



Testimony  
Before the Subcommittee on Coast  
Guard and Maritime Transportation,  
Committee on Transportation and  
Infrastructure, House of Representatives

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## COAST GUARD

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

Statement of Heather MacLeod, Director,  
Homeland Security and Justice

# GAO Highlights

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

## Why GAO Did This Study

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

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

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

## What GAO Recommends

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

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

November 14, 2023

## COAST GUARD

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

## What GAO Found

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

#### Coast Guard Vessel and Personnel Conducting Drug Interdiction Operation



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

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

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

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Chairman Webster, Ranking Member Carbajal and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here to today to discuss our work on the U.S. Coast Guard's law enforcement missions and resources. The Coast Guard—a multi-mission, maritime military service within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)—is the nation's lead federal maritime law enforcement agency. Composed of more than 55,000 personnel, the Coast Guard is responsible for, among other things, protecting the country's maritime borders from encroachment, defending the nation's maritime sovereignty against illicit activity, and suppressing violations of federal law on, under, and over the seas. Coast Guard personnel operate aviation and vessel assets that include a fleet of about 200 fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, more than 1,600 boats, and about 250 cutters, as of September 2020.<sup>1</sup> To carry out its missions, the Coast Guard must maintain these assets while making necessary investments for the future and operating within its existing resources.

My statement today discusses (1) Coast Guard law enforcement missions related to homeland security and (2) challenges we have identified and recommendations we have made to the Coast Guard related to managing its assets, workforce, and technology. This statement is based primarily on 17 GAO reports published from April 2010 to July 2023 related to the Coast Guard as well as selected updates regarding Coast Guard efforts to address our previous recommendations through June 2023.<sup>2</sup> For these reports, we analyzed Coast Guard documents and data and interviewed agency officials. In addition, for our selected updates through June 2023, we reviewed Coast Guard documentation and met with Coast Guard officials.

We made 31 recommendations to the Coast Guard in the reports covered by this statement. As of November 2023, four recommendations have

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<sup>1</sup>As of April 2022, Coast Guard officials stated that the agency had a total workforce of 55,236—including 46,235 military and 9,001 civilian personnel. The Coast Guard classifies vessels under 65 feet in length as boats, which usually operate near shore, on inland waterways, or attached to cutters. Coast Guard also operates cutters, defined as a vessel 65 feet in length or greater with accommodations for a crew to live aboard.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Offshore Patrol Cutter Program Needs to Mature Technology and Design*, [GAO-23-105805](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 20, 2023); GAO, *Coast Guard: Increasing Mission Demands Highlight Importance of Assessing Its Workforce Needs*, [GAO-22-106135](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2022); and See GAO, *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Ensure Investments in Key Data System Meet Mission and User Needs*, [GAO-20-562](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 16, 2020).

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been implemented, two recommendations have been partially implemented, and 25 remain open. We will continue to monitor the Coast Guard's progress in implementing them.

More detailed information on the objectives, scope, and methodologies of our prior work can be found in each of the reports listed at the end of this statement. We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Coast Guard Conducts Several Key Law Enforcement Missions

The Coast Guard is responsible for conducting 11 statutory missions, three of which are maritime law enforcement missions codified as homeland security missions—drug interdiction, migrant interdiction, and other law enforcement (which includes preventing illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing).<sup>3</sup> These missions involve about a quarter of Coast Guard resources. In some cases, the Coast Guard coordinates its law enforcement missions with interagency partners.

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### Drug Interdiction

The purpose of this mission is to stem the flow of illicit drugs into the U.S., which the U.S. government has identified as a significant threat to the public, law enforcement, and the national security of the U.S. The Coast Guard deploys its vessels and aircraft to disrupt the flow of illicit drugs smuggled from South America to the U.S. through the Western Hemisphere transit zone—a 6 million square mile area of smuggling routes that includes the eastern Pacific Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean Sea. In fiscal year 2022, the Coast Guard interdicted over 335,000 pounds of cocaine, according to the Coast Guard's fiscal year 2024 budget overview. Figure 1 shows Coast Guard personnel conducting a drug interdiction operation, which resulted in seizing 17,000 pounds of cocaine.

