CCDB partners develop and reconcile information about the quantity of cocaine seized during drug interdiction operations.

<sup>6</sup>See GAO, *Drug Control: U.S. Assistance Has Helped Mexican Counternarcotics Efforts, but Tons of Illicit Drugs Continue to Flow into the United States*, [GAO-07-1018](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 17, 2007); *Drug Control: Agencies Need to Plan for Likely Declines in Drug Interdiction Assets, and Develop Better Performance Measures for Transit Zone Operations*, [GAO-06-200](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 15, 2005); and *Drug Control: Long-Standing Problems Hinder U.S. International Efforts*, [GAO/NSIAD-97-75](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 27, 1997).

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Guard's Seventh District, which is responsible for overseeing operations and allocating vessels and aircraft for Sector San Juan. We also interviewed officials from DHS headquarters, including the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and the Office of Policy, to obtain information on DHS-wide efforts to combat illicit drug flows into the territories. We also met with officials from Sector Miami and Coast Guard Air Station Miami—key providers of vessels and aircraft, respectively, for drug interdiction operations in the Caribbean—to obtain information on their roles in supporting drug interdiction operations conducted in the Caribbean. We visited Puerto Rico to meet with Coast Guard Sector San Juan officials responsible for planning and commanding drug interdiction operations in the Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands areas, and with officials from other federal agencies conducting counter drug efforts in the territories, including DHS, and its components including Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). During our visit to Puerto Rico, we also visited the locations where Coast Guard Sector San Juan's vessels and aircraft are based—in San Juan and Air Station Borinquen in Aguadilla, respectively—to discuss drug interdiction operations, including vessel and aircraft deployments. In addition, to obtain information on challenges faced by the Puerto Rican and U.S. Virgin Islands governments as a result of illicit drug smuggling there, we met with local officials, including senior officials from the Puerto Rico Governors office, Puerto Rico Police Department, Puerto Rico National Guard, and officials from the U.S. Virgin Islands Governor's office and Police Department.

We conducted this performance audit from September 2013 to June 2014 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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## Background

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### Drug Interdiction Is a Key Component of ONDCP's Counterdrug Efforts

According to ONDCP, disrupting the illicit flow of drugs will reduce their availability, increase their cost, and eventually, reduce the rate of illicit drug usage. One part of the ONDCP strategy to disrupt the illicit drug market focuses interdiction efforts on seizing cocaine and other illicit drugs in the transit zone that are bound for the United States (arrival zone) from South America (source zone).<sup>7</sup> Virtually all of the cocaine shipped to the United States travels through the transit zone from South America—entering Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean en route to the United States. The transit zone is a 6 million square mile area that encompasses Central America, Mexico, the eastern Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean Sea. The transit zone is divided into four maritime trafficking routes: Eastern Pacific, Western Caribbean, Central Caribbean, and Eastern Caribbean. Drug traffickers use go-fast boats, fishing vessels, submersible vessels, noncommercial aircraft, and other types of conveyances to smuggle cocaine from the source zone to Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean en route to the United States.<sup>8</sup>

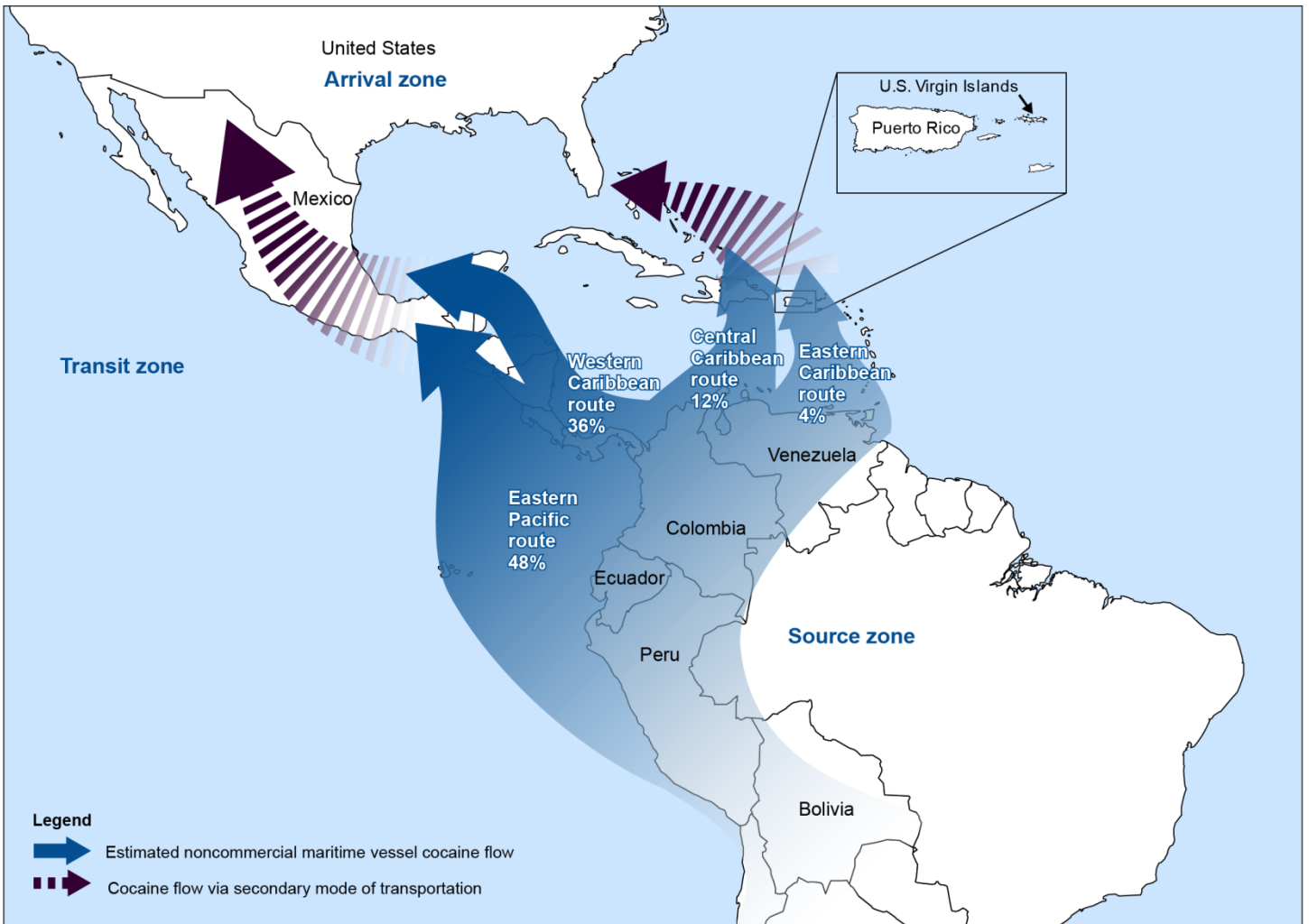
ONDCP's strategy for drug interdiction in the transit zone is focused on cocaine because ONDCP has identified cocaine as a leading drug threat to the United States. According to Coast Guard officials, the largest estimated share of cocaine has been smuggled through the Eastern Pacific and Western Caribbean routes of the transit zone for nearly two decades. For example, the principal source of information about cocaine flow in the transit zone is the CCDB. According to the CCDB, in fiscal year 2013, approximately 84 percent of the estimated cocaine flow, as measured in metric tons, was by noncommercial maritime means through these two routes. Figure 1 shows a map indicating the source, transit, and arrival zones—with the fiscal year 2013 estimated noncommercial maritime cocaine flow through the four smuggling routes and the locations of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands within the transit zone.

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<sup>7</sup>According to ONDCP, in fiscal year 2012, 90 percent of the illicit cocaine (by volume) was shipped through the transit zone by maritime vessels and 10 percent by aircraft.

<sup>8</sup>Upon landfall, bulk cocaine is broken down into multiple smaller shipments for transit into Mexico and the United States.

**Figure 1: The Source, Transit, and Arrival Zones and the Percentage of Estimated Noncommercial Maritime Vessel Flows of Cocaine in Fiscal Year 2013, by Smuggling Route**



Source: U.S. Coast Guard based on the Consolidated Counterdrug Database; Map Resources (Map). | GAO-14-527

Note: According to Department of Homeland Security and Office of National Drug Control Policy officials, estimates of the amount of cocaine that enters the United States are based on intelligence and other information that may not reflect the actual flow of cocaine toward the United States.

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As the southernmost points of entry into the United States and the only U.S. territories within the transit zone, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are key entry points for illicit drugs being smuggled into the United States. Like the continental United States, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are considered part of the arrival zone, yet they are located geographically within the Eastern Caribbean route of the transit zone. According to a 2011 Department of Justice National Drug Intelligence Center report,<sup>9</sup> Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are attractive targets for illicit drug smuggling because of their proximity to the source zone and Puerto Rico's location within the United States' Customs zone.<sup>10</sup> According to Coast Guard officials, the illicit drug flow through the Central and Eastern Caribbean routes generally consists of maritime smuggling from South America to the Dominican Republic and eventual transshipment to Puerto Rico (secondary flow) and, to a lesser extent, maritime smuggling directly from South America to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands (primary flow). CCDB drug flow estimates show that in fiscal year 2013, about 3 percent of the cocaine flow in the transit zone was smuggled toward Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.<sup>11</sup> The Department of Justice has reported that most of this flow is destined for the continental United States—with the rest remaining on the islands for local consumption.<sup>12</sup> However, estimates indicate that illicit cocaine

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<sup>9</sup>See Puerto Rico/U.S. Virgin Islands High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), *Drug Market Analysis 2011*; U.S. Department of Justice National Drug Intelligence Center, Johnstown, Pennsylvania. September 2011. The HIDTA program, created by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988, provides assistance to federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies operating in areas determined to be critical drug-trafficking regions of the United States. See Pub. L. No. 100-690, § 1005(c), 102 Stat. 4181, 4186-87 (1988). As of May 2014, there were 28 HIDTAs, which included approximately 16 percent of all counties in the United States and 60 percent of the U.S. population. HIDTA-designated counties are located in 46 states, as well as in Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the District of Columbia.

