



441 G St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20548

Accessible Version

June 24, 2026

The Honorable Rand Paul, M.D.
Chairman
The Honorable Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Andrew Garbarino
Chairman
The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

Department of Homeland Security: Continued Actions Needed to Improve Quality of Border Security Metrics Reporting

Securing the nation's borders against illegal entries, smuggling of drugs and contraband, and terrorist activities is a key part of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) mission. According to DHS, the U.S. has approximately 6,000 miles of land borders, 95,000 miles of coastline, and 328 ports of entry.¹ DHS's U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), which is responsible for securing U.S. borders, reported over 2.9 million encounters with noncitizens at the nation's borders in fiscal year 2024 and about 692,000 encounters in fiscal year 2025. DHS's ability to measure border security inputs, outputs, and outcomes is essential for the department to make evidence-based decisions about resource allocation and manage its border security responsibilities effectively. In our prior work, we have reported on the need for DHS to improve how it assesses its border security efforts.²

¹Ports of entry are officially designated facilities (seaports, airports or land border locations) that provide for the controlled entry into, or departure from, the U.S.

²See, for example, GAO, *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Improve Maritime Interdictions*, [GAO-26-107440](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 13, 2026); *Land Port Inspections: CBP Should Improve Performance Data and Deployment Plans for Scanning Systems*, [GAO-25-107379](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 15, 2025); and *Illicit Fentanyl: DHS Has Various Efforts to Combat Trafficking but Could Better Assess Effectiveness*, [GAO-25-107667](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 2, 2025).

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 (2017 NDAA) requires DHS to develop an annual report containing 43 specific metrics to measure the effectiveness of border security.³ These metrics span several DHS components, and the law requires DHS to consult with the appropriate component heads and ensure that it uses authoritative sources to develop the metrics.⁴ DHS is required to submit the report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Comptroller General. As of May 2026, DHS has submitted seven *Border Security Metrics Reports* in response to the 2017 NDAA reporting requirement. Most recently, DHS submitted its seventh report, the 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report*, in January 2025.⁵

In addition, the 2017 NDAA includes a provision for us to analyze the suitability and statistical validity of the data and methodology in DHS's first report and complete biennial reviews for the following 10 years.⁶ As part of our review, we are to, as appropriate, include recommendations on improvements needed to the metrics and the feasibility of other suitable metrics.

Since March 2019, we have issued three reports on DHS's *Border Security Metrics Report* that collectively included eight recommendations focused on improving the usefulness and quality of the metrics.⁷ DHS agreed with these eight recommendations and, as of May 2026, had implemented two of them.⁸ Specifically, in response to our March 2019 recommendations, DHS conveyed the sensitivity of key assumptions for the statistical model it uses to calculate certain metrics in its August 2020 *Border Security Metrics Report*. In its April 2022 report, DHS also included measures of statistical uncertainty for all metrics based on estimates derived from statistical models.

³Pub. L. No. 114-328, div. A, title X, subtitle G, § 1092, 130 Stat. 2000, 2429-36 (2016) (classified at 6 U.S.C. § 223). In particular, see 6 U.S.C. § 223(b), (c), (d), (e).

⁴DHS is also required to consult or work with other relevant agencies, as appropriate.

⁵Department of Homeland Security, *Border Security Metrics Report: FY 2023* (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 5, 2025). This report, which we refer to as the 2023 report, responds to the reporting requirement for fiscal year 2023 and contains data through fiscal year 2022.

⁶6 U.S.C. § 223(g)(2). This provision requires that GAO conduct a review and submit a report to Congress within 270 days of receipt of DHS's first report, and biennially for the following 10 years with respect to every other DHS report.

⁷GAO, *Border Security: DHS Should Improve the Quality of Unlawful Border Entry Information and Other Metric Reporting*, [GAO-19-305](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 21, 2019); *Border Security Metrics: Progress Made, but DHS Should Take Additional Steps to Improve Information Quality*, [GAO-22-104651](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 16, 2021); and *Department of Homeland Security: Reporting on Border Security Metrics Could Be Improved*, [GAO-24-106277](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 13, 2023). In our March 2019 report, we made four recommendations for DHS to improve the quality of the information presented in the *Border Security Metrics Report*. In our November 2023 report, we made four recommendations for DHS to more fully report required metrics and increase the usefulness and quality of information in the *Border Security Metrics Report*.

