

Actions Needed to Address Law Enforcement Mission Challenges

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What GAO Found

The Coast Guard employs assets—including aircraft and vessels—and personnel to conduct law enforcement operations. In prior work, GAO identified longstanding challenges that have hindered the Coast Guard's ability to meet its law enforcement mission demands. GAO made recommendations to help address asset availability, acquisitions, and workforce challenges, which the Coast Guard has yet to fully address.

- The Coast Guard's vessels and aircraft have faced availability challenges and have been in a state of decline for decades. [In June 2025](#) GAO found that the Medium Endurance Cutters availability to conduct missions declined from fiscal year 2020 through fiscal year 2024. GAO recommended that the Coast Guard address maintenance challenges and operational availability issues with these cutters, which it relies on for law enforcement missions.
- The Coast Guard's declining asset availability is exacerbated by persistent and longstanding challenges managing its planned \$40 billion acquisition programs to modernize its vessels and aircraft. [In November 2025](#), GAO found that continued delays and cost overruns with the Offshore Patrol Cutter program—one of its highest priority acquisitions—is likely. GAO made four recommendations to address these issues
- GAO has identified longstanding staffing shortfalls and poor workforce planning, which have challenged the Coast Guard's ability to meet its mission needs. For example, [in June 2025](#), GAO reported that cutter crew vacancy rates increased from fiscal year 2017 through fiscal year 2024, according to the most recent Coast Guard data at the time. GAO recommended that the Coast Guard develop a clear plan to support its workforce retention initiatives, among other recommendations.

Coast Guard Migrant Interdiction



Source: U.S. Coast Guard courtesy photo. | GAO-26-108847

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. government has identified transnational and domestic criminal organizations as a significant threat to the public, law enforcement, and national security.

The Coast Guard is the nation's lead federal maritime law enforcement agency. It received nearly \$25 billion in supplemental funding in fiscal year 2025 for various acquisitions and in support of efforts to modernize operations and capabilities. The Coast Guard is a component of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). It conducts maritime law enforcement, including: drug interdiction, migrant interdiction, and other missions (which include fisheries law enforcement work to prevent illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing).

This statement discusses Coast Guard challenges GAO previously identified related to its law enforcement missions. This statement is based primarily on six GAO reports published from June 2023 to January 2026.

What GAO Recommends

GAO previously made 24 recommendations to the Coast Guard in the reports covered by this statement to help address challenges related to vessel and aircraft availability, acquisition delays and cost overruns, and staffing shortfalls.

DHS generally agreed with the recommendations. As of January 2026, two of the recommendations have been implemented. GAO continues to monitor the agency's progress in implementing the remaining recommendations.