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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-1062](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

Created in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Port Security Assessment Program was designed to evaluate security at the nation's 55 most economically and militarily strategic ports. Implemented by the U.S. Coast Guard, an agency of the Department of Homeland Security, the program focuses on identifying vulnerabilities, suggesting approaches to minimize them, and making the information available to those responsible for developing and implementing portwide security plans. The program has been under way for more than 2 years and has undergone several sets of changes, including the addition of a geographic information system (GIS). GAO was asked to discuss why and how the program changed and assess the Coast Guard's approach for implementing the program in its current form.

## What GAO Recommends

To enhance the program's effectiveness as a tool for improving port security, GAO recommends that the Coast Guard define performance requirements for the GIS and develop a more comprehensive plan for implementing both the GIS and the Port Security Assessment Program as a whole. In commenting on a draft of this report, the Coast Guard agreed to take steps to define the functional requirements of the GIS and to more fully develop a plan for the long-term implementation of the program.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-1062](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-1062).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Margaret Wrightson at (415) 904-2200 or [wrightsonm@gao.gov](mailto:wrightsonm@gao.gov).

## MARITIME SECURITY

# Better Planning Needed to Help Ensure an Effective Port Security Assessment Program

## What GAO Found

Changes in the Port Security Assessment Program reflect attempts to deal with two main developments since the program's inception: evolving assessment needs at the ports and missteps in how the initial assessments were carried out. The program was designed as a comprehensive assessment of each port and its critical assets, such as passenger terminals, factories, cargo facilities, and bridges. However, the need for comprehensive assessments was diminished when many owners and operators of these critical assets began conducting their own assessments to comply with new regulatory requirements or apply for security grants. The program's assessments also proved more expensive than expected, and a GAO review conducted at the time found shortcomings in their quality and usefulness. The current program's assessments are more targeted in scope and nature, including the opportunity for local Coast Guard officials to request reviews of specific assets they do not know enough about. To help local authorities with security planning and response, the Coast Guard decided to incorporate a GIS. A GIS is a computer mapping system designed to have many information "layers" that can be easily updated and retrieved. The Coast Guard expects to complete the assessments at the 55 ports by February 2005, but no timeline exists for making the GIS component operational.

Although the revised program holds promise, the implementation approach is at increased risk because the Coast Guard is not taking sufficient steps in the planning process. Contrary to best practices for technology systems development, the GIS is being developed without sufficient up-front work to identify how the system will be expected to perform. Both the GIS component and the program as a whole also lack a project plan detailing tasks, schedules, and costs. In other federal agencies, GAO has identified similar projects that failed when such steps were not followed. The initial response of local Coast Guard officials to the new, targeted assessments is generally positive. However, the assessments could be of greater benefit if functional requirements for the GIS were more clearly defined, so the Coast Guard could use the assessments to address gaps in security knowledge.

**A terrorist attack on port assets could result in human casualties, economic disruption, and environmental destruction. Assessments of assets such as bridges are to identify methods to protect them from such an attack.**



Source: Port of Long Beach.