



Testimony

Before the Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement and the Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

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MARITIME SECURITY

Actions Needed to Address Coordination and Operational Challenges Hindering Federal Efforts

Statement of Heather MacLeod, Director, Homeland Security and Justice

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-108525](#), a testimony to the Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement and the Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security, Committee on Homeland Security, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Securing the nation's borders against unlawful movement of people, illegal drugs and other contraband, and terrorist activities is a key part of DHS's mission. While there is increased attention to the southwest land border, criminal organizations continue to use maritime routes to smuggle people, drugs, and weapons into the United States.

The U.S. government has identified transnational and domestic criminal organizations trafficking and smuggling illicit drugs as a significant threat to the public, law enforcement, and national security. In March 2021, GAO added national efforts to prevent, respond to, and recover from drug misuse to its [High Risk List](#).

This statement discusses (1) key DHS resources to counter illicit maritime activities and (2) DHS operational challenges related to its efforts to counter illicit maritime activities. This statement is based primarily on 15 GAO reports published from July 2012 to April 2025.

What GAO Recommends

In prior work GAO made dozens of recommendations in the reports covered by this statement, including 23 to DHS. DHS generally agreed with the recommendations. As of May 2025, four of the recommendations have been implemented. GAO continues to monitor the agency's progress in implementing open recommendations.

For more information, contact Heather MacLeod, MacLeodH@gao.gov.

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What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) employs assets—including aircraft and vessels—and personnel across the U.S. and abroad to secure U.S. borders, support criminal investigations, and ensure maritime security and safety. Relevant DHS components include the Coast Guard, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations.

In prior work, GAO identified coordination challenges that hinder U.S. efforts to confront illicit maritime activities and recommended actions to improve oversight, measure effectiveness, and build organizational capacity. For example:

- In [March 2025](#), GAO found that Homeland Security Investigations had not fully implemented certain training requirements due to disagreements over training content with the Drug Enforcement Administration, with whom they coordinate. Without doing so, the agencies cannot ensure that their agents are properly trained to collaborate effectively on counternarcotics investigations.
- In [February 2024](#), GAO found that DHS had not developed targets for its coordinated efforts to combat complex threats like drug smuggling and terrorism—limiting its ability to assess the effectiveness of its efforts.
- In [April 2024](#), GAO found that the Coast Guard had not assessed the type and number of helicopters it requires to meet its mission demands, as part of an analysis of its assets. Doing so could help ensure it has the necessary aircraft capability to execute its missions in the coming decades.

Coast Guard Cocaine Seizure in the Caribbean Sea, September 2023



Source: U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Santiago Gomez. | [GAO-25-108525](#)

DHS components and their law enforcement missions are vital to confronting and mitigating illicit maritime activities. Addressing GAO's recommendations on setting targets and managing assets and personnel will help ensure that DHS efficiently uses its available resources to carry out its law enforcement missions to protect our maritime borders.

Chairmen Guest and Gimenez, Ranking Members Correa and McIver, and Members of the Subcommittees:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss federal efforts to confront illicit maritime activities and challenges. Securing the nation's borders against unlawful movement of people, illegal drugs and other contraband, and terrorist activities is a key part of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) mission. While there is increased attention on the southwest land border, criminal organizations continue to use maritime routes to smuggle people, drugs, and weapons into the United States.