<sup>10</sup>Puerto Rico is within United States Customs territory, and therefore, commercial aviation and maritime travel between Puerto Rico and the continental United States is not subject to the same level of scrutiny. See 19 C.F.R. § 101.1. According to federal reports, illicit drug traffickers seek to exploit this for smuggling drugs into the continental United States.

<sup>11</sup> According to our analysis of CCDB data provided by the Coast Guard, about 4 percent of the estimated non-commercial maritime cocaine flow in the transit zone was in the Eastern Caribbean transit route and 12 percent was in the Central Caribbean route. The data showed that about 3 percent of the transit zone total reported was destined for Puerto Rico or the U.S. Virgin Islands (either directly from South America or via the Dominican Republic).

<sup>12</sup>See Puerto Rico/U.S. Virgin Islands High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), *Drug Market Analysis 2011*. U.S. Department of Justice, National Drug Intelligence Center.

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smuggling toward Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands has increased each year since fiscal year 2009. For example, according to CCDB estimates, cocaine flow toward Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands has more than doubled in recent years, from 6.4 metric tons in fiscal year 2009 to 17.3 metric tons in fiscal year 2013.

Federal and local government officials in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands have raised concerns about the illicit drug flow and have identified it as a key contributor to the high levels of murder and other violent crime on the islands.<sup>13</sup> In particular, homicide rates in the two territories have risen in recent years, and federal and local officials have linked the rise of the homicide rates, in part, to illicit cocaine trafficking on the Island. According to a 2014 study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, the 2010 homicide rate in Puerto Rico was about 27 per 100,000 persons and in the U.S. Virgin Islands it was about 53 per 100,000 persons—more than 5 times (Puerto Rico) and 11 times (U.S. Virgin Islands) the U.S. national rate.<sup>14</sup> According to a 2011 report issued by the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area office that oversees the territories, most of this violence is associated with turf wars for control over the local drug market.<sup>15</sup>

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## Federal Agencies' Roles in Maritime Drug Interdiction Operations

JIATF-S relies on DHS (Coast Guard and CBP) and the Department of Defense (Navy) to provide vessels and aircraft for conducting drug interdiction operations in the transit zone.<sup>16</sup> JIATF-S also receives operational resources from allied countries, with Canada, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom providing maritime detection and monitoring assistance. According to JIATF-S and Coast Guard officials,

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<sup>13</sup>For example, see *Preventing a Security Crisis in the Caribbean*, a report by the United States Senate Caucus on International Narcotics Control, 112th Cong., 2nd sess., September 2012.

<sup>14</sup>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *Global Study on Homicide 2013: Trends, Contexts, Data* (Vienna, Austria: March 2014).

<sup>15</sup>See Puerto Rico/U.S. Virgin Islands High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), *Drug Market Analysis* 2011.

<sup>16</sup>For example, CBP provides a major share of maritime patrol aircraft support to JIATF-S, while the Navy provides both aircraft and vessel support. According to JIATF-S, in fiscal year 2013, CBP provided over 6,134 maritime patrol aircraft hours to JIATF-S. The U.S. Navy provided 2,100 maritime patrol aircraft hours and 429 days of vessel deployment. We discuss the Coast Guard's resource deployments to JIATF-S later in this report.

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the JIATF-S strategy is to use its available vessel and aircraft resources to patrol the transit zone far from U.S. shores and close to the source zone countries in South America in order to increase chances the interdictions are of larger load sizes and higher purity than would otherwise be the case and to cause greater disruption to illicit drug-smuggling organizations. JIATF-S officials reported deploying the majority of available vessels and aircraft to patrol the Eastern Pacific and Western Caribbean routes of the transit zone because the routes have accounted for the largest drug flow—and therefore deploying resources to these routes will have the greatest impact on efforts to disrupt cocaine flow.

The Coast Guard is the lead federal agency for maritime drug interdiction in the transit zone, and its operations with JIATF-S are a key element of the Coast Guard’s counter-drug efforts.<sup>17</sup> Overall, the Coast Guard is a major contributor of JIATF-S vessel and aircraft resources.<sup>18</sup> The resources the Coast Guard provides to JIATF-S generally include major cutters,<sup>19</sup> maritime patrol aircraft (planes), and helicopters capable of deploying airborne use of force (AUF).<sup>20</sup> In addition, the Coast Guard provides JIATF-S with deployable specialized forces—specifically Law

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<sup>17</sup>According to the Coast Guard, the elements of its drug interdiction strategy are to (1) maintain a surface and air interdiction presence to deny smugglers access to maritime routes and deter trafficking activity, (2) strengthen ties with partner nations to support their ability to reduce production and trafficking within their sovereign boundaries, and (3) support interagency and international efforts to combat drug smuggling through increased cooperation and coordination. For more information on U.S. government efforts to support partner nation counter drug efforts, see GAO, *Status of Funding, Equipment, and Training for the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative*, [GAO-13-367R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 20, 2013).

<sup>18</sup>According to JIATF-S, drug interdiction efforts include the following elements: detecting and monitoring potential drug-smuggling vessels and interdicting and apprehending drug smuggling vessels, crew, and contraband. For transit zone operations, JIATF-S maintains tactical control of vessels and aircraft during the detection and monitoring phase, then switches tactical control to the Coast Guard for interdiction and apprehension. Tactical control is switched to the Coast Guard because the Coast Guard is authorized by federal law to make maritime arrests in international waters, and JIATF-S, as a Department of Defense component, is not. See 14 U.S.C. § 89.

<sup>19</sup>According to the Coast Guard, major cutters include 418-foot national security cutters (NSC), 378-foot high endurance cutters (HEC), and both 270-foot and 210-foot medium endurance cutters (MEC). Major cutters are armed with multiple crew-served weapons, carry small boats aboard, and can also deploy with a helicopter aboard. The major cutters are capable of extended on-scene presence—that is, remaining at sea for between 21 and 60 days without reprovisioning.

<sup>20</sup>We discuss AUF later in this report.

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Enforcement Detachments (LEDET)—embarked on U.S. naval and allied vessels. We discuss AUF and LEDETs in more detail later in this report.

The Coast Guard's process for allocating drug interdiction resources is focused on meeting commitments for strategic priorities, such as JIATF-S transit zone operations, first, before dividing up its remaining resources between its Atlantic and Pacific Area Commands. According to Coast Guard guidance and discussions with DHS officials, the Coast Guard determines the amount of resource levels—targets for the amount of time selected vessels, aircraft, and LEDETs are provided to JIATF-S—through an annual operational planning process that considers factors, including resource requirements for strategic priorities, evolving maritime risks, and the availability of the Coast Guard's fleet of vessels and aircraft. JIATF-S requests for resource requirements specify the capabilities (types of vessels or aircraft) and corresponding capacities (number of days for vessels or resource hours for aircraft) for the Coast Guard, CBP, and the Department of Defense. The Coast Guard reviews JIATF-S resource requirement requests, sets resource deployment targets for JIATF-S, and communicates these targets to DHS for inclusion in a DHS-wide Statement of Intent of planned deployments to JIATF-S. The Coast Guard then allocates its remaining available resources to the Atlantic and Pacific Area Commands, which further allocate the resources for implementing the Coast Guard's 11 missions, including drug interdiction.<sup>21</sup> See appendix I for more details on the Coast Guard's drug interdiction mission resource allocation process.

Unlike with overall transit zone operations, JIATF-S does not oversee detection and monitoring efforts for drug smuggling in the U.S. territories.<sup>22</sup> Rather, DHS has the lead federal responsibility for planning and coordinating operations to interdict the maritime flow of illicit drugs in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands because they are U.S. territories and part of the arrival zone. In addition to the Coast Guard, CBP's Puerto Rico-based Caribbean Air and Marine Branch conducts marine interdiction and patrol operations using a mix of planes, helicopters, and

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<sup>21</sup>The Coast Guard's 11 missions include Search and Rescue; Maritime Safety; Ports, Waterways and Coastal Security; Drug Interdiction; Migrant Interdiction; Defense Readiness; Ice Operations; Aids to Navigation and Waterways Management; Marine Environmental Protection; Living Marine Resources; and Other Law Enforcement.

<sup>22</sup>JIATF-S's area of responsibility does not include Puerto Rico or the U.S. Virgin Islands.