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<sup>3</sup>6 U.S.C. § 468(a). Appendix I provides information on the Coast Guard's missions programs and statutory missions.

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**Figure 1: Coast Guard Personnel Conducting Drug Interdiction Operation**



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

Given challenges the federal government faces in responding to the drug misuse crisis, in March 2021, we updated our High Risk List to include national efforts to prevent, respond to, and recover from drug misuse. Ongoing efforts seek to address drug misuse, including through law enforcement and drug interdiction. We identified several challenges in the federal government's response to drug misuse, such as the need for more effective implementation of a coordinated, strategic approach.<sup>4</sup>

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## Migrant Interdiction

The purpose of this mission is to stem the flow of unlawful migration and human smuggling activities via maritime routes. It has three main objectives: deter migrants attempting to enter the U.S. through irregular routes and transnational smugglers from using maritime routes to enter

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<sup>4</sup>See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Dedicated Leadership Needed to Address Limited Progress in Most High-Risk Areas*, [GAO-21-119SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 2021); We issue an update to the High-Risk List every 2 years at the start of each new session of Congress. The most recent update was issued in April 2023. See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Efforts Made to Achieve Progress Need to Be Maintained and Expanded to Fully Address All Areas*, [GAO-23-106203](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 20, 2023).

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the U.S.; detect and interdict migrants and smugglers far from the U.S. border; and expand Coast Guard participation in multi-agency and bi-national border security initiatives. The Coast Guard interdicted more than 12,000 migrants in both fiscal year 2022 and 2023—more than double the fiscal year 2021 total, according to Coast Guard data.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. is currently experiencing an increase in migrants entering the country by sea. Global international migration is likely to continue and potentially accelerate over the next decade, according to the National Academy of Sciences.<sup>6</sup> Figure 2 shows Coast Guard personnel conducting a migrant interdiction operation.

**Figure 2: Coast Guard Personnel Conducting a Migrant Interdiction Operation**



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

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## Other Law Enforcement

The purpose of this mission is to enforce international treaties, including the prevention of IUU fishing in international waters and the dumping of

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<sup>5</sup>According to Coast Guard documentation, the Coast Guard interdicted 5,028 migrants in fiscal year 2021.

<sup>6</sup>National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *The Coast Guard's Next Decade: An Assessment of Emerging Challenges and Statutory Needs*. (Washington, D.C., 2023).

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plastics and other marine debris. IUU fishing encompasses many illicit activities, including under-reporting the number of fish caught and using prohibited fishing gear. In fiscal year 2022, the Coast Guard boarded 81 foreign vessels to suppress IUU fishing, according to the Coast Guard's fiscal year 2024 posture statement. Figure 3 below shows a Coast Guard vessel interdicting a vessel using an illegal high seas driftnet, and Coast Guard officials preparing to conduct a law enforcement boarding. According to the Coast Guard IUU Strategic Outlook, IUU fishing has replaced piracy as the leading global maritime security threat that if unchecked could threaten geo-political stability around the world.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 3: Coast Guard Vessel Interdicting Illegal Fishing and Officials Preparing to Conduct a Law Enforcement Boarding**



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

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## Law Enforcement Missions Resources

In September 2021, we reported that Coast Guard data showed almost a quarter of its total estimated operating expenses were for law enforcement missions related to homeland security.<sup>8</sup> From fiscal years 2011 through 2020, drug interdiction accounted for 13 percent of its