⁸[GAO-19-305](#). The two recommendations DHS implemented were to include in its annual *Border Security Metrics Report* (1) the results of sensitivity analyses to key assumptions in its statistical models of unlawful entry estimates and (2) measures of statistical uncertainty for all metrics based on estimates derived from statistical models. By including this information in its report, Congress, policy makers, and the public will be able to more fully evaluate the validity of the border security metrics.

However, our work highlights an ongoing opportunity for DHS: improving its reporting on border security metrics by addressing our other six recommendations. These include two recommendations we made in March 2019 to help DHS improve the quality of information in the report and four recommendations we made in November 2023 to help improve the usefulness of information in the report.⁹ As of May 2026, these recommendations remain open, as discussed further below. Fully addressing these recommendations will help DHS ensure the information it reports is useful to Congress.

This report assesses the extent DHS took steps in its 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report* to (1) more fully report and increase the usefulness of the metrics reported and (2) improve the quality of the information underlying the metrics reported, as previously recommended. This report also provides information on other metrics we have identified in our reports since 2023 that may be used to measure the effectiveness of border security.¹⁰

To address our first objective, we assessed how the 40 metrics DHS included in its 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report* were similar to, or different from (i.e., corresponded to), the metrics as defined in the 2017 NDAA. As part of this assessment, we leveraged information from our prior assessment of DHS's 2021 report and analyzed changes DHS made in its 2023 report.¹¹ Our analysis identified three metrics that DHS newly reported, two metrics DHS initially included in its 2022 report and one metric DHS first included in its 2023 report. We assessed the differences between those three metrics and the 2017 NDAA definitions. We obtained perspectives from DHS officials to determine the reasons for those differences and any efforts to update the metrics in future reports. We also interviewed DHS officials to assess the actions they were taking to address our two prior recommendations to more fully report and increase the usefulness of the metrics reported.

To address our second objective, we analyzed information in DHS's 2022 and 2023 *Border Security Metrics Reports* and interviewed DHS officials to assess the quality of the information presented for the three metrics DHS newly reported. For these metrics, we also collected information from DHS to determine what processes are in place to ensure the overall reliability of the information reported. We reviewed documentation on a statistical model CBP is developing to estimate certain metrics using a combination of statistical modeling and data from sensors along the border. In addition, we interviewed DHS officials to assess their efforts to address our four prior recommendations related to the quality of information in the *Border Security Metrics Report*.

⁹[GAO-19-305](#) and [GAO-24-106277](#).

¹⁰The 2017 NDAA states that we are to include recommendations on improvements needed to the metrics and the feasibility of other suitable metrics. 6 U.S.C. § 223(g)(2)(B). For this report, we identified four additional metrics from three of our prior reports. (1) In January 2026, we recommended that DHS should ensure the Coast Guard implements performance measures for the migrant interdiction mission that effectively measure the service's efforts; (2) In September 2025, we recommended that CBP should clearly define all non-intrusive inspection key performance parameters and report performance using them; (3) In September 2025, we recommended that DHS should establish a program to collect data and develop measures to assess the effectiveness of technologies and strategies used to detect and deter illicit fentanyl, including its analogues and precursor chemicals, from being trafficked into the U.S. at and between ports of entry, as required by law; and, (4) In September 2025, we recommended that DHS should establish performance goals and measures that relate to DHS's strategic goals for its efforts to combat fentanyl trafficking. DHS concurred with these four recommendations but has not yet taken actions to address them. [GAO-26-107440](#); [GAO-25-107379](#); and, [GAO-25-107667](#).

¹¹[GAO-24-106277](#).

To identify other metrics that may be used to measure border security effectiveness, we reviewed 43 border security-related reports that we issued from October 2023 to March 2026. We selected this time frame because our November 2023 report identified other metrics through September 2023.¹²

We conducted this performance audit from September 2025 to June 2026 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.