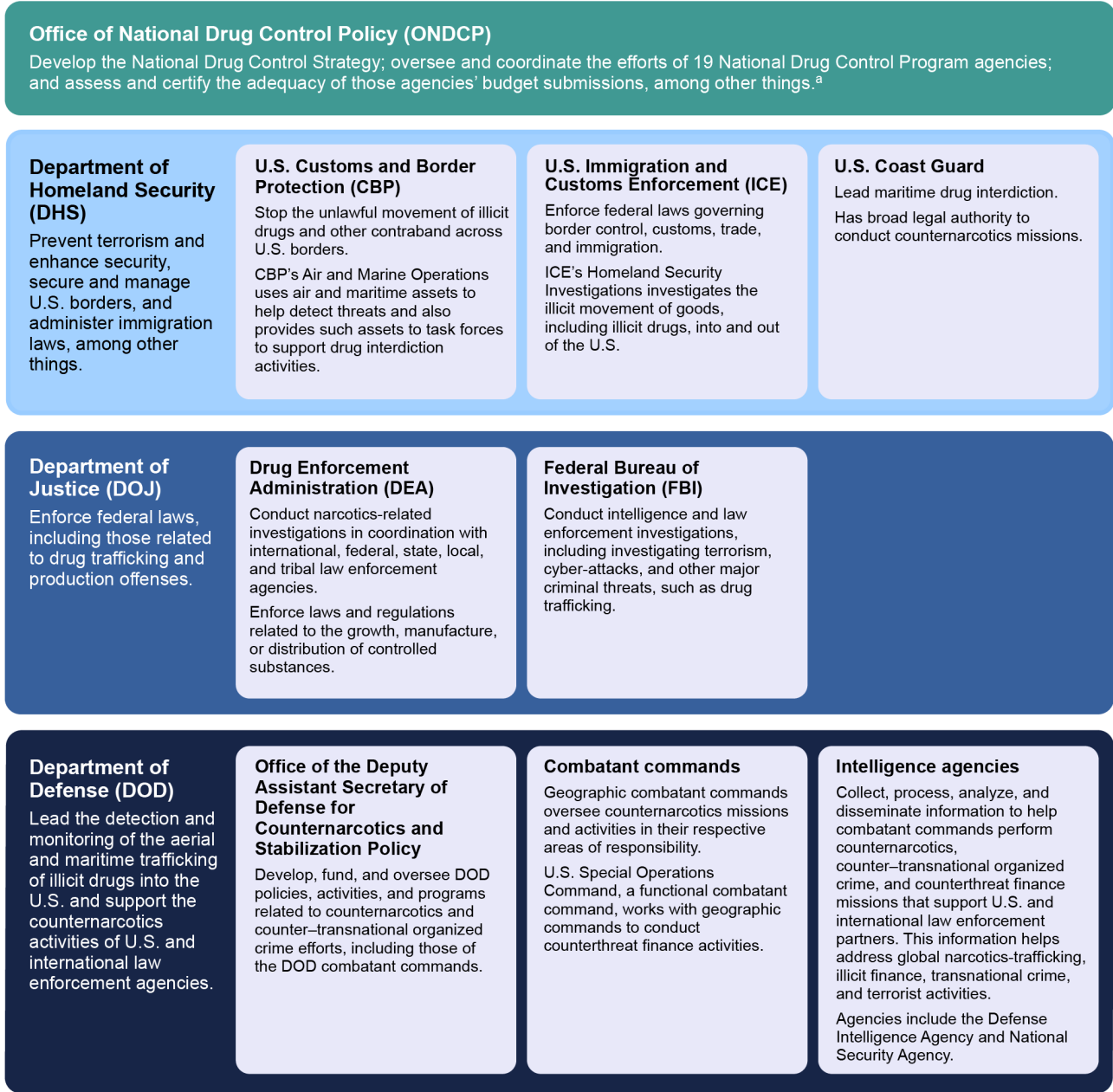
The U.S. government has identified trafficking of illicit drugs as a significant threat to the public, law enforcement, and national security. Use of these illicit drugs continues to impact tens of thousands of Americans each year. For example, provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show about 80,000 drug overdose deaths during the 12-month period ending in December 2024.¹

As shown in figure 1, multiple federal departments and agencies coordinate on efforts to counter illicit maritime activities. Among them is DHS, which is responsible for, among other things, securing U.S. borders to prevent illegal activity while facilitating legitimate trade and travel.²

¹According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reported provisional counts for 12-month ending periods are the number of deaths received and processed for the 12-month period ending in the month indicated. Drug overdose deaths are often initially reported with no cause of death (pending investigation) because they require lengthy investigation, including toxicology testing. As a result, reported provisional counts may not include all deaths that occurred during a given time and are subject to change.