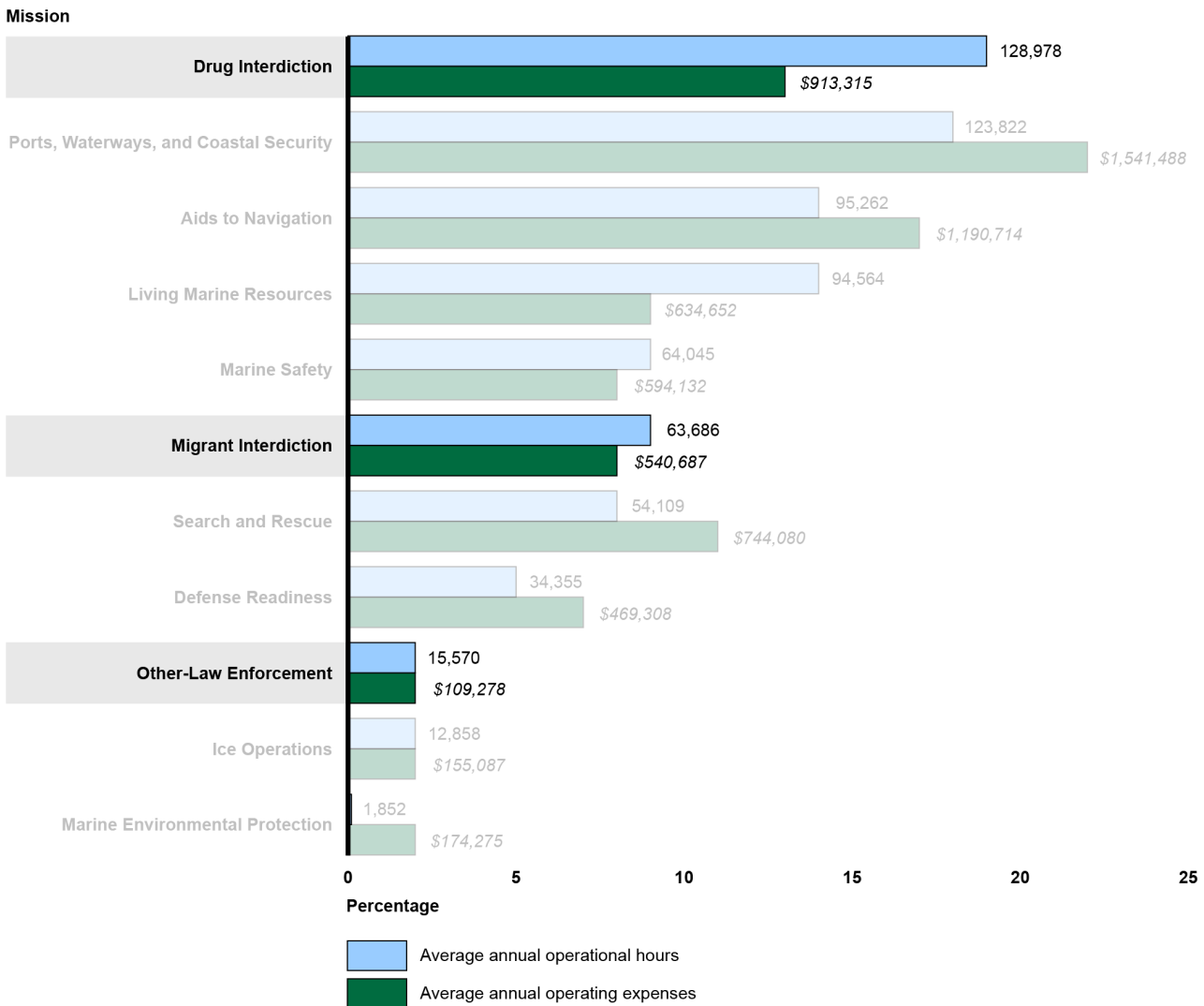
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<sup>7</sup>Coast Guard, *Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing Strategic Outlook* (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2020).

<sup>8</sup>GAO, *Coast Guard: Information on Defense Readiness Mission Deployments, Expenses, and Funding*, [GAO-21-104741](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 15, 2021). The Mission Cost Model is the Coast Guard's official methodology for estimating annual operating expenses for its 11 statutory missions. The Model estimates the proportion of operating expenses by mission by (1) multiplying operations and maintenance costs for supporting a vessel or aircraft by the operational hours and (2) using survey data to estimate additional personnel costs for nonvessel or aircraft-based operations. It produces estimates of operating expenses by mission rather than actual operating expenditures.

estimated operating expenses, migrant interdiction 8 percent, and other law enforcement 2 percent, which includes preventing IUU fishing. The operating expenses of these three missions annually averaged more than \$1.5 billion over this time period. Vessel and aircraft deployments for these missions accounted for 30 percent of the average annual operational hours during that period, as shown in figure 4.