DHS Reported Additional Metrics but Did Not Fully Engage Components or Congress

DHS made progress toward reporting all the metrics required by the 2017 NDAA. However, DHS did not report information on three required metrics that it has also omitted from all prior reports and did not fully engage components or Congress to improve its reporting. Specifically, DHS reported information on 40 of the 43 metrics in its 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report*, including two first included in its 2022 report and one first included in its 2023 report.¹³ DHS reported these new metrics to better measure maritime threat response rates and the effectiveness of secondary examinations.

Metrics omitted from DHS's 2023 report. For the three metrics DHS did not include in its 2023 report, DHS's Office of Homeland Security Statistics (OHSS) has plans to report on one of these metrics in a future report.¹⁴ The office does not have an estimate for reporting the remaining two metrics, as further explained below.

- **Air and Marine Operations actionable intelligence.** According to the 2023 Border Security Metrics Report and agency officials, DHS plans to include this metric in future reports, potentially starting with the 2026 Border Security Metrics Report.¹⁵ The 2023 report stated that Air and Marine Operations is working with CBP to develop a data visualization product using historic data collected from unmanned aerial systems along the southwest border. Agency officials estimated that this product will be available in December 2026.

¹²In November 2023, we reported on the status of 14 other metrics from 11 of our prior reports that DHS could use to help measure the effectiveness of border security, in addition to the 2017 NDAA metrics. [GAO-24-106277](#).

¹³In November 2023, we reported that DHS included 37 of the 43 metrics in its 2021 *Border Security Metrics Report*. [GAO-24-106277](#).

¹⁴OHSS is responsible for developing the *Border Security Metrics Report*.

¹⁵The 2017 NDAA defines Air and Marine Operations actionable intelligence as the number of times that actionable intelligence related to border security was obtained through the use of unmanned aerial systems and manned aircraft 6 U.S.C. § 223(e)(1)(H).

- **Unlawful entries at ports of entry.** According to agency officials, this metric relies on data from CBP’s Office of Field Operations’ Compliance Examination program used to measure the effectiveness of CBP inspections at ports of entry.¹⁶ The 2023 Border Security Metrics Report states that this program does not have a sufficient sample size to generate an estimate of unlawful entries at ports of entry, as required by the NDAA. In addition, agency officials told us that the program will not operate during fiscal year 2026, and they do not know when it will resume. As a result, DHS cannot estimate when it will be able to report on this metric.
- **A measurement of situational awareness achieved in each U.S. Border Patrol sector.** OHSS officials told us they are considering using data from a statistical model, called the Operational Performance Simulator, to report this metric, but have not yet made this determination, as discussed below.¹⁷

Metrics included in DHS’s 2023 report. For the 40 metrics DHS included in the 2023 Border Security Metrics Report, we assessed the extent to which they were similar to, or differed from, the definitions in the 2017 NDAA. We found that 21 of those metrics in the report generally corresponded with their 2017 NDAA definitions, while 19 differed in scope or calculation from their definitions.¹⁸

These 19 metrics include 16 we previously identified as differing in scope or calculation from the 2017 NDAA definition, as well as the three newly reported metrics, as shown in table 1.¹⁹

Table 1: Differences Between Newly Reported Metrics in the DHS 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report* and the 2017 NDAA

Metric	National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 (2017 NDAA) definition	Differences between reported metrics and definitions in the 2017 NDAA	Status
Department of Homeland Security (DHS) known maritime threat response rate	Rate that compares the ability of the maritime security components of DHS to respond to and resolve known maritime threats, whether inside or outside a transit zone, by placing assets on-scene, with the total number of events with respect to which DHS has known threat information.	DHS did not include information about threats outside the transit zone. In the numerator of the rate, DHS included Coast Guard data but excluded other DHS maritime security components.	As of January 2026, DHS officials said there are no plans to modify the metric’s data to include outside the transit zone. DHS officials stated they are working with other DHS maritime components to refine the methodology so these components can be included in the fiscal year 2025 Border Security Metrics Report.

¹⁶The 2017 NDAA defines unlawful entries at ports of entry as the number of unlawful border crossers who enter the U.S. at a port of entry and are not apprehended by DHS. 6 U.S.C. § 223(a)(11), (c)(1)(A)(iii).

