

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107222](#), a report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard, a multi-mission military service within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is responsible for ensuring the safety, security, and stewardship of more than 100,000 miles of U.S. coastline and inland waterways. It relies heavily on its cutter fleet to meet these mission demands. In 2012, GAO reported that the Coast Guard's legacy cutters were approaching, or had exceeded, their expected service lives and that their physical condition was generally poor.

GAO was asked to review how the cutter fleet has changed since 2012. This report examines, among other things, the Coast Guard's (1) challenges in operating and maintaining its cutter fleet, and (2) the extent it has determined its cutter-related workforce needs.

GAO analyzed available Coast Guard documentation and data for the period 2012-2024 on types of cutters, cutter availability, and cutter usage time. GAO also conducted site visits to observe facility operations and interviewed Coast Guard officials, including maintenance officials and cutter crews representing a mix of cutter types and geographic locations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that the Coast Guard collect and assess data on (1) the impact of deferred maintenance on cutter equipment failures and which parts and systems are or will become obsolete; and (2) staff availability for the cutter workforce. DHS agreed with four of the recommendations but did not agree to analyze staff availability data. GAO continues to believe this would help inform personnel assignments.

View [GAO-25-107222](#). For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at macleodh@gao.gov.

June 2025

COAST GUARD

Actions Needed to Address Cutter Maintenance and Workforce Challenges

What GAO Found

The U.S. Coast Guard faces increasing challenges operating and maintaining its fleet of 241 cutters—vessels 65 feet or greater in length with accommodations for crew to live on board. Since fiscal year 2019, the cutter fleet's availability to conduct missions generally declined due, in part, to increasing equipment failures. Across the cutter fleet, the number of instances of serious cutter maintenance issues increased by 21 percent from 3,134 in fiscal year 2018 to 3,782 in fiscal year 2023. As a result, more cutters are operating in a degraded state and at an increased risk of further maintenance issues.

Coast Guard Cutter Penobscot Bay at a Major Repair Facility in Baltimore, Maryland



Source: GAO. | GAO-25-107222

Two maintenance challenges that are particularly impactful are increasing deferred maintenance and delays in obtaining obsolete parts. In fiscal year 2024, the Coast Guard deferred \$179 million in cutter maintenance, almost nine times the amount deferred in 2019 (based on inflation-adjusted values). Due to delays in receiving critical parts needed for repairs, the Coast Guard cannibalizes cutters by moving working parts between cutters. The Coast Guard lacks complete information to address the impacts of these challenges. Systematically collecting data on, and assessing, deferred maintenance and parts obsolescence could enable the Coast Guard to better prioritize projects and funding.

The Coast Guard has not fully addressed the impacts of personnel shortages that are a major challenge to operating and maintaining the cutter fleet. Cutter crew and support positions are short staffed, with vacancy rates increasing from about 5 percent in fiscal year 2017 to about 13 percent in fiscal year 2024. Cutter personnel workload has increased to meet mission demands and cutters often deploy without a full crew, which the Coast Guard does not account for in its staffing data. Regularly collecting and assessing data on staff availability could help ensure the Coast Guard is fully considering the workload faced by cutter crews and support personnel when making decisions on personnel assignments.