

Coast Guard: Actions to Address Sexual Misconduct Underway but Incomplete

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Sexual misconduct in the U.S. Coast Guard is a longstanding problem. Implementing our recommendations can help the Coast Guard instill a culture intolerant of sexual misconduct and communicate progress to Congress and the public.

The Big Picture

Sexual misconduct has been a challenge within the U.S. Coast Guard for decades. For example, in a 2020 internal investigation called “Operation Fouled Anchor,” the Coast Guard examined more than 100 allegations of sexual assault from 1990 to 2006 at the Coast Guard Academy. The investigation concluded that the academy often mishandled these cases and failed to take sufficient action to ensure a safe environment for cadets. Sexual misconduct negatively affects victims and cadet retention, and it disrupts mission readiness.

Cadets at Coast Guard Academy Practicing Drills



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Matt Thieme. | GAO-26-109302

In June 2023, after media reporting on the mishandling of sexual assault cases, the Coast Guard committed to reforming its culture, including addressing sexual misconduct. It also committed to better communicate its progress on these efforts to Congress and the public.

A November 2023 Coast Guard report developed in response to Operation Fouled Anchor concluded that drastic improvement was needed to address harmful behaviors, including sexual misconduct. The report highlighted that about 18 percent of current Coast Guard women and 4 percent of men who responded

to the Coast Guard’s 2022 Workforce and Gender Relations survey reported having experienced sexual harassment.

What GAO’s Work Shows

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2026 includes a provision for GAO to report on Coast Guard efforts to mitigate sexual misconduct in the service. Pub. L. No. 119-60, div. G, tit. LXXV, subtit. A, § 7501, 139 Stat. 718, 1788-89 (2025). Our prior work has highlighted challenges that the Coast Guard has faced in addressing and reporting sexual misconduct. The Coast Guard has begun to implement our recommendations to address these concerns, but as of August 2026, its actions were incomplete.

Implementing Reforms to Address Key Gaps

The Coast Guard has taken some actions to implement reforms, but gaps in key areas may affect the Coast Guard’s ability to maintain progress and achieve lasting results. Specifically, [we reported](#) that in November 2023 the Coast Guard identified 33 actions to implement as part of its reform effort to address sexual misconduct. Subsequently, the Coast Guard identified 16 additional actions. These actions include revising policy and filling new positions to address sexual misconduct, among others. As of August 2026, the Coast Guard reported completing 36 of the 49 actions.

We found that the Coast Guard had not updated timelines or outlined clear next steps for implementing the incomplete reform actions. In addition, Coast Guard did not have a way to collect

feedback from personnel to determine whether the reforms were working.

In light of these findings, we recommended in January 2026 that the Coast Guard develop an implementation plan for its reform effort, reconstitute its implementation team, and establish a two-way communications strategy with employees regarding the status and effects of its reform efforts, among other items. The Coast Guard is taking steps to implement these recommendations. For example, in June 2026 it developed a feedback tool to engage the workforce on reform efforts. The Coast Guard also provided an updated implementation plan in August 2026.

Assessing the Effectiveness of the Reforms

The Coast Guard has not yet developed a performance plan to assess its progress over time—a deficiency we highlighted more than two years ago in [our testimony before Congress in March 2024](#).

Since that time, the Coast Guard has begun to develop a tool to leverage relevant metrics from its current surveys and other reports to establish a baseline for assessing the cumulative impact of its reform actions. However, as of June 2026, the service has yet to develop goals and measures for its tool, and effort remains incomplete. Assessing the effectiveness of its actions would better ensure that the Coast Guard has the information it needs to evaluate whether the actions are helping personnel have an experience free from sexual misconduct.

Improving Reporting to Congress

The service did not notify Congress of Operation Fouled Anchor until media reporting was imminent, potentially impairing congressional oversight. In April 2025 [we reported](#) that the Coast Guard's policy provides limited guidance on notifying Congress of its investigations into sexual misconduct.

Additionally, the Coast Guard is statutorily required to inform Congress annually about sexual misconduct. However, we reviewed the Coast Guard's report

issued in 2022 under 14 U.S.C. § 5112 and it did not include all statutorily required information and was nearly a year late. In our January 2026 report, we [recommended](#) the Coast Guard ensure that future reports address all required elements and issue on time. However, the Coast Guard issued its 2023, 2024, and 2025 reports late and still did not include all required information. Coast Guard officials stated that the 2025 report is complete. We found that required elements are still missing

As we also recommended, documenting its guidance for determining the investigations that warrant proactive congressional notification and issuing complete and on time reports would provide Congress with information it can use for oversight.

Challenges and Opportunities

Addressing sexual misconduct in the Coast Guard requires a cultural transformation. Our previous work shows that fully implementing major transformations can take years and requires focused, full-time attention to ensure that initiatives are implemented in a coherent and integrated way. But gaps in leadership, monitoring, and employee engagement have hindered progress. Absent implementation of our recommendations related to sexual misconduct, the service risks not being able to make the types of long-term cultural and procedural changes that are necessary to address sexual misconduct. It also risks missed opportunities for the Coast Guard to assess the effectiveness of its reform efforts and accurately communicate results to Congress and the public.

Coast Guard Personnel on Patrol



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photo by Chief Petty Officer Sara Mooers. | GAO-26-109302

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