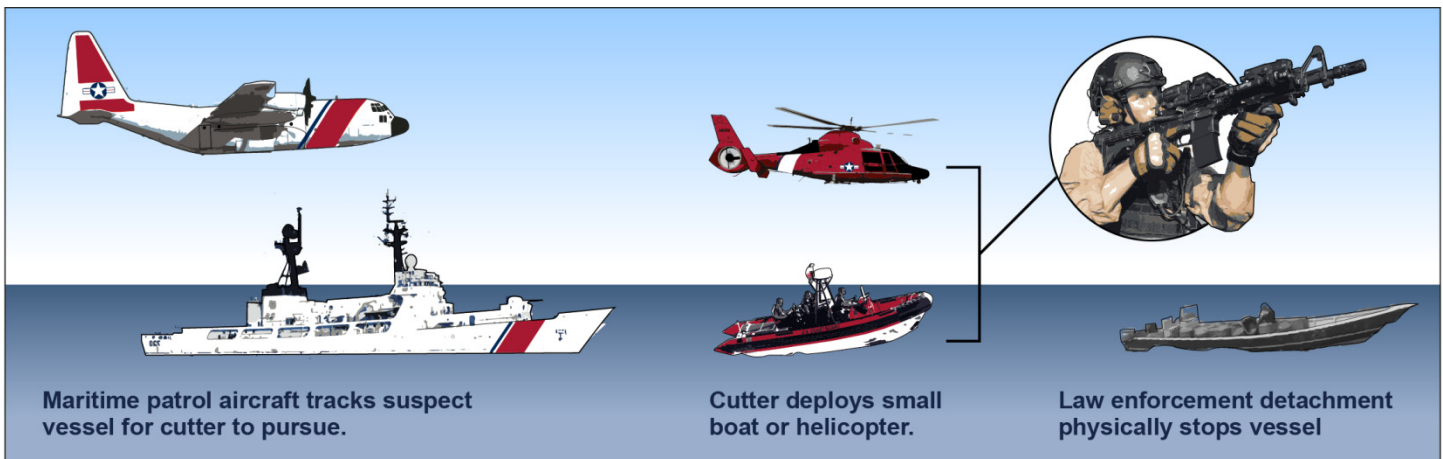


small boats for coastal drug interdiction operations, generally within U.S. territorial waters. The Puerto Rico Police Department also deploys small boats for drug interdiction operations.<sup>23</sup>

## The Coast Guard's Resource Deployments for Transit Zone Drug Interdiction Operations Have Varied in Recent Years

Overall, from fiscal years 2009 through 2013, the amount of resources the Coast Guard provided to JIATF-S—including vessels, aircraft, and LEDETs—varied. During this period, the Coast Guard generally did not meet annual targets for its primary drug interdiction mission performance measure. Coast Guard officials cited the declining readiness of the Coast Guard's aging major cutter fleet; delays in the delivery of new, more capable replacement cutters; and budget constraints, including sequestration, as key factors affecting the Coast Guard's ability to meet its resource deployment and drug interdiction mission performance targets. Figure 2 shows the key resources the Coast Guard uses to support drug interdiction operations.

Figure 2: Coast Guard Resources Used to Support Drug Interdiction Operations



Source: GAO adaptation of U.S. Coast Guard images. | GAO-14-527

<sup>23</sup>Federal and local agencies involved in drug interdiction include the Department of Justice, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the National Guard, and local Puerto Rican and U.S. Virgin Islands law enforcement.

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## The Coast Guard's Resource Deployments to JIATF-S Varied during Fiscal Years 2009 through 2013

### Vessels Deployed to JIATF-S

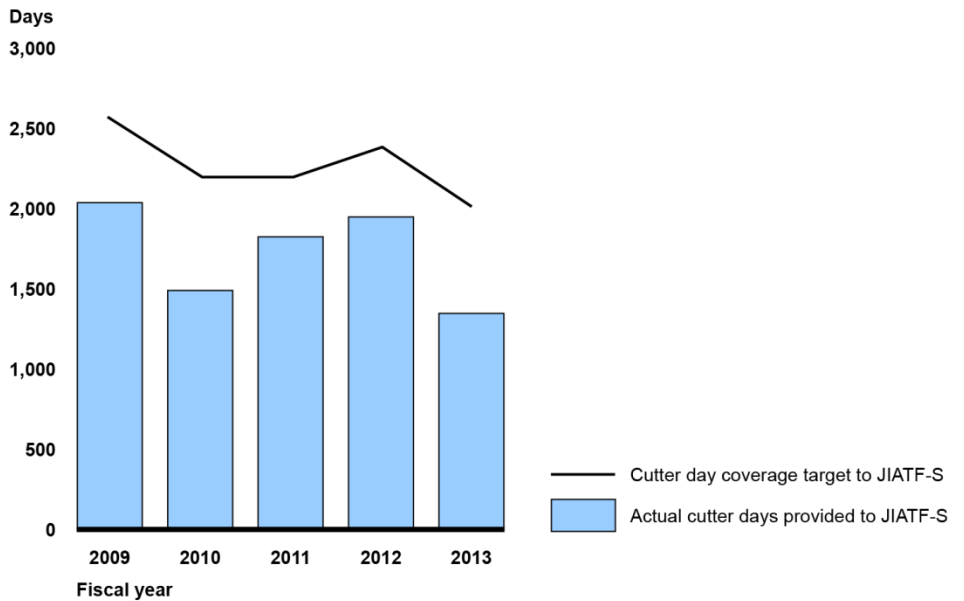
The Coast Guard's deployment of vessels to JIATF-S to carry out drug interdiction operations in the transit zone varied during fiscal years 2009 through 2012, and then sharply declined in 2013. Specifically, the Coast Guard's coverage targets—the planned number of days major cutters (national security cutters, high endurance cutters, and medium endurance cutters) are to operate under JIATF-S tactical control throughout the year—have varied since fiscal year 2009, and the Coast Guard has not fully met them.<sup>24</sup> For example, according to Coast Guard documents, in fiscal year 2009, the Coast Guard's cutter coverage target was 2,555 days (the equivalent of 7 major cutters under JIATF-S tactical control throughout the year) and the Coast Guard provided 2,036 days—about 80 percent of its target. In fiscal year 2013, the cutter coverage target was 2,008 days (or 5.5 major cutters) and the Coast Guard provided 1,346 days—about 67 percent of its target. Overall, the Coast Guard met an average of 76 percent of its annual JIATF-S cutter coverage targets during fiscal years 2009 through 2013.<sup>25</sup> Figure 3 compares the Coast Guard's cutter coverage targets with the actual cutter days provided to JIATF-S for fiscal years 2009 through 2013.

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<sup>24</sup>The Coast Guard sets coverage targets for the number of major cutters to be available to JIATF-S throughout a fiscal year. The coverage target, based on JIATF-S planning factors, is the number of vessels required to be underway in the assigned operating area throughout the year.

<sup>25</sup>Coast Guard officials attributed the increase in JIATF-S cutter deployments in fiscal year 2012 to additional resources provided to support Operation Martillo—a JIATF-S interagency surge operation targeting illicit smuggling routes in the coastal waters of Central America—as well as the increased availability of a high endurance cutter that year following its return to service after major repairs. According to the Coast Guard, the goal of Operation Martillo is to change the behavior of smuggling organizations by causing them to push farther offshore, where they are more vulnerable to detection and monitoring than they would be nearer land.

**Figure 3: Coast Guard Cutter Day Coverage Targets Compared with Actual Cutter Days Provided to the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-S), Fiscal Years 2009 through 2013**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-14-527

### Aircraft Deployed to JIATF-S

The Coast Guard’s primary aircraft deployments to JIATF-S are long-range maritime patrol aircraft—generally the HC-130—to detect and monitor drug smuggling activity in the transit zone.<sup>26</sup> The Coast Guard also deploys helicopters—generally modified MH-65s—with marksmen on board in what is known as airborne use of force.<sup>27</sup> AUF-capable helicopters are deployed aboard major cutters and allied vessels to conduct short-range patrols and pursuit actions in the transit zone using marksmen who are trained to shoot out and disable the engines of fleeing

<sup>26</sup>The Coast Guard’s HC-130 long-range surveillance aircraft provide heavy air transport and meet long-range maritime patrol requirements. In fiscal year 2012, the Coast Guard began limited deployments of HC-144A aircraft to JIATF-S. The HC-144A is a maritime patrol aircraft the Coast Guard uses for medium-range transport and surveillance operations. The aircraft is part of the Coast Guard’s acquisition program to replace its aging vessels and aircraft.

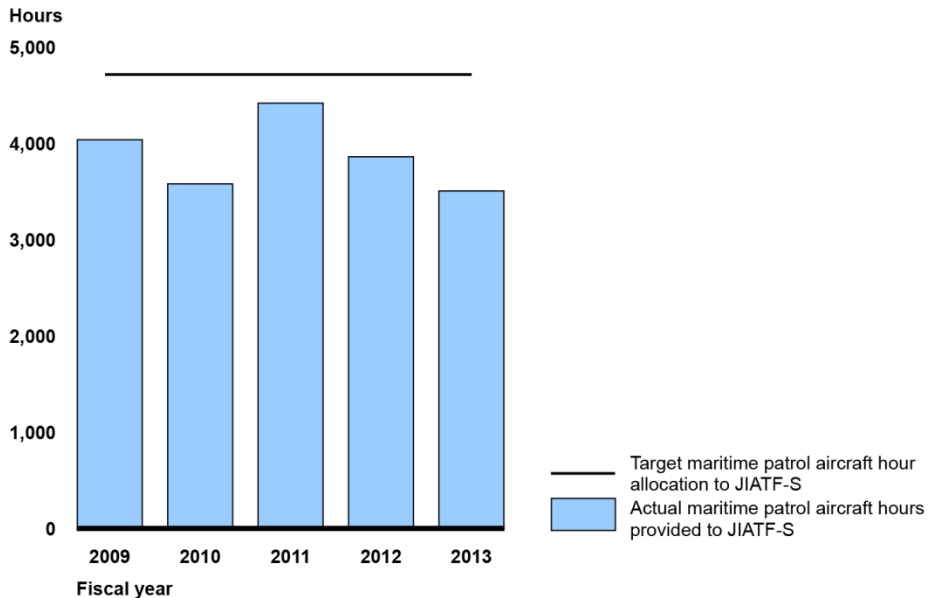
<sup>27</sup>The MH-65 is an all-weather, short-range helicopter used for multiple missions, including Search and Rescue and Law Enforcement. The MH-65 is the primary Coast Guard aircraft used aboard major cutters during deployments.