**Figure 4: Coast Guard Average Annual Vessel and Aircraft Operational Hours and Estimated Operating Expenses, by Statutory Mission, Fiscal Years 2011 through 2020**



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



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Note: Operational hours include the use of aircraft, cutters, and boats for the Coast Guard's 11 statutory missions. They do not include the time personnel may spend on missions without using vessels or aircraft. We do not include hours spent on support activities, such as training and technology tests. Operating expenses are estimated by mission by (1) multiplying operations and maintenance costs for supporting a vessel or aircraft by the operational hours and (2) using survey data to estimate additional personnel costs for nonvessel or aircraft-based operations.

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## Interagency Collaboration

The Coast Guard collaborates with other agencies on certain law enforcement missions.

- The Coast Guard coordinates with other DHS components and the Department of Defense on counterdrug missions through various interagency task forces, including Joint Interagency Task Force-South. In July 2019, we reported on the contribution and allocation of assets, such as ships and surveillance aircraft, through these task forces.<sup>9</sup> For example, the task force is allocated assets, such as ships and surveillance aircraft, from Department of Defense and DHS components, such as Coast Guard, as well as from foreign partners. The task force uses these assets, in conjunction with available intelligence, to detect and monitor the trafficking of illicit drugs, such as cocaine, being smuggled north on noncommercial maritime vessels across its area of responsibility.<sup>10</sup>

Coast Guard units also deploy aboard Department of Defense vessels in support of certain law enforcement missions. In November 2019, we reported that the Coast Guard employs specialized units to serve as force multipliers, including for specialized capabilities needed to carry out the drug interdiction mission.<sup>11</sup> Among these units, the Coast Guard has two Tactical Law Enforcement Teams which provide specialized capabilities for offshore drug interdiction and vessel interception operations, primarily in the Caribbean Sea and Eastern Pacific Ocean. These specialized teams do not maintain their own vessels but deploy aboard Coast Guard cutters or U.S. Navy or Allied vessels.

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<sup>9</sup>GAO, *Drug Control: Certain DOD and DHS Joint Task Forces Should Enhance Their Performance Measures to Better Assess Counterdrug Activities*, [GAO-19-441](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2019).

<sup>10</sup>Joint Interagency Task Force-South's area of responsibility includes the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, and the eastern Pacific Ocean.

<sup>11</sup>GAO, *Coast Guard: Assessing Deployable Specialized Forces' Workforce Needs Could Improve Efficiency and Reduce Potential Overlap or Gaps in Capabilities*, [GAO-20-33](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 21, 2019).

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- The Coast Guard coordinates with other federal agencies to address IUU fishing.<sup>12</sup> For example, in November 2021 we reported that the Coast Guard and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration analyze data to identify vessel movements and actions that may indicate IUU fishing.<sup>13</sup> We also reported that the Coast Guard had used aircraft to capture images confirming a suspicion that a vessel was engaging in IUU fishing.

Coast Guard officials told us they use data analysis to develop lists of vessels suspected of IUU fishing, which contribute to successful identification of IUU fishing at sea and help guide at-sea patrol operations to target these vessels. For example, the Coast Guard identified and interdicted a vessel in 2018 that, according to officials, was included on a list of suspected vessels after analysis of location data indicated the vessel was moving in ways characteristic of using prohibited high seas driftnets. Coast Guard officials told us they intercepted the vessel, confirmed illegal use of driftnets, and escorted the vessel to authorities of its flag state. According to Coast Guard officials, authorities of the flag state prosecuted the case, imprisoned several people, and destroyed the vessel.

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## Coast Guard Has Faced Asset, Workforce, and Technology Challenges

Our previous reports have identified various challenges the Coast Guard has faced in managing its assets, workforce, and technology, as well as some steps it has taken to address them. These challenges have affected the Coast Guard's ability to conduct its law enforcement missions.