²The Department of Defense (DOD) is the single lead agency responsible for detecting and monitoring the aerial and maritime transport of illegal drugs like cocaine and fentanyl into the U.S. 10 U.S.C. § 124.

Figure 1: Selected Federal Departments and Components with Counter Drug Missions and Activities



Source: GAO summary of information provided by the entities listed. | GAO-25-108525

^aThe Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) is a component of the Executive Office of the President. In addition to the entities shown, ONDCP coordinates with the Departments of Health and Human Services, State, and the Treasury on counternarcotics activities.

The Coast Guard is a multi-mission, maritime military service within DHS. The Coast Guard describes itself as the lead federal maritime law enforcement agency and the only agency with both the authority and capability to enforce national and international law on the high seas, outer continental shelf, and inland from the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone to inland waters.³ Coast Guard responsibilities include detecting and interdicting contraband and illegal drug traffic; at sea enforcement of U.S. immigration laws and policies; enforcing our nation's fisheries and marine protected areas laws and regulations; and other missions.⁴ It coordinates with DOD in joint task forces to carry out its drug interdiction mission.⁵ In particular, the Coast Guard is a major contributor of vessels and aircraft deployed to disrupt the flow of illicit drugs.⁶

The Coast Guard shares maritime law enforcement responsibilities with other DHS components, including U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) Air and Marine Operations and U.S. Border Patrol, while U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) investigates the illicit movement of goods, including counternarcotics investigations, among other responsibilities.

According to the Coast Guard, in fiscal year 2023, the agency intercepted more than 212,000 pounds of cocaine and 54,000 pounds of marijuana.⁷ According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the majority of the cocaine shipped to the U.S. travels on maritime routes from South

³The term exclusive economic zone refers to an area up to 200 nautical miles from the territorial sea baseline where a country has sovereign rights to natural resources such as fishing and energy production.

⁴See 6 U.S.C. § 468.

⁵10 U.S.C. § 124 designates DOD as the single lead agency of the federal government for the detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs into the U.S. The Coast Guard, within DHS, is the lead federal agency for interdiction of maritime drug smugglers in international waters. This is because the Coast Guard may make inquiries, examinations, inspections, searches, seizures, and arrests upon the high seas and waters over which the United States has jurisdiction to prevent, detect, and suppress violations of U.S. laws. See 14 U.S.C. § 522.

⁶Coast Guard aviation and vessel assets include a fleet of about 200 fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, about 250 cutters, and more than 1,600 boats. GAO, *Coast Guard: Aircraft Fleet and Aviation Workforce Assessments Needed*, [GAO-24-106374](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 9, 2024).

⁷Admiral Linda L. Fagan, Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard, *The Coast Guard's Fiscal Year 2025 Budget Request*, testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation, 118th Cong., 2nd sess., May 23, 2024.

America and through the eastern Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Sea.⁸ Additionally, precursor chemicals may be shipped from Asia to Mexico, sometimes as legitimate commerce, where they may be combined into fentanyl or other controlled substances.⁹ Figure 2 shows maritime and land routes for precursor chemical and illicit drug smuggling.

⁸Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), *2020 National Drug Threat Assessment*, DEA-DCT-DIR-008-21 (March 2021). The majority of known maritime drug flow is conveyed via noncommercial vessels through the Western Hemisphere Transit Zone—a 6 million square mile area of routes drug smugglers use to transport illicit drugs that includes the eastern Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, among other areas. See GAO, *Coast Guard: Resources Provided for Drug Interdiction Operations in the Transit Zone, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands*, [GAO-14-527](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 16, 2014).

⁹Precursor chemicals are chemicals or substances that may be intended for illicit drug production.

Figure 2: Maritime and Land Routes for Precursor Chemical and Illicit Drug Smuggling



Source: U.S. Coast Guard based on the Consolidated Counterdrug Database; Map Resources (Map). | GAO-25-108525

Note: Precursor chemicals are chemicals or substances that may be intended for illicit drug production.