¹⁷The 2017 NDAA defines the measurement of situational awareness achieved in each U.S. Border Patrol Sector as the measurement of the knowledge and understanding of current unlawful cross-border activity, for each U.S. Border Patrol sector. 6 U.S.C. § 223(a)(7), (b)(1)(B).

¹⁸Of the 19 metrics that did not correspond, DHS reported information for two using an alternative measure. We also found that two other metrics, out of the 19 metrics, more closely corresponded with their 2017 NDAA definitions than in the 2021 report due to the inclusion of additional data for the northern and coastal borders. However, these metrics—apprehensions of unaccompanied alien children and apprehensions of family units—still differed from their 2017 NDAA definitions because the NDAA calls for both metrics to report the number of apprehensions in each U.S. Border Patrol sector, but the 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report* does not include all sectors.

¹⁹[GAO-24-106277](#).

Metric	National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 (2017 NDAA) definition	Differences between reported metrics and definitions in the 2017 NDAA	Status
Intergovernmental actionable maritime threat response rate	Rate that compares the ability of the maritime security components of DHS or other U.S. government entities to respond to and resolve actionable maritime threats, whether inside or outside a transit zone, with the number of such threats detected.	DHS did not include information about threats outside the transit zone.	According to DHS officials, as of January 2026, there are no plans to modify the metric's data to include outside the transit zone.
Secondary examination effectiveness rate	Enforcement rate that measures the effectiveness of such secondary examinations at detecting major violators.	DHS reported proxy measures, such as seizures divided by secondary baggage and agriculture referrals.	DHS officials stated they do not plan to modify the metric because data are not available to measure the reasons for secondary examinations in a way that would align the metric with the 2017 NDAA definition.

Source: GAO analysis of 2023 DHS *Border Security Metrics Report* and interviews with DHS officials. | GAO-26-108715

Note: We refer to the metrics provided by DHS in the 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report* as they are enumerated in the 2017 NDAA, Pub. L. No. 114-328, div. A, title X, subtitle G, § 1092, 130 Stat. 2000, 2429-36 (2016) (classified at 6 U.S.C. § 223).

Several factors contributed to differences between the three newly reported metrics and their definitions in the 2017 NDAA, including gaps in reported data. For example, reported data do not include threats outside the transit zone, a geographic area of trafficking routes that includes the eastern Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, among other areas.²⁰ For two of the newly reported metrics—the DHS maritime threat response rate and the intergovernmental maritime threat response rate—the 2017 NDAA specifies that DHS report on maritime threats both within and outside the transit zone. However, DHS reported only maritime threats detected within the transit zone. According to OHSS officials, DHS estimates drug flow destined for the U.S. outside the transit zone to be minimal, and data on estimated flow are unavailable to calculate an accurate rate. In addition, DHS officials explained that certain Coast Guard interdictions outside the transit zone that are not destined for the U.S. are not considered relevant to the *Border Security Metrics Report*.²¹

²⁰According to the 2017 NDAA, the term “transit zone” means the sea corridors of the western Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, and the eastern Pacific Ocean through which undocumented migrants and illicit drugs transit, either directly or indirectly, to the U.S. 6 U.S.C. § 223(a)(8).

²¹Coast Guard officials told us that Coast Guard operates under Title 10 authority in some global regions and has conducted drug seizures under Department of Defense counterterrorism authority. However, Title 10 interdictions are distinct from drug interdictions Coast Guard performs in the western hemisphere transit zone under its Title 14 law enforcement authority, and the latter are relevant to the *Border Security Metrics Report*. See 14 U.S.C. § 522.

Further, we found that the formula DHS used to calculate the DHS known maritime threat response rate differed from the description of the rate in the 2017 NDAA. This rate, as defined by the 2017 NDAA, compares DHS maritime security components' ability to respond to and resolve known maritime threats with the total number of events for which DHS has threat information. In the numerator of the rate, DHS only included Coast Guard data and excluded other DHS maritime security components.²² OHSS officials told us they are working with components to refine the methodology to also include CBP data in a future *Border Security Metrics Report*, consistent with the 2017 NDAA definition.

