

Protection Policies Should be Consistently Updated to Better Ensure Protectee Safety

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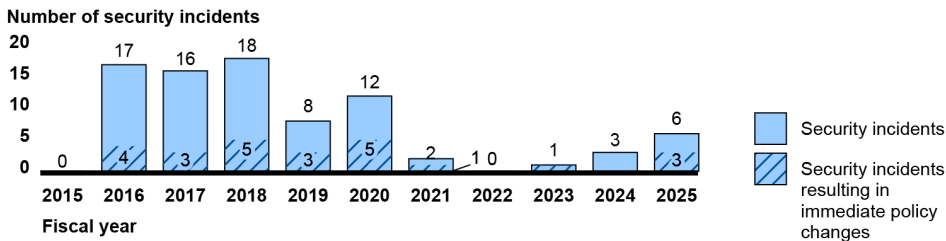
A report to congressional requesters

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What GAO Found

The Secret Service protects the President, Vice President, visiting foreign dignitaries, and others. From fiscal year 2015 through fiscal year 2025, the Secret Service's budget increased while the number of its protectees fluctuated, particularly around changes in presidential administrations. During this time, there were 83 security incidents. The Secret Service updated its protection policies in response to 25 of them.

Secret Service Policy Changes in Response to Incidents, Fiscal Years 2015–2025



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Secret Service documentation. | GAO-26-108455

Secret Service policy does not require that personnel document their rationale when they determine an incident does not warrant a protection policy update. However, Secret Service officials told GAO that doing so would be important because it shows an incident was fully reviewed. In the absence of this information, it is sometimes unclear why the Secret Service maintained the status quo. For example, the Secret Service encountered drone incidents from 2015 to 2021, but did not update its policies to address civilian use of drones prior to July 2024, when a shooter used a drone in an assassination attempt of then-former President Trump. Revising its policy to require personnel to document the rationale for not making policy changes after incidents would provide the Secret Service with more complete information when considering protection policy updates to mitigate future threats.

Further, the Secret Service has not reviewed and updated protection policies in a timely manner. These policies are to be reviewed and updated within 4 years of issuance, but the Secret Service has not reviewed or updated eight of 22 protection policies within the required time frame. Secret Service officials said they try to make timely updates but are not always able to identify personnel available to do so. Revising its policy to assign responsibility to specific positions for updating protection policies within required time frames could help the Secret Service incorporate the most current techniques into advance planning.

Finally, since 1991, the Secret Service and Diplomatic Security Service, the protective division within the Department of State, have not updated a key memorandum of understanding that delineates the two entities' roles and responsibilities for securing the President and others traveling abroad, and foreign dignitaries traveling to the United States. Much has changed over the intervening years, such as the emergence of drone threats, and updating the memorandum would provide the two entities an opportunity to respond to evolving roles, responsibilities, and advance techniques.

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent attacks and threats of violence against Secret Service protectees highlight the importance of the Secret Service's protective mission. These incidents include the July 2024 assassination attempt of then-former President Trump, the alleged assassination attempt of President Trump at the April 2026 White House Correspondents' Dinner, and the shooting near Vice President Vance's motorcade in May 2026.

GAO was asked to examine the Secret Service's protection policies. This report addresses, among other things, (1) how the Secret Service protection budget and number of protectees changed from fiscal year 2015 through fiscal year 2025; and (2) the extent to which the Secret Service has updated its protection policies.

GAO analyzed data and reviewed documentation related to protection policies for the Secret Service and Diplomatic Security Service from fiscal year 2015 through fiscal year 2025. GAO also conducted interviews with officials from the Secret Service and Diplomatic Security Service, as well as eight other selected federal, state, and local entities with protection responsibilities.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including two to revise current Secret Service policies to (1) require that personnel document why protection policy updates are not needed after incidents, and (2) assign responsibility for policy updates, and one each to the Secret Service and the Department of State to update their memorandum of understanding. The Department of Homeland Security, which includes the Secret Service, and the Department of State concurred with the recommendations.