

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-107388](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

The Coast Guard is a maritime military service within the Department of Homeland Security that employs more than 55,000 personnel. Sexual assault and harassment have a negative effect on the victims, negatively affect retention, and disrupt mission readiness.

This statement discusses the Coast Guard's recent efforts to address sexual assault and harassment.

GAO analyzed Coast Guard documents, interviewed agency officials, and reviewed prior GAO reports on Department of Defense and Coast Guard efforts to prevent sexual assault and harassment. We also compared Coast Guard efforts to the Commandant instruction on internal controls as well as federal internal control standards.

What GAO Recommends

Previously, GAO has made four recommendations to the Coast Guard regarding implementation of laws pertaining to sexual assault. The Coast Guard has fully addressed one of them and GAO continues to monitor implementation.

In this statement, GAO recommends that the Coast Guard develop an evaluation plan and mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of actions taken to help ensure service members have an experience free from sexual assault and harassment.

The Department of Homeland Security provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-24--107388](#). For more information, contact Heather MacLeod at (202) 512-8777 or MacLeodH@gao.gov.

March 6, 2024

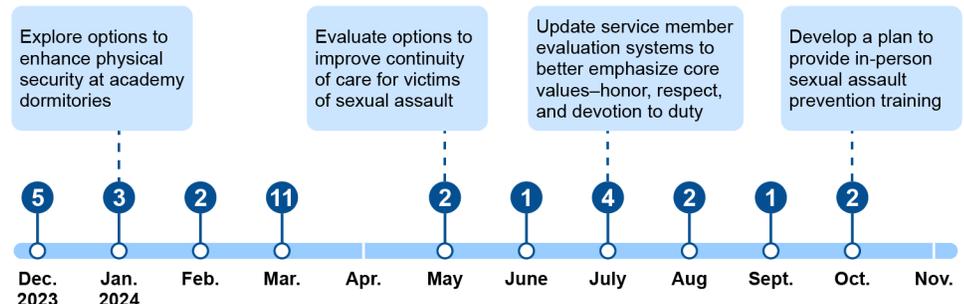
COAST GUARD

Action Needed to Evaluate Efforts to Address Sexual Assault and Harassment

What GAO Found

The Coast Guard has taken action to address sexual assault and harassment but has not developed a plan to assess its efforts. In a 2020 internal investigation called "Operation Fouled Anchor," the Coast Guard examined 102 separate allegations of sexual assault from 1990 to 2006 at the Coast Guard Academy and concluded that the academy often mishandled these cases. More recently, service members reported a total of 263 sexual harassment allegations between September 2020 through April 2023, according to Coast Guard data. After media reporting on Operation Fouled Anchor in June 2023, the Commandant directed a 90-day review of policy processes, practices, and service culture relevant to countering sexual assault and harassment in the Coast Guard. The resulting report identified areas for organizational improvement to ensure a culture of accountability and transparency. In November 2023, the Commandant directed the Coast Guard to implement 33 initial actions by certain dates to address the findings of the review and help ensure service members have an experience free from sexual assault and harassment (see figure). The actions span six categories, including training, the academy, and information and data. According to Coast Guard officials, they have completed five actions as of February 2024.

Number of Coast Guard Planned Actions Each Month to Respond to Sexual Assault and Harassment and Selected Examples



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard documents. | GAO-24-107388

The Commandant-directed actions include administering a Coast Guard-wide survey and analyzing survey results. However, the service has not developed an evaluation plan to assess the results of its 33 initial actions. According to Coast Guard officials, they have had discussions about assessing the results of the actions but have not developed plans or mechanisms to do so because measuring culture change is difficult. However, these officials identified certain resources, such as employee surveys and Department of Defense officials, that could prove useful in this effort.

Developing an evaluation plan and mechanisms for assessing the effectiveness of actions taken to improve its culture of accountability and transparency would better ensure that Coast Guard has the information it needs to evaluate whether the actions are helping service members have an experience free from sexual assault and harassment. Further, taking these steps would help ensure the service is improving its culture, which could assist in the recruitment and retention of its workforce.