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## Delayed Asset Acquisitions, Declining Legacy Asset Capabilities, and Cost Increases

In multiple reports, we found challenges with the acquisition of the Coast Guard's newest cutters—the Offshore Patrol Cutter and Polar Security Cutter—that are intended to support law enforcement missions and

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<sup>12</sup>The Coast Guard, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration within the Department of Commerce, the Department of Defense, and the State Department coordinate with one another, as well as internationally, to address IUU fishing.

<sup>13</sup>GAO, *Combating Illegal Fishing: Clear Authority Could Enhance U.S. Efforts to Partner with Other Nations at Sea*, [GAO-22-104234](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 5, 2021).

deliver greater capabilities (e.g., the length of time a ship can spend at sea) than the legacy assets they will replace (see fig. 4).<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 5: Rendering of the Coast Guard’s Offshore Patrol Cutter (left) and Polar Security Cutter (right)**



Source: 2016 Eastern Shipbuilding Group, Panama City, Florida (left image); Bollinger Mississippi Shipbuilding (right image). | GAO-24-107144

We found in our summer 2023 reports that, combined, these two programs are billions of dollars over their initial cost estimates and are more than 2 years behind schedule, increasing the risk of potential capability gaps and putting cost pressure on the overall acquisition portfolio.<sup>15</sup> For example, in June 2023, we reported that the Coast Guard projects to have a reduced number of cutters available for operation starting in 2024 and through 2039 due to the Offshore Patrol Cutters’ delivery delays.

<sup>14</sup>Coast Guard plans to acquire 25 Offshore Patrol Cutters and three Polar Security Cutters. The Offshore Patrol Cutters will replace the aging fleet of 28 Medium Endurance Cutters, which have exceeded their design service lives. They will enable the Coast Guard to continue conducting patrols for homeland security, law enforcement, and search and rescue operations. Polar Security Cutters will replace the aging *Polar Star* icebreaker and enable the U.S. to maintain defense readiness in the Arctic and Antarctic regions; enforce treaties and other laws needed to safeguard both industry and the environment; and help support other missions.

<sup>15</sup>[GAO-23-105805](#); *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Polar Security Cutter Needs to Stabilize Design Before Starting Construction and Improve Schedule Oversight*, [GAO-23-105949](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2023); *Coast Guard Recapitalization: Actions Needed to Better Manage Acquisition Programs and Address Affordability Concerns*, [GAO-23-106948](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2023).

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We have reported for decades that the operational capacity of the legacy vessel fleet has been declining. For example, we reported in July 2012 that Medium Endurance Cutters—a key asset for law enforcement missions that the Offshore Patrol Cutter is to replace—did not meet operational hours targets from fiscal years 2005 through 2011 and that declining operational capacity hindered mission performance.<sup>16</sup> Further, since 2013, the Coast Guard has acknowledged that its two operational icebreakers—the Polar Star and Healy—are insufficient to meet its multifaceted mission needs in the polar regions, which include preventing IUU fishing.

Since 2010, the Coast Guard has invested at least \$850 million to maintain the aging Medium Endurance Cutters and the Polar Star icebreaker. The Coast Guard is investing an additional \$250 million to extend the service life for six cutters and \$75 million to extend the service life of the almost 50-year-old Polar Star until the delayed Offshore Patrol Cutters and Polar Security Cutters, respectively, are operational.

We made seven recommendations in our 2023 reports on the Offshore Patrol and Polar Security Cutters to better align the Coast Guard’s acquisition policy and the programs’ practices with shipbuilding leading practices. DHS and the Coast Guard agreed with five of our recommendations and have taken some steps to implement them. For example, the Coast Guard stated that it plans to update its acquisition policy to require that all shipbuilding programs complete the functional design of major portions of systems that affect multiple zones of the ship—such as electricity and water—prior to the start of lead ship construction.<sup>17</sup>

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## Uncertain Workforce Needs

Coast Guard challenges with determining its workforce needs generally as well as for specific key mission needs have affected its ability to meet mission demands. In recent years, the Coast Guard has raised concerns

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

<sup>17</sup>The two recommendations that DHS did not agree with were related to the Offshore Patrol Cutter stage 2 program, which encompasses Offshore Patrol Cutters 5 through 15. These recommendations stated that the Coast Guard should ensure the stage 2 program 1) successfully demonstrates integrated prototypes of all critical technologies in a realistic environment no later than preliminary design review, and 2) achieves a sufficiently stable design—which according to leading practices is completion of basic and functional design, including the routing of major distributive systems—prior to the start of lead ship construction. We stand by our recommendations because they align with leading practices.

