What GAO Found
The U.S. counternarcotics strategy has changed emphasis across program areas over time to align with the overarching counterinsurgency campaign. The 2005 U.S. counternarcotics strategy focused on five program areas: elimination/eradication, interdiction, justice reform, public information, and alternative livelihoods. Since then, U.S. Department of Defense (Defense) policy and rules of engagement were changed to allow greater military involvement in Afghanistan counternarcotics efforts due to the ties between traffickers and insurgents. Furthermore, the U.S. counternarcotics strategy has shifted to align more closely with counterinsurgency efforts by de-emphasizing eradication, focusing more on interdiction efforts, and increasing agricultural assistance.

The United States’ use of total poppy cultivation as a primary measure of overall counternarcotics success has limitations in that it does not capture all aspects of U.S. counternarcotics efforts. In recognition of this, the administration is attempting to develop measures that better capture overall counternarcotics success. U.S. agencies have reported progress within counternarcotics program areas, but GAO was unable to fully assess the extent of progress due to a lack of performance measures and interim performance targets to measure Afghan capacity, which are a best practice for performance management. For example, although Defense is training Afghan pilots to fly interdiction missions on their own, this program lacks interim performance targets to judge incremental progress. Furthermore, a lack of security, political will, and Afghan government capacity have challenged some counternarcotics efforts. For example, eradication and public information efforts have been constrained by poor security, particularly in insurgency-dominated provinces. In addition, other challenges affect specific program areas. For example, drug abuse and addiction are prevalent among the Afghan National Police.

Monitoring and evaluation are key components of effective program management. Monitoring is essential to ensuring that programs are implemented as intended, and routine evaluation helps program managers make judgments, improve effectiveness, and inform decisions about current and future programming. U.S. agencies in all counternarcotics areas have monitored program progress through direct U.S. agency oversight, contractor reporting, and/or third-party verification. For example, eradication figures were routinely reported by U.S. Department of State (State) officials and contractors, and verified by United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime monitors. U.S. agencies also conducted and documented program evaluations to improve effectiveness in the elimination/eradication, interdiction, and public information program areas. However, State has not formally documented evaluations of its justice reform program.