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drug-smuggling vessels—a capability JIATF-S and Coast Guard officials cite as being critical to drug interdiction success.

**Maritime patrol aircraft:** According to Coast Guard data, the number of maritime patrol aircraft hours the Coast Guard provided to JIATF-S varied during fiscal years 2009 through 2012, ending with an overall decline in 2013, although the numbers remained below target levels. As can be seen in figure 4, since fiscal year 2009, the Coast Guard’s annual maritime patrol aircraft hour allocation target (the number of hours the aircraft are to be under JIATF-S tactical control) has been 4,700 hours. According to Coast Guard data, the Coast Guard approached the target in fiscal year 2011, when the Coast Guard provided 4,416 resource hours—or about 94 percent of its target. Since 2011, though, the Coast Guard has reduced the number of maritime patrol aircraft hours that it has provided to JIATF-S. Coast Guard officials attributed this reduction to a smaller HC-130 fleet size and maintenance needs, including modifications to extend the HC-130s’ airframe life. In fiscal year 2013, the Coast Guard provided 3,506 maritime patrol aircraft resource hours—roughly 75 percent of its targeted level.

**Figure 4: Coast Guard Maritime Patrol Aircraft Hour Allocation Target Compared with Actual Aircraft Hours Provided to the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S), Fiscal Years 2009 through 2013**

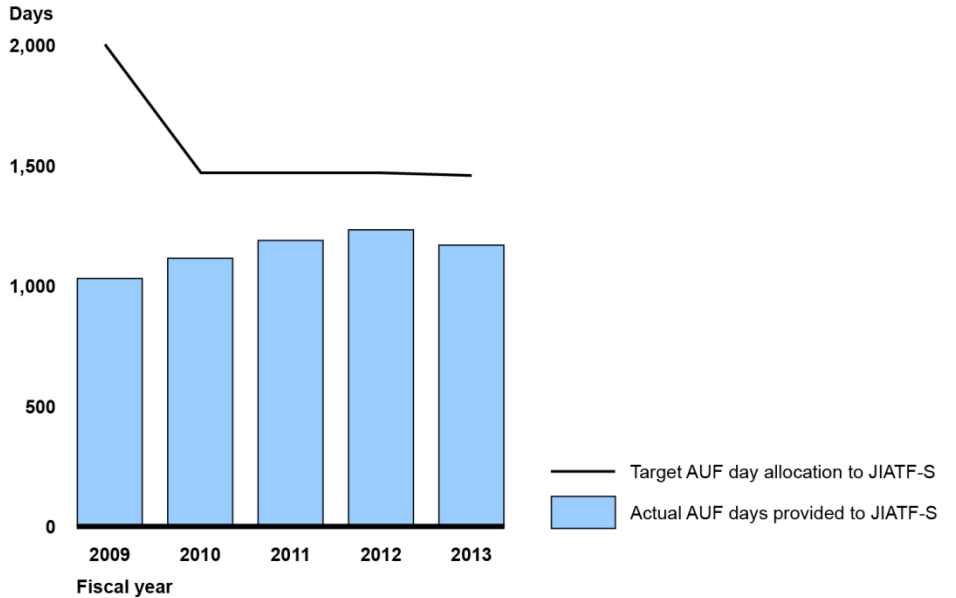


Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-14-527

**Airborne use of force:** The Coast Guard measures its deployment of AUF to JIATF-S in the number of days AUF-capable helicopters are deployed under JIATF-S tactical control. Coast Guard data show the Coast Guard increased its AUF deployments to JIATF-S during fiscal years 2009 through 2012, before declining in 2013, while remaining below target levels. Specifically, the Coast Guard’s AUF deployments increased from 1,030 days in 2009 to 1,232 days in fiscal years 2012, before declining to 1,169 days in fiscal year 2013. According to Coast Guard data, in fiscal year 2013, the Coast Guard’s AUF deployment target was 1,460 days and the Coast Guard provided 1,169 days—approximately 80 percent of its AUF days target goal.<sup>28</sup> Figure 5 shows the AUF deployment day targets compared with actual AUF days provided to JIATF-S during fiscal years 2009 through 2013.

<sup>28</sup>In fiscal year 2009, the Coast Guard’s AUF goal was 2,000 days. Since fiscal year 2010, the Coast Guard’s goal has been about 1,460 days. Coast Guard officials reported that this goal was reduced because of reduced availability of major cutters on which the AUF helicopters are deployed.

**Figure 5: Coast Guard Airborne Use-of-Force (AUF) Targets Compared with Actual AUF Days Provided to the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S), Fiscal Years 2009 through 2013**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-14-527

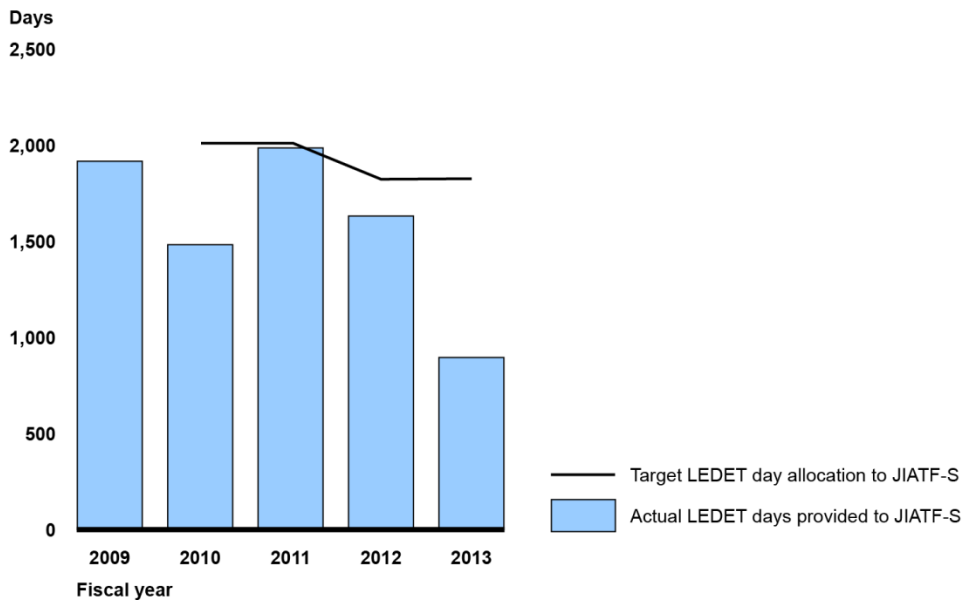
Deployments of Law Enforcement Detachments

Beyond vessels and aircraft, the Coast Guard provides JIATF-S with LEDETs—specially trained personnel who deploy primarily aboard U.S. Navy and allied vessels to conduct maritime law enforcement operations such as boarding suspect vessels and taking custody of suspected drug smugglers in the transit zone. The Coast Guard is the only JIATF-S resource provider that has law enforcement authority and LEDET personnel deployed in maritime areas far from U.S. waters.<sup>29</sup> By deploying LEDETs on Navy and allied vessels, JIATF-S increases the resources it has available for apprehending suspected drug smugglers, their contraband, and their vessels.

<sup>29</sup>The Posse Comitatus Act prohibits the Department of Defense from playing an active and direct role in civilian law enforcement except where authorized by the Constitution or an act of Congress. 18 U.S.C. §1385. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 provided that the Coast Guard is to assign personnel who are trained in law enforcement to appropriate surface naval vessels to perform law enforcement functions in drug interdiction areas. 10 U.S.C. § 379.

According to Coast Guard data, and as shown in figure 6, the Coast Guard's deployment of LEDETs to JIATF-S (as measured in days) varied from fiscal years 2009 through 2013, but experienced an overall decline during this time period. The Coast Guard has not met its LEDET allocation target levels to JIATF-S since establishing targets in fiscal year 2010. The Coast Guard provided its lowest LEDET allocation to JIATF-S in fiscal year 2013, when it provided 895 days, or just under half of its targeted level of 1,825 days. According to Coast Guard officials, the Coast Guard's ability to deploy LEDETs to JIATF-S is largely dependent on the availability of Navy and allied vessels, as discussed later in this report.

**Figure 6: Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachment (LEDET) Allocation Targets Compared with Actual LEDET Days Provided to the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S), Fiscal Years 2009 through 2013**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-14-527

Note: The Coast Guard established its JIATF-S LEDET day target in fiscal year 2010.

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## The Coast Guard Has Generally Not Met Its Drug Interdiction Mission Performance Targets because of Various Factors

### Drug Interdiction Mission Performance Targets

The Coast Guard has generally not met targets for its primary drug interdiction performance measure—removal rate for cocaine from noncommercial vessels in the maritime transit zone. According to Coast Guard officials, this measure focuses on transit zone drug operations because the Coast Guard's drug interdiction mission priority is removing illicit drugs as close to their origins in South America and as far from U.S. shores as possible, where drug shipments are in their most concentrated bulk form. The 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 using noncommercial maritime vessels, as estimated in the CCDB. According to Coast Guard data, since establishing performance targets for this measure in fiscal year 2009,<sup>30</sup> the Coast Guard met its target in 1 year—fiscal year 2013.<sup>31</sup> In fiscal year 2013, the Coast Guard reported a cocaine removal rate of 15.3 percent in the transit zone, exceeding its performance target rate of 14.1 percent. Figure 7 shows the Coast Guard's performance in meeting this primary drug interdiction performance measure from fiscal years 2009 through 2013.