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that its workload had outpaced its workforce levels. Notably, in April 2018, the Coast Guard reported to Congress that it faced challenges meeting its daily mission demands because it was operating below the workforce level necessary to meet all its mission requirements.<sup>18</sup>

More recently, in 2022, the Coast Guard reported that operating in increasingly complex and dynamic security and maritime domains will become more complicated with technology-driven changes. The Coast Guard reported that these changes require workforce growth and enhanced skills to operate and maintain updated assets.<sup>19</sup> Further the Coast Guard has a workforce shortfall of approximately 3,500 enlisted members, according to remarks made by the Commandant in October 2023, and the service has missed its recruiting targets in recent years.<sup>20</sup>

Although the Coast Guard has expressed workforce concerns, it has conducted limited assessments of its workforce needs. In 2022, 2020, and 2010, we reported that the Coast Guard had not adequately determined its workforce needs.<sup>21</sup> Specifically, the Coast Guard had assessed only a small portion of its workforce needs through the requirements determination process it began using in 2003.<sup>22</sup> In February 2020, for example, we found that the Coast Guard had completed workforce requirements analyses from calendar years 2003 through 2019

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<sup>18</sup>Coast Guard, *Manpower Requirements Plan Report to Congress*, (Apr. 13, 2018).

<sup>19</sup>Coast Guard, *Ready Workforce 2030*, (Apr. 2022).

<sup>20</sup>Admiral Linda L. Fagan, “*The U.S. Coast Guard in an Era of Great Power Competition with ADM Linda L. Fagan*” Transcript of event held at Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 17, 2023. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-coast-guard-era-great-power-competition-adm-linda-l-fagan>.

<sup>21</sup>[GAO-22-106135](#); *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Evaluate the Effectiveness of Organizational Changes and Determine Workforce Needs*, [GAO-20-223](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 26, 2020); *Coast Guard: Deployable Operations Group Achieving Organizational Benefits, but Challenges Remain*, [GAO-10-433R](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 7, 2010).

<sup>22</sup>U.S. Coast Guard, *Manpower Requirements Plan, Report to Congress* (Apr. 13, 2018). The requirements determination process includes a requirements analysis, which is a comprehensive review of workforce needs, and concludes with a requirements determination, which identifies the number and type of positions a unit type requires to meet mission-based capability requirements.

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for 28 percent of its workforce and requirements determinations over the same period for 6 percent of its workforce.<sup>23</sup>

We found several limitations affecting the Coast Guard's ability to effectively implement its workforce requirements determination process. Specifically, it lacks time frames for how it will achieve its workforce assessment goals—notably, to assess the workforce requirements for all its positions and units. Among other things, we recommended that the Coast Guard update its Manpower Requirements Plan with time frames and milestones for doing so.<sup>24</sup> DHS concurred with our recommendations and described actions planned to address them. As of November 2023, the Coast Guard reported that it had completed workforce requirements determinations for 15 percent of its workforce.

As of May 2023, Coast Guard officials said they had not determined time frames and milestones to fully implement its workforce requirements plan but indicated it could be feasible to develop a rough estimate of how many positions it plans to assess in the next five years. By updating its plan to complete requirements determinations and obtaining information on the resources needed to achieve its workforce assessment goal, the Coast Guard will be better positioned to ensure that it has the right number of people with requisite skills in the right units to meet its mission demands.

We have also previously reported on Coast Guard's workforce challenges related to identifying capability gaps in specific mission needs, including specialized forces. In November 2019, we reported that the Coast Guard could benefit from assessing workforce needs for its Deployable Specialized Forces workforce—multiple units with a range of specialized capabilities needed to handle drug and migrant interdiction, IUU fishing, terrorism, and other threats in the U.S. maritime environment.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>[GAO-20-223](#). Further, we reported in September 2022 that the service has faced persistent challenges filling certain cyberspace positions it considers as critical or understaffed. See *GAO, Coast Guard: Workforce Planning Actions Needed to Address Growing Cyberspace Mission Demands*, [GAO-22-105208](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 27, 2022).