Another gap included DHS reporting an alternative measure instead of the metric defined in the 2017 NDAA. For example, the 2017 NDAA defines the secondary examination effectiveness rate metric as an enforcement rate that measures the effectiveness of secondary examinations at detecting major violators. However, according to the 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report*, CBP cannot categorize a given secondary examination as "effective" or "ineffective" and therefore does not calculate a secondary examination effectiveness rate. The report explained that CBP Office of Field Operations officers conduct secondary examinations for a variety of discretionary and mandatory reasons and seizures alone cannot determine the effectiveness of secondary examinations. As a result, according to the report, not all secondary examinations are expected to result in enforcement outcomes, and examinations that identify no violations may still be considered effective. DHS therefore reported an alternative measure.²³

DHS's response to GAO's prior recommendations. In November 2023, we recommended that DHS take steps to engage with components to more fully report the metrics as defined by the 2017 NDAA in the *Border Security Metrics Report*. DHS concurred with our recommendation; however, nearly half of the reported metrics in the most recent 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report* differed in scope or calculation from the statutory definitions.

DHS has taken some steps to address this recommendation, but OHSS officials noted that additional actions are needed. For example, we previously identified two instances where OHSS missed opportunities to engage with components to help ensure that reported metrics better corresponded to their 2017 NDAA definitions.²⁴ Specifically, OHSS could have engaged components to obtain input on (1) available Office of Field Operations data for a reported metric, called the secondary examinations at ports of entry metric, and (2) CBP's efforts to develop a statistical model.²⁵ In February 2026, OHSS officials agreed that it would be reasonable for them to engage with the Office of Field Operations to determine whether additional data could be included in the report. OHSS has engaged with CBP on efforts to develop a statistical model, which we discuss in more detail later in this report. OHSS officials also stated that they are working with the Coast Guard to more fully report two of the new metrics.

²²Based on the 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report*, other DHS maritime security components include CBP and its Border Patrol.

²³The alternative measure DHS reported for the secondary examinations effectiveness rate metric consisted of secondary referrals, seizure incidents, and seizures as a percentage of secondary referrals.

²⁴[GAO-24-106277](#).

²⁵The 2017 NDAA defines the secondary examination rate as a rate that measures the frequency of secondary examinations at each land port of entry. 6 U.S.C. at § 223(c)(1)(F)(iii). A secondary examination is when a CBP officer at a port of entry refers a traveler to a separate area, outside the primary inspection area, to complete the inspection or examination process.

While these are important steps toward addressing the recommendation, OHSS had not engaged with components to ensure that certain previously reported metrics—such as those related to illicit drug removal and secondary examinations at ports of entry—corresponded with the 2017 NDAA definitions.²⁶ By better engaging with components, OHSS could obtain additional information needed to ensure that metrics are fully reported, as defined in the 2017 NDAA.

We also found in November 2023 that engaging with Congress could help DHS address challenges it has faced in fully reporting border security metrics as defined by the 2017 NDAA. We recommended that DHS periodically engage with Congress to improve the usefulness of information in the *Border Security Metrics Report*.²⁷ DHS concurred with this recommendation, and DHS's 2023 report (submitted in 2025) states that it will continue refining the metrics by engaging with Congress and keeping Congress updated on the process. However, in June 2025, OHSS officials told us they had not engaged with Congress and that DHS leadership would need to approve any efforts to do so. In February 2026, OHSS officials said they had no additional updates regarding this recommendation. Periodically engaging with Congress could help OHSS clarify definitions for these metrics and identify potential opportunities to refine the metrics that have been challenging to report, such as those DHS has omitted.

DHS Has Not Systematically Identified Data Limitations or Improved the Information Quality of Its Statistical Model

DHS reported some data limitations and modified the methodology of its statistical model for estimating certain metrics but has not implemented our four recommendations to improve the quality of information in its *Border Security Metrics Report*. Two of these recommendations focus on the reliability of the data underlying the metrics in the report and the other two focus on a statistical model DHS uses to estimate certain metrics.

