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# Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-06-903](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

Hurricane Katrina was one of the largest natural disasters in our nation's history. Significant federal, state, and local resources were mobilized to respond to the Hurricane Katrina disaster, including those of the U.S. Coast Guard. The Coast Guard played a key role in the planning, response, and recovery efforts for Hurricane Katrina in three mission areas: search and rescue, marine pollution response, and management of maritime commerce. This report discusses the activities undertaken by the Coast Guard, as well as the challenges and lessons learned as a result of the agency's efforts. More specifically, it focuses on (1) the factors that prepared the Coast Guard to perform these three mission areas in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina; (2) the Coast Guard's response to Hurricane Katrina, the challenges it faced in performing its missions, and its efforts to mitigate these challenges; and (3) the implications and lessons learned, as identified by the Coast Guard, regarding the effect of Hurricane Katrina surge operations on its people, assets, financial resources, and operations.

To determine the Coast Guard's preparation factors, the challenges and lessons learned we interviewed officials responsible for preparing, and responding to disasters, and reviewed the Coast Guard's disaster guidance and plans.

GAO is not making any recommendations in this report.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-903](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-903).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Stephen L. Caldwell at (202) 512-9610 or [CaldwellS@gao.gov](mailto:CaldwellS@gao.gov).

## COAST GUARD

# Observations on the Preparation, Response, and Recovery Missions Related to Hurricane Katrina

## What GAO Found

Of the estimated 60,000 people left stranded by Hurricane Katrina, over 33,500 were saved by the Coast Guard. Precisely identifying why the Coast Guard was able to respond as it did may be difficult, but underpinning these efforts were factors such as the agency's operational principles. These principles promote leadership, accountability, and enable personnel to take responsibility and action, based on relevant authorities and guidance. Another key factor was the agency's reliance on standardized operations and maintenance practices that provided greater flexibility for using personnel and assets from any operational unit for the response. Up-to-date and regularly exercised hurricane plans were also key—preserving Coast Guard personnel and resources first, so they could then respond to search and rescue, marine environmental protection, and facilitation of commerce needs after the storm. These various factors are consistent with previous GAO findings on lessons learned from past catastrophic disasters.

GAO's work shows that the Coast Guard was most relevant in search and rescue, marine environmental protection, and management of maritime commerce missions. While the Coast Guard performs these missions daily, the severity of Hurricane Katrina presented the agency with several challenges that required innovative approaches. The Coast Guard was able to mitigate challenges caused by Hurricane Katrina's damage as a result of planning, preparation, and assistance from Coast Guard Auxiliary members.

According to Coast Guard officials, the agency incurred no significant damage to personnel, assets, operations, or financial resources as a result of sending people and assets to the Gulf region. Although continuing operations at ports nationwide while conducting Katrina operations presented challenges, these challenges have been addressed to mitigate negative impacts on the Coast Guard. Finally, the Coast Guard has collected after-action reports from Hurricane Katrina and has made them available to Coast Guard personnel through an internal database.

Helicopter Rescue



Source: U.S. Coast Guard.

Stranded Vessel in the Greater New Orleans Area



Source: GAO.