The U.S. government has identified illicit drugs, as well as the transnational and domestic criminal organizations that traffic and smuggle them, as significant threats to the public, law enforcement, and the national security of the U.S. Further, given challenges the federal government faces in responding to the drug misuse crisis, in March 2021, we added national efforts to prevent, respond to, and recover from drug

misuse to our High Risk List.¹⁰ Specifically, we identified several challenges with the federal government's response to drug misuse, such as the need for more effective implementation and monitoring, and related ongoing efforts to address the issue, including law enforcement and drug interdiction.

My statement today discusses (1) key DHS resources to counter illicit maritime activities and (2) DHS operational challenges related to its efforts to counter illicit maritime activities. This statement is based primarily on 15 GAO reports published from July 2012 to April 2025. For the reports we cite in this statement, among other methodologies, we analyzed DOD, DHS, CBP, and Coast Guard policy, documentation, and data, and interviewed officials from agency headquarters and selected field units. More detailed information on our scope and methodology can be found in the reports we cite in this statement.

For this statement, we reviewed information on the status of agency implementation of selected recommendations through May 2025. In addition, we reviewed Coast Guard budget and performance documents since 2018 to determine the extent the service reported meeting its drug interdiction performance goals from fiscal years 2014 through 2024. We also analyzed Coast Guard operational hour data for each of its 11 statutory missions, from fiscal years 2015 through 2024. We found these data to be sufficiently reliable to report Coast Guard operational hours for aircraft and vessels by statutory mission. To determine the Coast Guard's operating expenses, we reviewed the service's Mission Cost Model operating expense estimates for its 11 statutory missions. We found these data to be sufficiently reliable to report Coast Guard operating expense estimates for its statutory missions.

We conducted the work on which this statement is based in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained

¹⁰See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Dedicated Leadership Needed to Address Limited Progress in Most High-Risk Areas* [GAO-21-119SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 2, 2021). We issue an update to the High-Risk List every two years at the start of each new session of Congress. The most recent update was issued in February 2025. See GAO, *High-Risk Series: Heightened Attention Could Save Billions More and Improve Government Efficiency and Effectiveness*, [GAO-25-107743](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 25, 2025).

provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

DHS Deploys Aircraft, Vessels, and Personnel to Address Illicit Maritime Activities

DHS employs assets—including aircraft and vessels—and personnel across the U.S. and abroad to secure U.S. borders, support criminal investigations, and ensure maritime security and safety. Relevant DHS components include the Coast Guard, CBP, and HSI. Their air and marine missions vary depending on operating location.¹¹

Coast Guard Resources

The Coast Guard is responsible for conducting 11 statutory missions, three of which are maritime law enforcement missions codified as homeland security missions—drug interdiction, migrant interdiction, and other law enforcement (which includes preventing illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing). In some cases, the Coast Guard coordinates its law enforcement missions with interagency partners.

The Coast Guard operates a fleet of about 200 fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft, with more than 1,600 boats and 250 cutters.¹² As of fiscal year 2024, it employs approximately 55,500 personnel—including active duty, reserve, and civilian.¹³ In addition, the Coast Guard’s shore infrastructure is comprised of nearly 40,000 assets, which consist of various types of buildings and structures.¹⁴ For example, within its shore operations asset line, the Coast Guard maintains over 200 stations along U.S. coasts and inland waterways to carry out its search and rescue operations, as well as other missions, such as maritime security.¹⁵ Figure 3 shows Coast Guard operating locations across the country, as of September 2020.

¹¹Coast Guard and CBP also coordinate on the deployment and allocation of assets and specialized personnel with the DOD to reduce the availability of illicit drugs by countering the flow of such drugs into the U.S.

