



Highlights of [GAO-11-207](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives.

Why GAO Did This Study

Ferries are a vital component of the U.S. transportation system and 2008 data show that U.S. ferries carried more than 82 million passengers and over 25 million vehicles. Ferries are also potential targets for terrorism in the United States and have been terrorist targets overseas. GAO was asked to review ferry security, and this report addresses the extent to which (1) the Coast Guard, the lead federal agency for maritime security, assessed risk in accordance with the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) guidance and what risks it identified; and (2) federal agencies, ferry and facility operators, and law enforcement entities have taken actions to protect ferries and their facilities. GAO reviewed relevant requirements, analyzed 2006 through 2009 security operations data, interviewed federal and industry officials, and made observations at five domestic and one international locations with varying passenger volumes and relative risk profiles. Site visits provided information on security, but were not projectable to all ports. This is the public version of a sensitive report that GAO issued in October 2010. Information that DHS deemed sensitive has been redacted.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Commandant of the Coast Guard, after evaluating the completed studies on ferry security, reassess vehicle screening requirements and take further actions to enhance security, if determined warranted. DHS concurred with our recommendations.

View [GAO-11-207](#) or key components. For more information, contact Stephen L. Caldwell at (202) 512-9610 or caldwells@gao.gov.

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MARITIME SECURITY

Ferry Security Measures Have Been Implemented, but Evaluating Existing Studies Could Further Enhance Security

What GAO Found

The Coast Guard assessed the risk—including threats, vulnerabilities, and consequences—to ferries in accordance with DHS guidance on risk assessment and, along with other maritime stakeholders, identified risks associated with explosive devices, among other things. Although in April 2010, Coast Guard intelligence officials stated that there have been no credible terrorist threats identified against ferries and their facilities in at least the last 12 months, maritime intelligence officials have identified the presence of terrorist groups with the capability of attacking a ferry. Many of the Coast Guard, ferry system and law enforcement officials GAO spoke with generally believe ferries are vulnerable to passenger- or vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, although not all ferry systems transport vehicles. The Coast Guard has also identified the potential consequences of an attack, which could include possible loss of life and negative economic effects. In April 2010, Coast Guard officials stated that the relative risk to ferries is increasing, as evidenced by attacks against land-based mass transit and other targets overseas.

Federal agencies—including the Coast Guard, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), and Customs and Border Protection (CBP)—ferry operators, and law enforcement entities report that they have taken various actions to enhance the security of ferries and facilities and have implemented related laws, regulations, and guidance, but the Coast Guard may be missing opportunities to enhance ferry security. Security measures taken by the Coast Guard have included providing a security presence on ferries during transit. Coast Guard officials also reported that they are revising regulations to improve ferry operator training and developing guidance on screening. Ferry operators' security actions have included developing and implementing security plans and screening vehicles and passengers, among other things. However, the Coast Guard had not evaluated and, if determined warranted, acted on all findings and recommendations resulting from five agency-contracted studies on ferry security completed in 2005 and 2006. Reports from these studies included several recommendations for standardizing and enhancing screening across ferry operators. Standards for internal control in the federal government state that agencies should ensure that findings of audits and other reviews are promptly resolved, and that managers take action to evaluate and resolve matters identified in these audits and reviews. As a result of our work on ferry security, in August 2010, Coast Guard officials stated they planned to review the reports. Taking action to address the recommendations in these reports, if determined warranted by the Coast Guard's evaluation, could enhance ferry security. Furthermore, Coast Guard documents from 2004 state that the agency should reassess vehicle screening requirements pending the completion of the ferry security reports or if the threat changes. However, no specific plans were in place to reassess these requirements. By taking action to reassess its screening requirements, the agency would be better positioned to determine if changes are warranted.