

Actions Needed to Address Challenges that Hinder Maritime Security Operations

GAO-26-108901

February 2026

A testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

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What GAO Found

In prior work, GAO identified challenges that have hindered the Coast Guard's ability to meet its maritime security operation demands. GAO made the following recommendations to help address challenges pertaining to the Coast Guard's workforce and assets, which it has yet to fully address.

- **Workforce.** In November 2019, GAO found that the Coast Guard lacked assurance that it had the right mix of deployable specialized forces personnel—who have capabilities needed to combat maritime threats—in the right units. GAO made two recommendations to address these issues. Further, in April 2025, GAO reported that even with increased recruiting, the service was approximately 2,600 service members (8.5 percent) short of its enlisted workforce target at the end of fiscal year 2024. GAO recommended that the service develop a plan to support its workforce retention.
- **Vessels and aircraft.** In June 2025 GAO found that the Medium Endurance Cutter's availability to conduct missions declined from fiscal year 2020 through fiscal year 2024 due, in part, to maintenance challenges that limit its maritime security operations. This is exacerbated by persistent and longstanding challenges managing its planned \$40 billion acquisition programs to modernize vessels and aircraft. In November 2025, GAO found that continued delays and cost overruns with the Offshore Patrol Cutter program—a high priority acquisition—are likely because of outdated cost estimates and incomplete ship design. GAO made nine recommendations to address these issues, including that Coast Guard stabilize design before constructing more ships.

Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Forces Conducting Drug Interdiction Mission



Source: U.S. Coast Guard. | GAO-26-108901

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 a component of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and 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. It conducts maritime security operations, including law enforcement boardings, drug interdiction, and other missions. The Coast Guard employs personnel and assets—including aircraft and vessels—to conduct maritime security operations.

This statement discusses Coast Guard challenges GAO previously identified related to its maritime security operations and actions to help address these challenges. This statement is based primarily on seven GAO reports published from November 2019 to January 2026.

What GAO Recommends

GAO previously made 26 recommendations to the Coast Guard in the reports covered by this statement to help address challenges related to staffing, vessels, and aircraft, as well as acquisition delays and cost overruns.

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