DHS Reported Some Data Limitations but Still Does Not Have a Process to Identify and Communicate Them

In March 2019, we recommended that DHS develop and implement a process to systematically review the reliability of data in the *Border Security Metrics Report* and comprehensively identify any limitations with the data and methodologies that underlie the metrics. We also recommended that DHS communicate the limitations of the metrics that the department identifies through its systematic review of information in the report.²⁸

²⁶The 2017 NDAA defines the illicit drug removal rate as a rate for drugs removed inside and outside of a transit zone, which compares the amount and type of illicit drugs removed, including drugs abandoned at sea, by DHS maritime security components in any fiscal year to the average of the amount and type of illicit drugs removed by such maritime components for the immediately preceding 5 fiscal years. 6 U.S.C. § 223(a)(8), (d)(1)(C).

²⁷[GAO-24-106277](#).

²⁸[GAO-19-305](#).

OHSS officials told us in February 2026 that they reviewed the data in the *Border Security Metrics Report* for consistency across years and reported some limitations. For example, OHSS identified data limitations for two of the newly reported metrics in the report: the DHS known maritime threat response rate and the intergovernmental actionable maritime threat response rate. For both metrics, the 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report* states that some migrant interdictions or counterdrug efforts conducted by agencies external to the Coast Guard may not be reported and counted in the total number of events.

However, officials stated they do not yet have a systematic process to identify limitations. Such a process would involve OHSS assessing whether the data underlying each of the metrics in the report was reliable and whether any limitations exist that would affect how they are used in the report. Without such a process, OHSS may not be aware of additional limitations, which could be useful to include in the *Border Security Metrics Report*. For example, Coast Guard officials shared with us an additional limitation for two of the newly reported metrics that was not included in the report. Coast Guard officials told us that the number of events reported for a given year may change if the underlying data changes, such as when a different agency is credited with a drug interdiction. This limitation may be useful to communicate in the report, particularly if one were to compare data across multiple *Border Security Metrics Reports*.

In February 2026, OHSS officials reiterated prior statements that they did not have the resources to implement a systematic process to identify data limitations and they obtained data used in the report from other DHS components.²⁹ In discussing potential ways OHSS could use its existing process to develop the *Border Security Metrics Report*, we observed that OHSS could ask questions about data reliability while collecting data from components for the report.

OHSS officials stated that they could implement a more robust process for reviewing the reliability of the data potentially starting with the 2025 *Border Security Metrics Report*. For example, in April 2026 OHSS officials stated that it sounded reasonable to incorporate questions to components about data reliability in their process for that report. Having such a process may help to improve the quality of the metrics in the *Border Security Metrics Report* and Congress, policymakers, and the public's understanding of the metrics. For example, in our review of the 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report*, we identified three instances of inaccurate information related to the three newly reported metrics. Specifically:

1. **DHS known maritime threat response rate.** DHS inaccurately reported the total number of maritime threat events in fiscal year 2020 as 5,218, when the correct number was 2,518.³⁰ OHSS officials told us that this number was transposed.

²⁹GAO-24-106277. As we previously reported, OHSS officials request updated data for metrics DHS has previously included in the report from DHS components to prepare the *Border Security Metrics Report*. For example, OHSS emailed CBP its request for data, and asked that the components enter data from the most recent fiscal year in a template containing data tables OHSS had included in the prior report.

³⁰6 U.S.C. § 223(d)(1)(E).

2. **Intergovernmental actionable maritime threat response rate.** DHS inconsistently stated how the intergovernmental maritime threat response rate is calculated.³¹ For example, the text of the report indicates that data from both the Coast Guard and other government entities are included in the numerator of the rate. However, in the data table, the rate is calculated using only other government entities in the numerator. OHSS officials clarified that the numerator of the rate consists of data from both Coast Guard and other government entities.
3. **Secondary examination effectiveness rate.** DHS inaccurately stated that it contained data on seizures and arrests, when the report only contained data on seizures.³² OHSS officials told us that the exclusion of arrest data was a mistake.

OHSS officials told us that these instances would be corrected in the forthcoming 2024 *Border Security Metrics Report*. By developing and implementing a process to systematically review the reliability of data, DHS would be better positioned to comprehensively identify and fully disclose metrics' limitations and to maximize the quality of the data. Thereafter, communicating the data or methodological limitations with the metrics would facilitate a better understanding and appropriate interpretation of the data in the context of the *Border Security Metrics Report*.