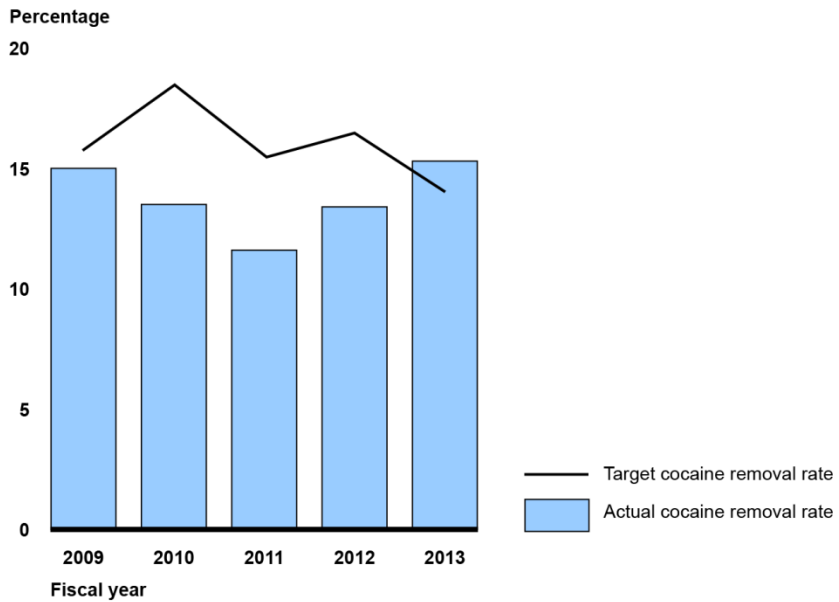
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<sup>30</sup>According to Coast Guard data, the Coast Guard has revised its annual performance target for this measure each year since 2009. Coast Guard officials reported that they revised the performance targets annually based on various factors, including asset availability, observed smuggling trends, and changes due to budget impacts that may affect mission performance. For example, the performance target in 2012 was 16.5 percent, while in 2013 it was lowered to 14.1 percent. Coast Guard officials reported that they focus on setting drug interdiction mission performance targets that are ambitious, but realistic without presuming that targets can be attained in each year.

<sup>31</sup>ONDCP sets a National Interdiction Goal that represents the U.S. government-wide target for cocaine removal from noncommercial maritime vessels in the transit zone as a result of the collective efforts of all U.S. agencies and allies, including the Coast Guard. For example, according to JIATF-S officials, in fiscal year 2012, the national interdiction goal was 36 percent, and the rate achieved by U.S. government agencies and partners was roughly 28 percent. The Coast Guard's cocaine removal rate targets and performance show the share of cocaine removed specifically through Coast Guard actions.



**Figure 7: Coast Guard Cocaine Removal Rate Targets Compared to Actual Cocaine Removal Rates in the Transit Zone, Fiscal Years 2009 through 2013**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-14-527

Note: According to Department of Homeland Security and Office of National Drug Control Policy officials, estimates of the amount of cocaine that enters the United States are based on intelligence and other information that may not reflect the actual flow of cocaine toward the United States.

Coast Guard officials reported that meeting its drug interdiction mission performance target in fiscal year 2013 may not reflect the Coast Guard’s improved performance; rather they noted it is likely a product of greatly reduced awareness of the estimated drug flow in the transit zone for that year. For example, in fiscal year 2009, the estimated noncommercial maritime flow of cocaine in the transit zone was 1,067 metric tons, whereas in fiscal year 2013, it was estimated at 644 metric tons—a roughly 40 percent decline from 2009. Coast Guard officials reported that the lower drug flow estimate for fiscal year 2013 was likely not the result of a reduced level of drug flows toward the United States, but rather the underreporting of the drug flow as a result of three primary factors: (1) reduced vessel and aircraft presence in the transit zone gathering information and intelligence on drug-smuggling activity, (2) less information about the potential movements of drug smugglers as a result

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Factors Limiting the Coast Guard's Drug Interdiction Performance

of fewer prosecutions, and (3) smugglers shifting routes to areas with reduced JIATF-S presence.<sup>32</sup> As a result, according to Coast Guard officials, the Coast Guard's cocaine removal rate performance in fiscal year 2013 appeared more successful than it likely would have been if better information on total cocaine flow had been available. Coast Guard officials reported that the Coast Guard views the cocaine removal rate as the most effective measure to determine success in the drug interdiction mission. The officials added that the cocaine removal rate performance in fiscal year 2013 may have been an anomaly and noted the Coast Guard will reassess the utility of this measure once future-year performance data are available.

The Coast Guard reported that a variety of factors have limited its drug interdiction mission performance.

**Declining readiness of Coast Guard legacy vessels and delays in receiving replacement vessels:** Coast Guard officials cited reduced availability and reliability of its legacy vessels as its primary challenge to combating drug flow in the transit zone and meeting its JIATF-S commitments.<sup>33</sup> In particular, the Coast Guard reported that the legacy high and medium endurance cutters it deploys to JIATF-S have become increasingly difficult and expensive to maintain and operate. We have previously reported on challenges that the Coast Guard faced in

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<sup>32</sup>According to Department of Justice officials, information obtained during criminal prosecutions of drug smugglers provides valuable information on drug-smuggling activities.

<sup>33</sup>We use the term "legacy vessels" to refer to four legacy vessel classes, including the 378-foot high endurance cutters, the 210-foot and 270-foot medium endurance cutters, and the 110-foot patrol boats. For more information on the challenges the Coast Guard faces in the declining condition of its legacy vessel fleet, see 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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operating its legacy vessel fleet.<sup>34</sup> Among other challenges, we found that the Coast Guard had lost a considerable number of planned operational days because of unscheduled maintenance. For example, in 2012, we reported that, according to Coast Guard data, in 2011, there were 654 days in which the Coast Guard's high and medium endurance cutters had planned operational days but were unavailable to conduct operations typically because of unscheduled maintenance.

While the Coast Guard reports that its acquisition of new vessels to replace its legacy vessels will benefit the Coast Guard and enhance its operational performance in the long term, Coast Guard officials cited delays in the acquisition of new cutters as a challenge to meeting its drug interdiction commitments. Specifically, the Coast Guard is in the midst of a \$32 billion acquisition effort to replace its aging cutters and aircraft with modernized and more capable assets.<sup>35</sup> However, since beginning the program in 1996, the Coast Guard has experienced problems in the areas of costs, management, and oversight that have led to considerable delays in the delivery of the replacement assets. For example, in 2012, we reported that according to 2007 program baselines, the planned delivery of replacement vessels for the Coast Guard's medium endurance cutters had been delayed by 13 years. Thus, the Coast Guard has had to

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<sup>34</sup>See [GAO-12-741](#). In this report, we found that the Coast Guard's legacy vessel fleet operational hour targets were not realistic. For example, we found that the Coast Guard's high endurance and medium endurance cutters generally did not meet operational hour targets from fiscal years 2005 through 2011. Coast Guard officials reported that they used operational hour targets to inform planning decisions, such as setting performance targets. However, the Coast Guard had not revised operational targets to reflect the reduced cutter performance. We recommended that DHS direct the Commandant of the Coast Guard to adjust legacy vessel fleet operational hour targets to reflect actual capacity, as appropriate by class. DHS did not concur with our recommendation. DHS stated that the Coast Guard has already taken actions to meet the maintenance challenges associated with its aging vessel fleet and strives to meet the annual operational targets associated with those vessels and that reducing the operational hour targets would fail to fully utilize those assets not impacted by maintenance issues. We disagree because, among other things, the Coast Guard's operational decisions are being made on the assumption that legacy vessels will achieve 100 percent of their operational hour targets and the Coast Guard has adjusted legacy vessel operational hour targets in the past. We continue to believe that this recommendation has merit and should be fully implemented.

<sup>35</sup>The Coast Guard's asset recapitalization plan includes projects to build or modernize five classes each of vessels and aircraft, and procurement of other capabilities, such as improved command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. This includes replacing the Coast Guard's high and medium endurance cutters and its 110-foot patrol boats. See a list of GAO reports related to the Coast Guard's recapitalization program at the end of this report.

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manage increased maintenance challenges that have reduced the availability of its medium endurance cutters, while the replacement vessels will not be available for far longer than initially planned. Coast Guard officials also reported that the Coast Guard has lost operational capacity as it has decommissioned high endurance cutters at a faster rate than it has commissioned replacement national security cutters. Coast Guard officials said that this has contributed to an overall decline of available vessel resource hours for the Coast Guard in recent years and, in particular, for the Coast Guard's drug interdiction mission in the Eastern Pacific, where the legacy high endurance cutters are deployed.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to replacing its aging high endurance cutters, the Coast Guard has also taken actions in recent years to improve the condition of its legacy cutters, including its fleet of medium endurance cutters—which have accounted for the majority of the vessels the Coast Guard has provided to support JIATF-S drug interdiction operations in the transit zone. According to Coast Guard officials, during fiscal years 2009 through 2013, its fleet of 27 medium endurance cutters has been undergoing an extended maintenance project to improve their capabilities and readiness.<sup>37</sup> While the Coast Guard expects this project to enhance the vessels' condition and improve their operational readiness, taking the vessels out of service for extended repairs reduced their operational availability.

**Budget constraints and sequestration:** Coast Guard officials reported that budget constraints in recent years, including the fiscal year 2013 sequestration, required the Coast Guard to decrease its JIATF-S drug interdiction deployments. To meet sequestration guidance, the Coast Guard officials reported reducing overall resource commitments by 25 percent in fiscal year 2013. As part of this, Coast Guard officials reported that during sequestration, the Coast Guard's Pacific Area Command reduced maximum days away from homeport of its high endurance

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<sup>36</sup>The Coast Guard has commissioned three NSCs since fiscal year 2009 and decommissioned five HECs since fiscal year 2011. Coast Guard officials reported that each NSC is to provide greater operational capacity than that provided by the HECs, including improved communications and abilities to deploy aircraft and small boats for drug interdiction operations.

