

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-513](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The COVID-19 pandemic shows how catastrophic biological incidents can cause substantial loss of life, economic damage, and require a whole-of-nation response involving multiple federal and nonfederal entities. The 2018 National Biodefense Strategy outlines specific goals and objectives to help prepare for and respond to such incidents.

The CARES Act includes a provision for GAO to conduct monitoring and oversight of federal efforts to prepare for, respond to, and recover from COVID-19. This report addresses: (1) interagency plans key federal agencies developed, and exercises they conducted, to help prepare for biological incidents; and (2) the extent to which exercises and real-world incidents revealed opportunities to better achieve National Biodefense Strategy objectives.

GAO reviewed biological incident plans and after-action reports from exercises and real-world incidents from calendar years 2009 through 2019, including a non-generalizable sample of 19 reports selected based on threat scenario and other factors. GAO interviewed federal and state officials to obtain their perspectives on plans, exercises, and the COVID-19 response.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations each to DHS, DOD, HHS, and USDA, including that the secretaries work through the Biodefense Steering Committee to communicate exercise priorities and conduct monitoring. The departments generally concurred but in response to comments GAO modified the recommendations to reflect that the secretaries work through the Committee identified above.

For more information, view [GAO-21-513](#) or contact Chris Currie at (404) 679-1875 or CurrieC@gao.gov.

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BIODEFENSE

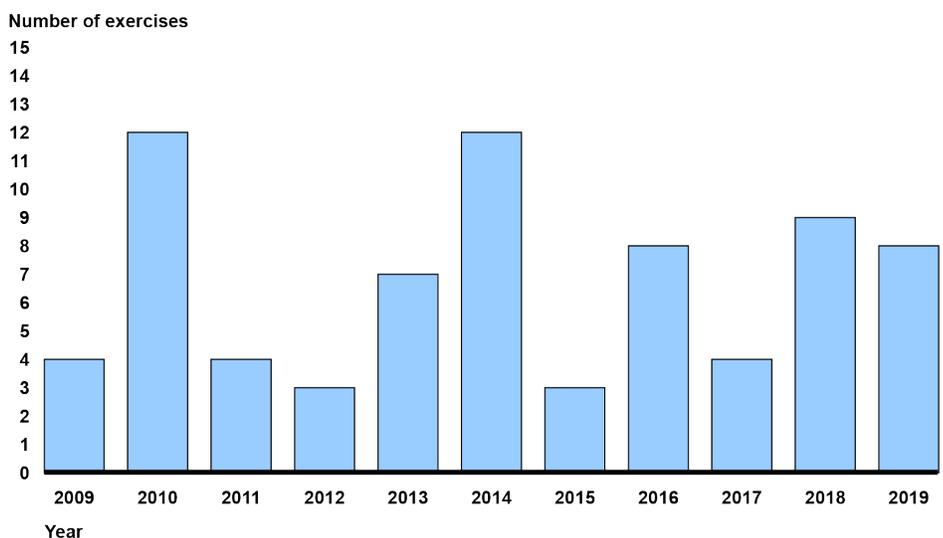
After-Action Findings and COVID-19 Response Revealed Opportunities to Strengthen Preparedness

What GAO Found

Key federal agencies, including the Departments of Homeland Security (DHS), Defense (DOD), Health and Human Services (HHS), and Agriculture (USDA), developed a range of interagency response plans to prepare for nationally significant biological incidents. These strategic, operational, and tactical level plans address responding to a broad spectrum of biological threats, including those that are intentional, accidental, or naturally occurring.

DHS, DOD, HHS, and USDA conducted numerous interagency exercises to help prepare for and respond to a wide variety of biological incidents, such as anthrax attacks, influenza pandemics, and diseases affecting plants and animals. Specifically, GAO identified 74 interagency biological incident exercises conducted from calendar years 2009 through 2019.

Number of Interagency Biological Incident Exercises Conducted, Calendar Years 2009 through 2019



Source: GAO analysis of documentation from the Departments of Homeland Security, Defense, Health and Human Services, and Agriculture. | [GAO-21-513](#)

GAO's analysis of after-action reports for selected interagency biological incident exercises and real-world incidents, as well as the COVID-19 response, identified long-standing biodefense challenges. GAO found that the nation lacked elements necessary for preparing for nationally significant biological incidents, including a process at the interagency level to assess and communicate priorities for exercising capabilities. Further, it determined that agencies do not routinely work together in monitoring results from exercises and real-world incidents to identify patterns and root causes for systemic challenges. Assessing and communicating exercise priorities and routinely monitoring the results of the exercises and incidents will help ensure the nation is better prepared to respond to the next biological threat.