

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-474](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

As DHS has increased the security of overland smuggling routes, transnational criminal organizations have adapted their techniques to smuggle drugs and humans through alternative methods. These methods include cross-border tunnels, ultralight aircraft, panga boats, and recreational maritime vessels. While these methods account for a small proportion of known smuggling, they can be used to transport significant quantities of drugs or for terrorist activity. GAO was asked to review DHS's efforts to address subterranean, aerial, and maritime smuggling. This report addresses, among other things, (1) the known prevalence of the aforementioned smuggling methods, (2) efforts to address them, and (3) efforts to assess the results of activities to counter them. GAO analyzed relevant procedures, reports, and data for fiscal years 2011 through 2016. GAO also interviewed DHS officials and conducted site visits to locations in California, Arizona, and Florida, chosen based upon past detection of smuggling by the selected methods, among other things. The information from the site visits is not generalizable, but provided valuable insights.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that DHS establish procedures for addressing tunnels, assess ultralight aircraft technology, and establish performance measures and targets. DHS concurred with four recommendations and disagreed with those to establish tunnel procedures and maritime performance measures, citing other efforts. GAO believes the recommendations remain valid, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-17-474](#). For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at (202) 512-8777 or gamblierr@gao.gov.

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BORDER SECURITY

Additional Actions Could Strengthen DHS Efforts to Address Subterranean, Aerial, and Maritime Smuggling

What GAO Found

GAO's analysis of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) data showed that there were 67 discovered cross-border tunnels, 534 detected ultralight aircraft incursions, and 309 detected drug smuggling incidents involving panga boats (a fishing vessel) and recreational vessels along U.S. mainland borders from fiscal years 2011 through 2016. The number of known smuggling events involving these methods generally declined over this period, but they remain threats.

Examples of a Cross-Border Tunnel, Ultralight Aircraft, and Panga Boat



Source: (Left and middle) U.S. Customs and Border Protection; (Right) U.S. Coast Guard. | GAO-17-474

DHS has established various coordination mechanisms and invested in technology to address select smuggling methods in the subterranean, aerial, and maritime domains. For example, DHS established interagency task forces to investigate cross-border tunnels. However, DHS has not established comprehensive standard operating procedures for addressing cross-border tunnels, and we found that relevant officials were not aware of all DHS systems or offices with tunnel information. By establishing procedures for addressing cross-border tunnels, DHS could provide strategic guidance and facilitate information sharing departmentwide, consistent with standards for internal control. DHS has also invested or plans to invest in at least five technology projects to help detect and track ultralight aircraft. However, DHS has not assessed and documented how all of the alternative ultralight aircraft technical solutions it is considering will fully address operational requirements or the costs and benefits associated with these different solutions. This type of analysis could help better position DHS to use its resources effectively and ensure that operational needs are met, consistent with risk management best practices.

DHS has established high-level smuggling performance measures and collects data on smuggling by tunnels, ultralight aircraft, panga boats, and recreational vessels; however, DHS has not assessed its efforts specific to addressing these smuggling methods to, for example, compare the percent of detected panga boat and recreational smuggling events that are interdicted against targeted performance levels. By establishing measures and regularly monitoring performance against targets, managers could obtain valuable information on successful approaches and areas that could be improved to help ensure that technology investments and operational responses to address these smuggling methods are effective, consistent with standards for internal control. This is a public version of a For Official Use Only—Law Enforcement Sensitive report that GAO issued in February 2017. Information DHS deemed For Official Use Only—Law Enforcement Sensitive has been redacted.