

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106855](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2014, the Secretary of Homeland Security directed the development of intradepartmental joint task forces to respond to long-term, multi-faceted challenges such as the smuggling of illicit drugs. The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 established in statute the Secretary of Homeland Security's authority to create joint task forces. In 2019, GAO reported on DHS's management of joint task forces, and recommended improvement to DHS's performance measures.

The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes new requirements related to joint task forces and a provision for GAO to review how DHS uses them. This report examines (1) the missions and activities of Joint Task Force-East; (2) criteria for establishing or terminating a joint task force; and (3) performance measures and targets for Joint Task Force-East. GAO analyzed DHS documentation on management and oversight of joint task forces, including actions taken since GAO's prior report ([GAO-19-441](#)). GAO also interviewed DHS headquarters, Joint Task Force-East, and component officials on task force activities and performance management.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that DHS develop and document criteria for establishing and terminating joint task forces, and establish targets and develop and document its methodology for Joint Task Force-East's performance measures. DHS concurred and identified ongoing and planned steps to address these recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106855](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or GamblerR@gao.gov.

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DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

Additional Actions Needed to Improve Oversight of Joint Task Forces

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Joint Task Force-East coordinates activities across DHS components and U.S. government and international partners in the U.S. southern maritime environment. In fiscal year 2023, Joint Task Force-East officials stated they focused on activities such as preparing for maritime mass migration incidents and combatting transnational criminal organizations in the eastern Caribbean.

DHS has not developed and documented criteria for establishing or terminating joint task forces, as of November 2023. From 2015 to 2020, DHS operated three task forces, but terminated two in 2020 (see table).

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Joint Task Force Operating Status, as of November 2023

Joint task force	Scope of operations	Lead DHS component	Operating status
East	The southern maritime environment, such as Puerto Rico and the coastline along the Gulf of Mexico and Florida.	U.S. Coast Guard	Active
West	The land border with Mexico from California to the Gulf of Mexico, among other surrounding areas.	U.S. Customs and Border Protection	Terminated September 2020
Investigations	Responsible for supporting DHS-wide investigations and sharing information to support the other two task forces.	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement	Terminated September 2020

Source: GAO analysis of DHS documentation. | [GAO-24-106855](#)

DHS is statutorily required to inform Congress within 7 days after establishing or terminating a joint task force of the criteria and conditions required to establish or terminate it. Further, DHS is required to establish the criteria for terminating each joint task force using leading practices in performance management and lessons learned by other law enforcement task forces and joint operations. DHS officials stated they recognize the need for criteria but did not provide GAO with drafts or interim documents to support planned actions, as of November 2023. Such criteria could better position the department to convey the conditions under which the Secretary decides to establish or terminate a joint task force.

DHS has taken some steps to develop performance measures for Joint Task Force-East but had not finalized them, as of November 2023. In 2019, GAO recommended that DHS develop outcome-based performance measures for joint task forces. Developing and implementing such measures would better position DHS to demonstrate task force effectiveness. Subsequently, DHS was statutorily required to establish targets—numeric values indicating the level of performance expected—for joint task force performance measures. DHS is also required to include, as part of its performance measures for joint task forces, a description of the methodology used to establish such measures. As of November 2023, DHS had not developed targets or its methodology for joint task force performance measures. Establishing targets and developing and documenting the methodology for Joint Task Force-East's performance measures would better position DHS to measure the task force's results.