<sup>37</sup>The Coast Guard reported that total costs for the medium endurance cutter maintenance project are projected to be roughly \$280 million. According to Coast Guard officials, this project is scheduled to be completed in fiscal year 2014.

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cutters by half—from 185 days to 90 days—to reduce operating costs. According to JIATF-S officials, the Coast Guard’s reduced high endurance cutter availability limited the capacity of JIATF-S to conduct drug interdiction operations in the Eastern Pacific—the major drug flow transit route.

**Reduced number of Navy vessels for deploying LEDETs:** The Coast Guard’s ability to deploy LEDETs to JIATF-S depends on the availability of vessels from the Navy and allied partners on which the LEDETs can operate. Coast Guard officials attributed the decreased LEDET deployments to the reduced number of vessels the Navy has provided to support JIATF-S in recent years—particularly during sequestration in fiscal year 2013. For example, according to JIATF-S data, the Navy provided JIATF-S with 429 vessel days in fiscal year 2013—less than half of its average annual JIATF-S deployment during fiscal years 2009 through 2012. As a result, the Coast Guard had limited opportunities to deploy available LEDETs—which JIATF-S relies on to maximize the capacity of its force for drug interdiction and apprehension efforts.

**Responding to unexpected contingencies:** Coast Guard officials reported that the need to respond to unexpected contingencies reduced the availability of resources for drug interdiction operations. For example, Coast Guard’s responses to natural and man-made disasters—such as the Haiti earthquake in January 2010 and the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill in April 2010—led the Coast Guard to redeploy medium endurance cutters, maritime patrol aircraft, and helicopters that otherwise may have been used to support JIATF-S operations.

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## The Coast Guard Has Supported Counter-drug Efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands with Increased Asset Deployments

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### The Coast Guard Supports DHS Efforts to Combat Drug Smuggling in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands

The Coast Guard is supporting a DHS-wide effort to combat the growing level of violence associated with drug trafficking in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Specifically, in September 2012, DHS implemented Operation Caribbean Guard to address violence and drug trafficking into and within Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.<sup>38</sup> The Coast Guard's role in this DHS-wide effort has been to increase vessel and aircraft operations to interdict the flow of drugs being trafficked by noncommercial maritime vessels toward the islands. Since September 2012, the Coast Guard's Seventh District has implemented a surge operation, known as Operation Unified Resolve, which has provided Sector San Juan—the Coast Guard field unit whose area of responsibility includes Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands—with additional vessels and aircraft to regularly patrol Puerto Rico and the eastern approaches of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Operation Unified Resolve initially began as a surge operation, but in October 2013, the Coast Guard made the surge operation a standing operation—and, according to Coast Guard officials, established a new baseline for drug interdiction operations in support of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Under Operation Unified Resolve, the Coast Guard has placed special emphasis on targeting the primary and secondary flow of illicit drugs from South America to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. According to Sector San Juan officials, a key challenge for the Coast Guard is the relatively short distance between the Dominican Republic and Puerto

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<sup>38</sup>DHS agencies involved in Operation Caribbean Guard include the Coast Guard, CBP, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement. App. II provides further information on Operation Caribbean Guard and the various DHS component agencies involved.

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Rico. For example, officials noted that it would take approximately 4 hours for a go-fast vessel to transit the 70 to 80 miles between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Coast Guard officials reported that this places a premium on the need for good intelligence on potential drug-smuggling vessels and the effective placement of assets to interdict them.

According to Coast Guard officials, the Coast Guard's decision to provide additional resources to Sector San Juan resulted from Coast Guard analyses that found Sector San Juan lacked sufficient vessels and aircraft to reduce maritime drug smuggling into Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. For example, according to an August 2012 Coast Guard memorandum, Sector San Juan's fleet of vessels faced readiness concerns and lacked the capability to effectively conduct operations against the primary drug flow of go-fast boats smuggling illicit drugs from South America into Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Further, the memorandum notes that the Coast Guard did not have maritime patrol aircraft permanently assigned to the territories. According to the memorandum, the only permanently assigned Coast Guard aircraft in Puerto Rico were helicopters based in the northwest corner of the island and their endurance and position made them impractical for patrolling the eastern approaches to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Coast Guard officials reported that the Coast Guard has not received additional resources to support Operation Unified Resolve. Rather, to implement the operation, the Coast Guard reported that it supplemented its annual allocation of vessels and aircraft to Sector San Juan by reallocating medium endurance cutters and maritime patrol aircraft to Puerto Rico from other locations within the Coast Guard—largely from the Coast Guard's Seventh District.<sup>39</sup> According to Coast Guard officials, these vessels and aircraft, in general, had previously been allocated for alien migrant interdiction operations. As noted earlier and as further described in appendix I, the Coast Guard's process for allocating drug interdiction resources is focused on meeting commitments for strategic priorities, such as JIATF-S transit zone operations, first, before dividing up its remaining resources among its field locations such as Sector San Juan. In this way, the Coast Guard reported that the additional resources

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<sup>39</sup>In particular, according to Coast Guard officials, under Operation Unified Resolve, the Coast Guard has deployed HC-144A maritime patrol aircraft, medium endurance cutters, a 110-foot patrol boat, and two law enforcement pursuit boat crews to Sector San Juan.

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provided for Operation Unified Resolve did not come at the expense of its JIATF-S deployments.

Beyond Operation Unified Resolve, the Coast Guard is scheduled to modernize Sector San Juan's vessel fleet. According to Coast Guard officials, during fiscal years 2015 and 2016, the Coast Guard plans to replace Sector San Juan's six 110-foot patrol boats with six new 154-foot fast response cutters (FRC).<sup>40</sup> According to Coast Guard officials, the FRCs' impact on the drug interdiction mission will be significant, as the FRC is expected to provide (1) increased interdiction capabilities; (2) improved sea keeping; (3) greater endurance; (4) the ability to deploy a pursuit-capable small boat; (5) improved weapons systems; and (6) improved command, control, and communications systems. Coast Guard officials reported that Sector San Juan would accommodate a mix of the new FRCs and 110-foot patrol boats until the 110-foot patrol boats are phased out by the end of fiscal year 2016. According to senior officials from Sector San Juan, the additional resources Sector San Juan is utilizing for Operation Unified Resolve, along with the scheduled arrival of the six FRCs by the end of 2016, will put Sector San Juan in a better position to meet its mission needs.

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## The Coast Guard Has Deployed More Resources for Drug Interdiction in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in Recent Years

### Vessel Deployments Have Increased

According to Coast Guard data, the total amount of vessel hours in support of drug interdiction operations in the Sector San Juan area of responsibility more than tripled in recent years—from 2,051 hours in fiscal

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<sup>40</sup>The Coast Guard is replacing all of its 110-foot patrol boats with FRCs. According to Coast Guard officials, as of April 2014, the Coast Guard has homeported six FRCs at Sector Miami and has received three of six planned FRCs that will be homeported at Sector Key West. Sector San Juan is to receive its FRCs after Sector Key West has received its six FRCs.



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year 2009 to 6,839 hours in fiscal year 2013.<sup>41</sup> According to the data, much of the increase in vessel drug interdiction operational hours occurred from fiscal years 2012 through 2013, when the Coast Guard was implementing Operation Unified Resolve. Coast Guard data show that medium endurance cutters accounted for a rising share of the drug interdiction vessel operational hours, increasing from 3 percent in fiscal year 2011 to 28 percent in fiscal year 2013. In fiscal year 2013, drug interdiction operations accounted for 40 percent of reported medium endurance cutter and patrol boat hours in the Sector San Juan area of responsibility.<sup>42</sup> According to Coast Guard officials, the number of vessel operational hours in support of the drug interdiction mission has risen since 2009 in response to increased drug-smuggling events and the additional resources provided for Operation Unified Resolve beginning in late fiscal year 2012.

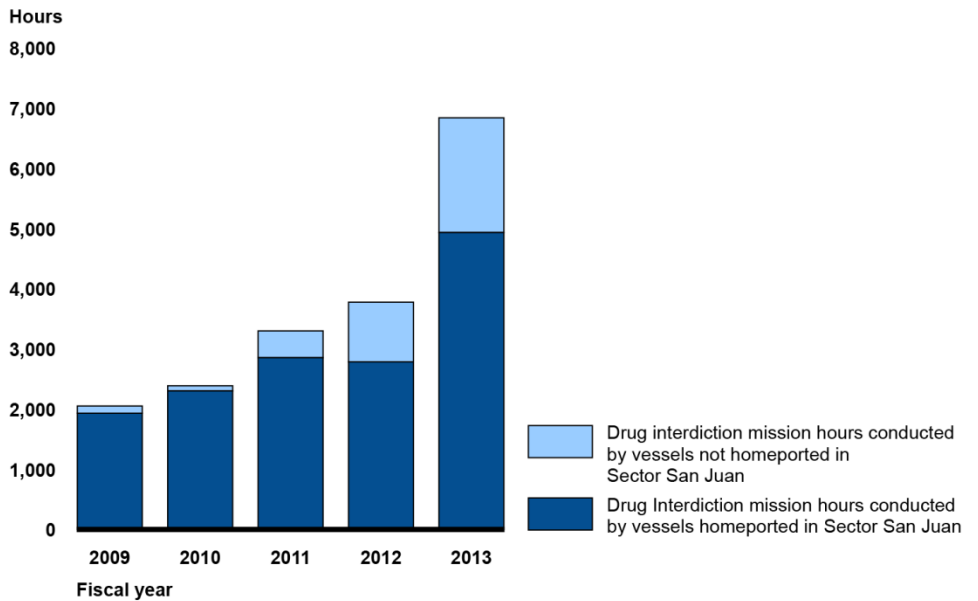
Figure 8 shows the total vessel hours (major cutter and patrol boat hours) the Coast Guard reported for conducting drug interdiction operations in the Sector San Juan area of responsibility during fiscal years 2009 through 2013, as well as, the relative share of the vessel hours provided by Sector San Juan and other Coast Guard locations.

