

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-108525](#), a testimony to the Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement and the Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Securing the nation's borders against unlawful movement of people, illegal drugs and other contraband, and terrorist activities is a key part of DHS's mission. While there is increased attention to the southwest land border, criminal organizations continue to use maritime routes to smuggle people, drugs, and weapons into the United States.

The U.S. government has identified transnational and domestic criminal organizations trafficking and smuggling illicit drugs as a significant threat to the public, law enforcement, and national security. In March 2021, GAO added national efforts to prevent, respond to, and recover from drug misuse to its [High Risk List](#).

This statement discusses (1) key DHS resources to counter illicit maritime activities and (2) DHS operational challenges related to its efforts to counter illicit maritime activities. This statement is based primarily on 15 GAO reports published from July 2012 to April 2025.

What GAO Recommends

In prior work GAO made dozens of recommendations in the reports covered by this statement, including 23 to DHS. DHS generally agreed with the recommendations. As of May 2025, four of the recommendations have been implemented. GAO continues to monitor the agency's progress in implementing open recommendations.

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MARITIME SECURITY

Actions Needed to Address Coordination and Operational Challenges Hindering Federal Efforts

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) employs assets—including aircraft and vessels—and personnel across the U.S. and abroad to secure U.S. borders, support criminal investigations, and ensure maritime security and safety. Relevant DHS components include the Coast Guard, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations.

In prior work, GAO identified coordination challenges that hinder U.S. efforts to confront illicit maritime activities and recommended actions to improve oversight, measure effectiveness, and build organizational capacity. For example:

- In [March 2025](#), GAO found that Homeland Security Investigations had not fully implemented certain training requirements due to disagreements over training content with the Drug Enforcement Administration, with whom they coordinate. Without doing so, the agencies cannot ensure that their agents are properly trained to collaborate effectively on counternarcotics investigations.
- In [February 2024](#), GAO found that DHS had not developed targets for its coordinated efforts to combat complex threats like drug smuggling and terrorism—limiting its ability to assess the effectiveness of its efforts.
- In [April 2024](#), GAO found that the Coast Guard had not assessed the type and number of helicopters it requires to meet its mission demands, as part of an analysis of its assets. Doing so could help ensure it has the necessary aircraft capability to execute its missions in the coming decades.

Coast Guard Cocaine Seizure in the Caribbean Sea, September 2023



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Santiago Gomez. | [GAO-25-108525](#)

DHS components and their law enforcement missions are vital to confronting and mitigating illicit maritime activities. Addressing GAO's recommendations on setting targets and managing assets and personnel will help ensure that DHS efficiently uses its available resources to carry out its law enforcement missions to protect our maritime borders.