DHS's Statistical Model Has Not Been Updated and May Not Reflect Current Conditions

In November 2023, we reported that DHS had not assessed or updated a statistical model, used to estimate deterrence for selected metrics, since its development in 2016. The lack of updating raises questions about the extent to which the model used to estimate metrics related to unlawful entries reflects current southwest border conditions. We recommended that DHS assess certain aspects of this model and document the results of its assessment.³³ We also recommended that DHS use the results of this assessment to update or inform its efforts to replace the model, as appropriate and DHS concurred with these recommendations.

In its 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report* (submitted in 2025), DHS noted that its statistical model has limitations. For example, the report states OHSS has viewed estimates from its statistical model as increasingly problematic, because those estimates apply to a small share of the population crossing the border. OHSS officials also told us that the demographic and migration patterns included in the model have changed and thus do not reflect current conditions.

³¹6 U.S.C. § 223(d)(1)(F). In addition, we found that the 2022 *Border Security Metrics Report* inconsistently calculated the intergovernmental response rate across fiscal years 2020 and 2021. For example, in fiscal year 2020 the numerator in the rate is calculated by adding together two columns containing the sum of Coast Guard and other U.S. government events, while in fiscal year 2021 the numerator in the rate is the sum of the other U.S. government events.

³²6 U.S.C. § 223(c)(1)(F)(iv). CBP officials told us that some arrests may occur following a seizure from a secondary examination and be counted as one incident. However, the 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report* did not provide this information.

³³[GAO-24-106277](#). Specifically, we recommended that DHS assess the extent to which its choice of input administrative data and model type for its statistical model of deterrence remains sufficiently predictive, and document the results. DHS's statistical model for estimating three unlawful entry metrics requires an estimated deterrence rate. As an input to this model, DHS uses a separate statistical model to estimate deterrence. A deterrence rate is the share of individuals who decide not to attempt to reenter the U.S. after being apprehended.

Furthermore, a survey needed for OHSS to apply its statistical model was not available for the 2 latest fiscal years (2021 and 2022) covered by the 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report*, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not having this survey data on apprehended migrants' intentions to re-attempt entry prevented OHSS from using its current model to estimate metrics related to unlawful entries.³⁴ Instead, OHSS reported an observational estimate for these 2 fiscal years using Border Patrol data. According to DHS's 2023 report, the observational estimate consisted of direct (i.e., Border Patrol agent) or indirect (i.e., residual evidence, such as footprints) observations of border crossers. OHSS officials told us that the survey has since resumed and OHSS plans to use the survey in the 2025 *Border Security Metrics Report*.

In February 2026, OHSS officials told us they had considered using a model from CBP, known as the Operational Performance Simulator (OPS), as an alternative to updating its own model for estimating metrics related to unlawful entries. CBP has been developing OPS since 2017. OPS uses a combination of statistical modeling, data collected from operations and sensors along the border, and assumptions about how migrants and Border Patrol resources strategically interact. According to OHSS officials, they reviewed estimates from this model for the 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report* but had questions regarding their validity. Specifically, OHSS found that the model's estimated number of got aways—individuals observed illegally crossing the U.S. border who evade apprehension—was too high. OHSS officials told us they compared the estimates to available Border Patrol and U.S. Census Bureau data to make this determination but had not conducted a written evaluation.

CBP officials told us that they are piloting OPS for operational decision-making and CBP has taken several steps to help ensure OPS produces valid results. Specifically, CBP officials told us that they have updated OPS several times, in response to changes recommended by a 2021 evaluation.³⁵ These updates included using more realistic numbers of Border Patrol agents making apprehensions and using more realistic movements of individuals crossing the border. CBP also surveys Border Patrol stations annually to ensure that the model is using updated data on a given station's geographic boundaries, assets, and operational resources, such as Border Patrol agents. CBP officials told us that the model could be used to estimate certain metrics, such as the probability of detection in the *Border Security Metrics Report*, but doing so would need leadership approval.³⁶

Our analysis of CBP documentation and interviews with CBP officials identified several strengths of OPS. One strength of OPS is its use of realistic data that is updated annually, such as the number, location, and capabilities of sensors used by Border Patrol stations. Another strength is that OPS simulates enforcement processes without making assumptions about migrants' intentions to re-attempt entry. In contrast, OHSS's current model assumes that migrants who attempt to evade detection will repeatedly try to cross the border until they are successful.