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<sup>41</sup>Coast Guard officials reported that these vessel hours represent the Coast Guard's total deployment of vessels conducting drug interdiction operations in the Sector San Juan area of responsibility. Coast Guard officials reported these hours included total deployments by the Atlantic Area Command, Seventh District, and Sector San Juan of medium endurance cutters and patrol boats (including 110-foot patrol boats, 154-foot FRCs, and 87-foot patrol boats).

<sup>42</sup>Coast Guard officials noted that cutters could be used to conduct several of the Coast Guard's 11 missions concurrently, such as Drug Interdiction, Search and Rescue, and Migrant Interdiction. According to Coast Guard data, in fiscal year 2013, patrol boats and medium endurance cutters expended 17,093 hours conducting various missions in the Sector San Juan area of responsibility. Of this total, 6,839 hours were spent for the drug interdiction mission.

**Figure 8: Coast Guard Vessel Hours Conducting Drug Interdiction Mission Operations in the Sector San Juan Area of Responsibility, Fiscal Years 2009 through 2013**



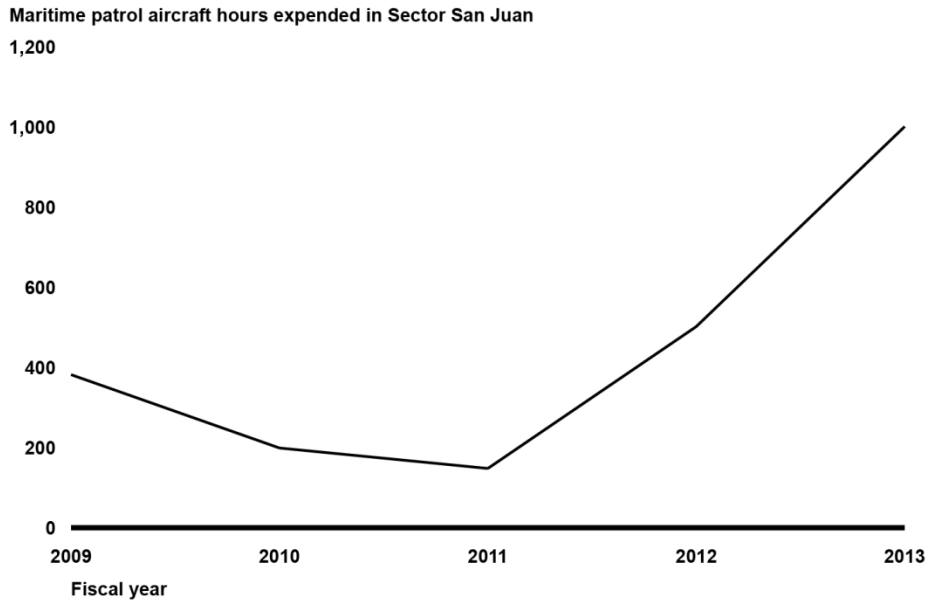
Source: U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-14-527

Note: According to Coast Guard officials, vessel hours include those of medium endurance cutters, 154-foot fast response cutters, 110-foot patrol boats, and 87-foot patrol boats.

### Aircraft Deployments Have Recently Increased

According to Coast Guard data, maritime patrol aircraft resource hours reported for drug interdiction operations in the Sector San Juan area of responsibility declined during fiscal years 2009 through 2011, before increasing considerably in fiscal years 2012 and 2013. For example, in fiscal year 2011, the Coast Guard reported conducting 148 flight hours patrolling Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and this number more than tripled to 502 hours in fiscal year 2012 before doubling to 1,000 hours in fiscal year 2013. The Coast Guard attributes this considerable increase of flight hours in recent years to increased aircraft provided in support of Operation Unified Resolve. Since implementing Operation Unified Resolve in September 2012, the Coast Guard has conducted surveillance patrols of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands using maritime patrol aircraft and crews forward deployed from Coast Guard field locations in the continental United States. Figure 9 shows the Coast Guard’s maritime patrol aircraft hours in support of drug interdiction operations in the Sector San Juan area of responsibility during fiscal years 2009 through 2013.

**Figure 9: Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) Hours Reported for Drug Interdiction Operations in the Sector San Juan Area of Responsibility, Fiscal Years 2009 through 2013**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-14-527

Coast Guard officials reported that the additional resources the Coast Guard provided for Operation Unified Resolve have led to increasing interdictions of illicit drugs being smuggled in and around Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. According to Coast Guard officials, as of March 25, 2014, Operation Unified Resolve had led to the removal of 32,669 kilograms of cocaine and roughly 11,000 pounds of marijuana. Further, Coast Guard officials reported that since deploying additional vessels and aircraft for Operation Unified Resolve in September 2012, the Coast Guard found the estimated primary flow of cocaine into Puerto Rico to be considerably higher than previously thought. For example, according to CCDB data provided by the Coast Guard, the estimated noncommercial maritime primary flow of cocaine toward Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands more than doubled, from 7.1 metric tons in fiscal year 2012 to

14.9 metric tons in fiscal year 2013.<sup>43</sup> Table 1 shows estimated primary and secondary noncommercial maritime drug flow toward Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands during fiscal years 2009 through 2013.

**Table 1: Estimated Primary and Secondary Cocaine Flow by Noncommercial Maritime Vessels to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, Fiscal Years 2009 through 2013**

Fiscal year	Flow to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands	
	Primary (direct from South America)	Secondary (via the Dominican Republic)
	Cocaine flow (metric tons)	Cocaine flow (metric tons)
2009	1.5	4.9
2010	4.7	2
2011	3.2	8
2012	7.1	8.7
2013	14.9	2.4

Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard data. | GAO-14-527

Note: According Department of Homeland Security and Office of National Drug Control Policy officials, estimates of the amount of cocaine that enters the United States are based on intelligence and other information that may not reflect the actual flow of cocaine toward the United States.

## Agency Comments

We are not making recommendations in this report. We provided a draft of this report to DHS, the Department of Justice, ONDCP, and JIATF-S for review and comment. We received technical comments that we have incorporated, as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Commandant of the Coast Guard, and appropriate congressional committees. In addition, this report is available at no charge on GAO's web-site at <http://gao.gov>.

<sup>43</sup>According to a senior DHS official, the rising estimates of cocaine flow toward Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands during fiscal years 2012 and 2013 may be a product of the greater awareness resulting from increased vessel and aircraft deployments under Operation Unified Resolve rather than greater drug-smuggling activity itself. For example, as noted earlier, the estimated drug flow in the transit zone overall has declined since 2009; however, CCDB estimates show that within the transit zone drug flow in the eastern and central Caribbean transit routes—areas that have been the focus of Coast Guard drug interdiction operations since fiscal year 2012—has risen.

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If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-9610 or [caldwells@gao.gov](mailto:caldwells@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Staff acknowledgments are provided in appendix III.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stephen Caldwell", with a checkmark at the end.

Stephen L. Caldwell  
Director, Homeland Security and Justice Issues

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# Appendix I: The Coast Guard's Process for Allocating Drug Interdiction Resources

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This appendix provides a summary of the Coast Guard's process for allocating vessels, aircraft, and other resources for its drug interdiction mission. The Coast Guard's process for allocating drug interdiction resources is focused on meeting commitments for strategic priorities, including for the Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S)—a reporting unit of the Department of Defense's Southern Command that oversees detection and monitoring operations of drug-smuggling events in the transit zone. The Coast Guard allocates drug interdiction resources for these strategic priorities, first, before dividing up its remaining resources among its Atlantic and Pacific Area Commands for further allocation to Coast Guard districts and sectors across the United States.<sup>1</sup> The Coast Guard determines the targets for the amount of time selected vessels, aircraft, and law enforcement detachments (LEDET) are provided to JIATF-S for transit zone operations—through an annual operational planning process that considers factors including resource requirements for strategic priorities, evolving maritime risks, and the availability of vessels and aircraft. Through this process, the Coast Guard reviews JIATF-S resource requests and sets resource targets. The Coast Guard then allocates the remaining resources among its field locations across the United States for implementing 11 missions, including drug interdiction.<sup>2</sup>

In general, the Coast Guard's annual drug interdiction resource allocation planning process includes four steps.

- First, JIATF-S submits its resource allocation requirements for meeting National Drug Control Strategy targets to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Department of Defense as directed

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<sup>1</sup>The Atlantic and Pacific Area Commands are responsible for Coast Guard operations, and develop and implement operational objectives for Coast Guard missions, including developing schedules for icebreakers, major cutters, long-range surveillance aircraft, and deployable specialized forces. District commands are responsible for regional operations and assume tactical control of allocated assets, including patrol boats, and air stations that deploy maritime patrol aircraft and helicopters. Sector commands are responsible for subregional and local operations within each district. They assume tactical control of allocated assets and executing operations in their area of responsibility through tasking of these assets.

<sup>2</sup>The Coast Guard's 11 missions include: Search and Rescue; Maritime Safety; Ports, Waterways, and Coastal Security; Drug Interdiction; Migrant Interdiction; Defense Readiness; Ice Operations; Aids to Navigation and Waterways Management; Marine Environmental Protection; Living Marine Resources; and Other Law Enforcement.