<sup>24</sup>We made a total of six recommendations, four of which addressed limitations with Coast Guard's workforce requirements determination process. As of November 2023, the Coast Guard implemented three of these recommendations by updating its guidance, determining necessary personnel to conduct the workforce determination process, and tracking the extent to which it completed this process for its units.

<sup>25</sup>[GAO-20-33](#).

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Specifically, we found that the Coast Guard had not used data and evidence to fully assess its Deployable Specialized Forces workforce needs.<sup>26</sup> We reported that conducting this analysis would better position the Coast Guard to identify capability gaps between mission requirements and mission performance caused by deficiencies in the numbers of personnel available.

As a result, we recommended that the Coast Guard conduct a comprehensive analysis of its Deployable Specialized Forces' workforce needs. DHS concurred with this recommendation, and, in February 2023, the Coast Guard reported that drafts of the mission analysis reports on two Specialized Forces unit types were being reviewed, with an estimated completion of Spring 2023. However, the Coast Guard informed us that analysis of the three remaining Specialized Force unit types is subject to available funding and is not yet complete. By comprehensively assessing Deployable Specialized Forces' workforce needs the Coast Guard may be able to more efficiently allocate resources for its Deployable Specialized Forces and the missions they conduct.

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## Technology Challenges

The Coast Guard has had longstanding issues managing its technology resources. The Coast Guard relies extensively on IT systems and services to carry out its missions. It also relies on operational technology, which encompasses a broad range of programmable systems or devices that interact with the physical environment, such as sensors and radar.

In July 2020, we reported on longstanding challenges the Coast Guard has had with its IT systems MISLE, which is a data system that tracks and reports results data for nearly all Coast Guard missions. We found that the system had some capability gaps, and MISLE users we spoke to described numerous challenges with the system. For example, MISLE did not capture migrant interdiction data used to meet departmental reporting requirements. According to Coast Guard maritime law enforcement officials, the Coast Guard is responsible for tracking 20 discrete migrant interdiction data elements for departmental reporting. However, according to these officials, they were only able to easily aggregate two of the 20 required data elements from MISLE—date and location of interdiction event—because MISLE captured the other data elements in user-created narrative entries that were not easily searched. Coast Guard officials at the time of our review estimated that they spent 1 hour per day compiling

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<sup>26</sup>As of November 2019, the Coast Guard had 25 specialized forces teams and 2 units.

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data manually but could compile the information in seconds if the data were readily available in MISLE.

MISLE system managers stated they were aware of these challenges, had begun to address some of them, and agreed that MISLE requires further investments to meet user needs. However, we found that the Coast Guard did not follow key systems development processes. As a result, we recommended that the Coast Guard follow its key systems development processes to identify and analyze alternatives to select solutions to meet mission needs. The Coast Guard concurred and said it plans to replace MISLE. As of June 2023, replacement efforts were ongoing.

In addition, in July 2022, we reported on various aspects of the Coast Guard's IT program.<sup>27</sup> For example, we reported that the Coast Guard implemented two processes intended to ensure that its IT infrastructure resources meet the service's mission needs.<sup>28</sup> However, the service did not have a comprehensive process that included common practices for network capacity planning—a key process in IT infrastructure planning that involves assessing and determining the network resource needs required to effectively support an entity's mission. As a result, we recommended that the Coast Guard develop network capacity planning policies and procedures and implement leading practices for network capacity planning, among other things. Coast Guard agreed with each of our eight recommendations and as of January 2023 was taking actions to address them, such as implementing leading practices for network capacity planning.

In conclusion, the Coast Guard's law enforcement missions are vital to U.S. interests. The Coast Guard has acknowledged that operating in the dynamic security and maritime domains will become more complicated as it acquires upgraded information systems as well as technologically advanced aircraft and vessels. In addition, workforce growth and enhanced skills will be required to operate and maintain updated assets. Addressing our recommendations on managing its assets, workforce, and technology will help ensure that the service efficiently uses its available resources to carry out its law enforcement and other missions.

