

Actions Needed to Strengthen Collaboration on Investigations

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A report to congressional committees.

 For more information, contact: Heather MacLeod at MacLeodH@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

The Coast Guard Investigative Service (CGIS) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) have some overlapping authorities to investigate complaints regarding the Coast Guard. From October 2018 through May 2024, CGIS investigated at least 4,951 such complaints, and DHS OIG investigated 70 such complaints. CGIS is an independent investigative body within the Coast Guard that primarily conducts criminal investigations related to Coast Guard personnel, assets, and operations. DHS OIG investigates complaints of alleged criminal, civil, and administrative misconduct involving Coast Guard employees, contractors, and programs, among others.

CGIS and DHS OIG identified the need to prevent duplicative investigations, but the two agencies have not fully followed five out of six selected leading practices for collaboration. For example, the agencies have different perspectives on which complaints CGIS should refer to DHS OIG. Fully following these five practices to improve collaboration, consistent with their statutory responsibilities, would better position the agencies to deconflict their investigative activities and ensure effective and appropriate allocation of resources.

Extent of Coast Guard Investigative Service (CGIS) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Inspector General (OIG) Collaboration

Selected leading collaboration practices	Overall assessment	Summary of findings
 Define common outcomes		The Coast Guard and DHS OIG developed a memorandum of understanding to prevent duplicative investigations and ensure effective and appropriate use of resources.
 Ensure accountability		CGIS does not regularly assess the extent to which it adheres to established policies for referring Coast Guard complaints.
 Bridge organizational cultures		CGIS and DHS OIG do not communicate regularly to deconflict investigative activities and do not agree on which complaints CGIS should refer to DHS OIG.
 Clarify roles and responsibilities		CGIS and DHS OIG have not clarified expectations for referring complaints in areas where the two agencies have overlapping areas of investigative responsibility.
 Leverage resources and information		CGIS and DHS OIG established methods for referring complaints, but CGIS does not fully adhere to established policies for reporting investigative information to DHS OIG.
 Develop and update written guidance and agreements		The Coast Guard and DHS OIG developed policies for referring Coast Guard complaints but have not updated these policies in over 20 years.

Assessment of the extent CGIS and DHS OIG followed the selected key considerations associated with the leading collaboration practice

 Generally followed  Followed some but not all  Did not follow any

Source: GAO analysis of CGIS and DHS OIG documentation and interviews with agency officials; GAO (icons). | GAO-26-107341

Why GAO Did This Study

CGIS and DHS OIG play critical roles in overseeing the Coast Guard—a multi-mission maritime military service within DHS that employs more than 51,000 personnel.

The James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023 includes a provision for GAO to assess the oversight of Coast Guard activities. This report examines the extent that (1) DHS OIG has processes in place to ensure timely and effective oversight of Coast Guard activities and (2) CGIS and DHS OIG coordinate on complaints, among other things.

GAO evaluated CGIS's and DHS OIG's processes for referring Coast Guard complaints to one another against GAO-identified leading practices for collaboration. GAO analyzed CGIS and DHS OIG investigative data, reviewed the 2003 memorandum of understanding and CGIS standard operating procedures, and interviewed CGIS and DHS OIG officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations to the Coast Guard and three recommendations to DHS OIG to, among other things, improve collaboration between CGIS and the OIG. DHS concurred with each of the four recommendations to the Coast Guard. DHS OIG neither agreed nor disagreed with the three recommendations and expressed concern with several aspects of the report. GAO maintains that its findings are accurate and its recommendations remain warranted.