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by the National Interdiction Command and Control Plan.<sup>3</sup> These requirements specify the capabilities (types of vessels or aircraft) and corresponding capacities (number of days for vessels or resource hours for aircraft). The DHS Office of Policy's Counter Illicit Trafficking Section communicates the resource requests to the Coast Guard with resource hour requests for Coast Guard cutters, boats, aircraft, and LEDETs.<sup>4</sup>

- Second, Coast Guard planners determine the amount of resources that the Coast Guard intends to provide in the upcoming fiscal year. The Coast Guard considers its support for JIATF-S drug interdiction operations as one of three strategic commitment priorities.<sup>5</sup> In this way, Coast Guard planners determine the number of vessel days and aircraft hours to provide to JIATF-S before allocating remaining vessels and aircraft to its field locations across the United States for other missions (as described in more detail below). The Coast Guard determines its JIATF-S resource targets based on various factors, including strategic priority and resource availability.
- Third, the Coast Guard provides its JIATF-S resource target—or Statement of Intent—to the DHS Office of Counter Illicit Trafficking, which liaises with JIATF-S and the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). The Statement of Intent details target levels of resources the Coast Guard intends to provide to JIATF-S for the next fiscal year. The Statement of Intent outlines asset availability level targets for major cutters, maritime patrol aircraft, and other resources, such as deployable forces. DHS then combines the Coast Guard Statement of Intent with those of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and submits an overall DHS Statement of Intent to ONDCP and JIATF-S.
- Fourth, after allocating resources for JIATF-S and other strategic commitments, the Coast Guard divides its remaining resource hours

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<sup>3</sup>The National Interdiction Command and Control Plan sets the overarching operational structure for agencies involved in drug interdiction.

<sup>4</sup>Small boats are vessels that may be used for pursuing drug smuggling vessels. Boats may be shore based or deployed on board major cutters which launch the vessels with armed crews.

<sup>5</sup>Other strategic commitment priorities are for Arctic mission operations and Department of Defense related operations.

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for vessels and aircraft between its Pacific and Atlantic Area Commands. Coast Guard officials reported that the Coast Guard's field units use a greater variety of vessels for coastal drug interdiction operations than provided to JIATF-S. These generally include the 110-foot patrol boats in addition to a variety of smaller boats. For example, whereas the Coast Guard generally provides major cutters to JIATF-S, field units rely on a greater variety of smaller vessels to conduct coastal drug interdiction operations because the missions are conducted much closer to shore than are JIATF-S operations.<sup>6</sup>

Outside of JIATF-S, the Coast Guard's Seventh District (headquartered in Miami, Florida, and having responsibility for the Caribbean area including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands) and Eleventh District (headquartered in Alameda, California, and having responsibility for the Eastern Pacific area, including coastal areas from the U.S.-Mexico border to South America) have accounted for the largest shares of the Coast Guard's drug interdiction resource hours. According to Coast Guard officials, these districts' areas of responsibility include high drug-trafficking areas, and therefore drug interdiction accounts for a larger mission focus than at other Coast Guard districts.

From fiscal years 2009 through 2013, the Coast Guard's budget included about \$1.2 billion per year for its drug interdiction mission. This mission accounted for between 10 and 12 percent of the Coast Guard's budget during this time. The Coast Guard reported, based on the enacted fiscal year 2014 budget, that its fiscal year 2014 estimate to perform the drug interdiction mission is \$1,305,271,000. Figure 10 shows the flow of the Coast Guard drug interdiction resource allocation process.

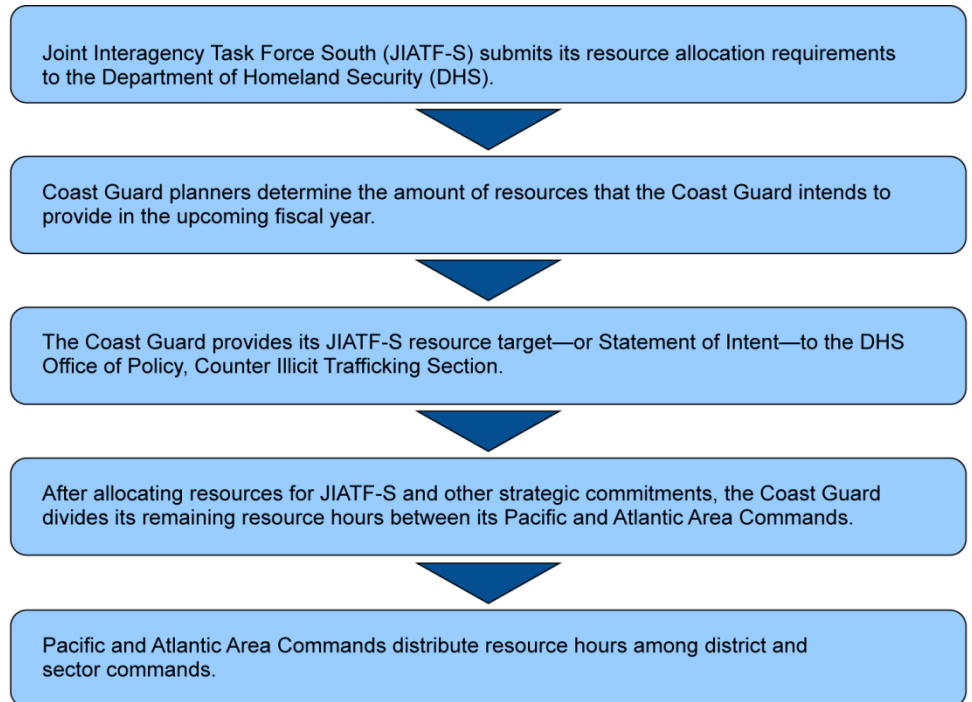
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<sup>6</sup>According to JIATF-S officials, JIATF-S has a standing requirement in the ONDCP Statement of Intent for short-range ships, which include 110-foot patrol boats. According to Coast Guard data, the Coast Guard deployed 110-foot patrol boats to support JIATF-S in fiscal years 2009 and 2012.



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**Figure 10: Coast Guard Drug Interdiction Resource Allocation Process Flow**



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-14-527

# Appendix II: Operation Caribbean Guard

This appendix identifies and describes the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) component agencies involved in Operation Caribbean Guard. In September 2012, DHS implemented Operation Caribbean Guard to intercept illegal weapons, drugs, and money flowing to and from Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Operation Caribbean Guard is a DHS-wide surge effort involving multiple component agencies. Table 2 identifies DHS component agencies involved in Operation Caribbean Guard and reported examples of actions they have taken.

**Table 2: Department of Homeland Security Components Participating in Operation Caribbean Guard and Examples of Actions Reported Taken**

DHS component	Actions taken under Operation Caribbean Guard
Coast Guard	Since September 2012, the Coast Guard has increased its deployments of vessels and aircraft for conducting drug interdiction patrols in the Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands area.
Customs and Border Protection	Initiated operations to intercept illegal weapons, drugs and money, including the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased assets and collection of intelligence along the south coast of Puerto Rico, including more frequent maritime patrol aircraft deployments.</li> <li>• Intensified seal integrity checks and inspection of containerized cargo arriving from the Dominican Republic.</li> <li>• Deployed assets into areas where its operations were conducted on a limited basis to increase presence and collect information.</li> </ul>
Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)	The ICE Homeland Security Investigation San Juan office brought together over 120 multiagency (federal, state and local) law enforcement officers to proactively conduct enforcement operations in the most crime-ridden areas of San Juan. According to DHS officials, the initiative led to the arrest of 890 violent criminals and the seizure of over 450 pounds of narcotics, \$543,000 in U.S. currency, 650 illegal weapons and over 40,000 rounds of ammunition.
Transportation Security Administration	Intensified searches of luggage, parcels, and freight transported on flights from Puerto Rico destined to the continental United States.

Source: GAO analysis of data provided by Department of Homeland Security components. | GAO-14-527

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# Appendix III: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Stephen L. Caldwell, Director (202) 512-9610

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## Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Christopher Conrad (Assistant Director), Jason Berman, Michele Fejfar, Eric Hauswirth, Susan Hsu, Tracey King, and Lerone Reid made key contributions to this report.

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# Related GAO Products

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*Coast Guard: Observations on Progress Made and Challenges Faced in Developing and Implementing a Common Operational Picture.* [GAO-13-784T](#). Washington, D.C.: July 31, 2013.

*Coast Guard: Clarifying the Application of Guidance for Common Operational Picture Development Would Strengthen Program.* [GAO-13-321](#). Washington, D.C.: April 25, 2013.

*International Affairs: Status of Funding, Equipment, and Training for the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative.* [GAO-13-367R](#). Washington, D.C.: March 20, 2013

*Coast Guard: Portfolio Management Approach Needed to Improve Major Acquisition Outcomes.* [GAO-12-918](#). Washington, D.C.: September 20, 2012.

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

*Observations on the Coast Guard's and the Department of Homeland Security's Fleet Studies.* [GAO-12-751R](#). Washington, D.C.: May 31, 2012.

*Coast Guard: Action Needed as Approved Deepwater Program Remains Unachievable.* [GAO-11-743](#). Washington, D.C.: July 28, 2011.

*Coast Guard: Deepwater Requirements, Quantities, and Cost Require Revalidation to Reflect Knowledge Gained.* [GAO-10-790](#). Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2010.

*Drug Control: Cooperation with Many Major Drug Transit Countries Has Improved, but Better Performance Reporting and Sustainability Plans Are Needed.* [GAO-08-784](#). Washington, D.C.: July 15, 2008.

*Drug Control: Agencies Need to Plan for Likely Declines in Drug Interdiction Assets, and Develop Better Performance Measures for Transit Zone Operations.* [GAO-06-200](#). Washington, D.C.: November 15, 2005.

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