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<sup>27</sup>GAO, *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Enhance IT Program Implementation*, [GAO-22-105092](#) (Washington, D.C. July 28, 2022).

<sup>28</sup>[GAO-22-105092](#).



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

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## GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Heather MacLeod, Director, Homeland Security and Justice at (202) 512-8777 or [macleodh@gao.gov](mailto:macleodh@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this statement are Paul Hobart (Assistant Director), Mara McMillen (Analyst-in-Charge), Jay Berman, Andrew Curry, Dawn Hoff, and Ben Nelson.

# Appendix I: Information on the U.S. Coast Guard's Missions Programs and Statutory Missions

As shown in table 1, the Coast Guard is responsible for 11 statutory missions identified in the Homeland Security Act of 2002, as amended.<sup>1</sup> The Coast Guard manages these missions through six mission programs, also listed in table 1.

**Table 1: Information on the Coast Guard's Mission Programs and 11 Statutory Missions**

Mission program	Statutory Mission	Description
Maritime security operations	Ports, waterways, and coastal security (response activities)	Ensure the security of the waters subject to the jurisdiction of the U.S. and the waterways, ports, and intermodal landside connections that comprise the marine transportation system and protect those who live or work on the water or who use the maritime environment for recreation.
Maritime law enforcement	Migrant interdiction	Stem the flow of undocumented alien migration and human smuggling activities via maritime routes.
	Drug interdiction	Stem the flow of illegal drugs into the U.S..
	Living marine resources	Enforce laws governing the conservation, management, and recovery of living marine resources, marine protected species, and national marine sanctuaries and monuments.
Maritime prevention	Other law enforcement	Enforce international treaties, including the prevention of illegal fishing in international waters and the dumping of plastics and other marine debris.
	Ports, waterways, and coastal security (prevention activities)	Ensure the security of the waters subject to the jurisdiction of the U.S. and the waterways, ports, and intermodal landside connections that comprise the marine transportation system and protect those who live or work on the water or who use the maritime environment for recreation.
	Marine safety	Enforce laws which prevent death, injury, and property loss in the marine environment.
Maritime response	Marine environmental protection (prevention activities)	Enforce laws which deter the introduction of invasive species into the maritime environment, stop unauthorized ocean dumping, and prevent oil and chemical spills.
	Search and rescue	Search for, and provide aid to, people who are in distress or imminent danger.
Defense operations	Marine environmental protection (response activities)	Respond to oil and chemical spills.
	Defense readiness	Maintain the training and capability necessary to immediately integrate with Department of Defense forces in both peacetime operations and during times of war.
Marine transportation system management	Aids to navigation	Mitigate the risk to safe navigation by providing and maintaining more than 51,000 buoys, beacons, lights, and other aids to mark channels and denote hazards.
	Ice operations	Establish and maintain tracks for critical waterways, assist and escort vessels beset or stranded in ice, and remove navigational hazards created by ice in navigable waterways.

Source: 6 U.S.C. § 468(a); GAO summary of Coast Guard information. | GAO-24-107144

Note: Blue shading denotes Coast Guard statutory homeland security missions.

<sup>1</sup> 6 U.S.C. § 468(a).

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# Related GAO Products

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*Coast Guard Acquisitions: Polar Security Cutter Needs to Stabilize Design Before Starting Construction and Improve Schedule Oversight*, [GAO-23-105949](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2023).

*Coast Guard Recapitalization: Actions Needed to Better Manage Acquisition Programs and Address Affordability Concerns*, [GAO-23-106948](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 27, 2023).

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*Maritime Security: Coast Guard and CBP Efforts to Address Prior GAO Recommendations on Asset and Workforce Needs*, [GAO-23-106695](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 23, 2023).

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*Coast Guard: Resources Provided for Drug Interdiction Operations in the Transit Zone, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands*, [GAO-14-527](#), (Washington, D.C.: June 16, 2014).

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*Coast Guard: Deployable Operations Group Achieving Organizational Benefits, but Challenges Remain*, [GAO-10-433R](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 7, 2010).

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