³⁴The Mexican research and educational institution, El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, did not conduct surveys in 2021 and 2022, which prevented estimating the deterrence rate for those fiscal years, according to the 2023 *Border Security Metrics Report*.

³⁵Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate. *Independent Verification and Validation (IV&V) of CBP's Operational Performance Simulator (OPS)* (Sept. 30, 2021).

³⁶The probability of detection rate compares the estimated total unlawful border crossing attempts not detected by Border Patrol with the unlawful border crossing effectiveness rate (i.e., the percentage resulting from dividing the number of apprehensions and turn backs by the sum of the number of apprehensions, estimated undetected unlawful entries, turn backs, and got aways). 6 U.S.C. § 223(a)(10), (b)(1)(C), (D)).

However, we found that OPS would have several limitations, if OHSS used it for statistical purposes such as the *Border Security Metrics Report*. First, the model's estimated number of undetected unlawful entries cannot be fully validated using known, observed data. This limitation is inherent to estimating an unobservable quantity and also applies to the OHSS model. Second, OHSS may need to adjust the model for statistical purposes, such as estimating unlawful entry metrics consistently over time and across other statistical series. For example, OHSS may need to calibrate the model to align with both the number of Border Patrol apprehensions and to demographic data relevant to migration statistics. Calibration to known demographic data is a common method that statistical agencies use to help ensure realistic and consistent estimates.³⁷ These and other adjustments may be necessary, because OPS was not designed for statistical purposes. Instead, CBP is piloting OPS for operational purposes to determine the effect of using various resources on apprehensions, got aways, and turn backs.³⁸

In February 2026, OHSS officials told us that they assessed their model as part of the 2024 *Border Security Metrics Report*. DHS has not yet finalized this report as of April 2026, but we reviewed a preliminary version of this assessment. We found that while OHSS officials modified their method for estimating deterrence rates, they did not assess whether the inputs to the deterrence model or model type remain sufficiently predictive, as we previously recommended. Specifically, this modified method uses historical survey data as inputs into its existing statistical model of deterrence to provide estimates for fiscal year 2023. While this update helped address limitations from unavailable survey data for fiscal years 2021 through 2023, OHSS did not assess the inputs to the model or model type to ensure they were sufficiently predictive. OHSS officials told us that they would like to use CBP's OPS model in future years if its estimates are valid. OHSS plans to continue using its current model, while OHSS determines whether, if it all, it would be able to use estimates from OPS.

Assessing or updating aspects of DHS's current statistical model for estimating metrics related to unlawful entries in the *Border Security Metrics Report* remains important, even as OHSS considers the strengths and limitations of the alternative OPS model for statistical purposes. This effort could help DHS better ensure that its current model remains sufficiently predictive, and reflects current southwest border conditions, particularly if DHS continues to use its current model.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DHS for review and comment. DHS provided technical comments on the report, which we incorporated as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Homeland Security, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

³⁷For example, calibration could ensure that estimates of total migration flow between ports of entry from OPS do not exceed total flow estimated by other relevant sources, such as the American Community Survey.

³⁸The 2017 NDAA defines got aways as individuals who are directly or indirectly observed entering unlawfully, are not apprehended, and are not turn backs. See 6 U.S.C. § 223(a)(3). The 2017 NDAA defines turn backs as individuals who, after making an unlawful entry into the U.S., respond to U.S. enforcement efforts by returning promptly to the country from which they entered. Id. at § 223(a)(9).

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at MacLeodH@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Media Relations may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to

this report are Taylor Matheson (Assistant Director), Emily Hutz (Analyst in Charge), Michelle Bird, Ben Crossley, Dominick Dale, Michele Fejfar, Sasan “Jon” Najmi, and Jeff Tessin.

//SIGNED//

Heather MacLeod
Director Homeland Security and Justice