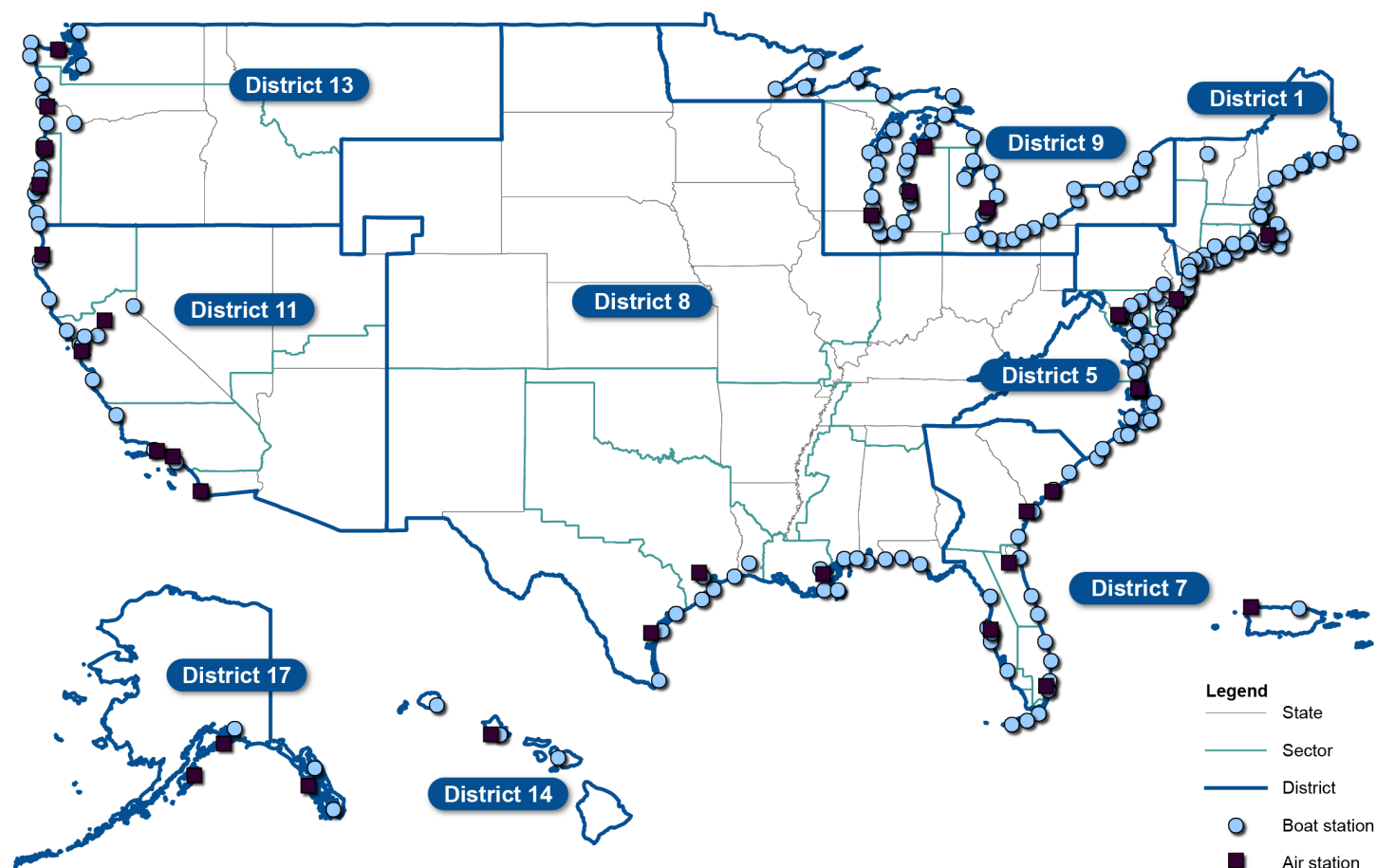
¹²[GAO-24-106374](#) and GAO, *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Address Persistent Challenges Hindering Efforts to Counter Illicit Maritime Drug Smuggling*, [GAO-24-107785](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 19, 2024).

¹³GAO, *Coast Guard: Enhanced Data and Planning Could Help Address Service Member Retention Issues*, [GAO-25-107869](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 23, 2025).

¹⁴GAO, *Coast Guard Shore Infrastructure: More Than \$7 Billion Reportedly Needed to Address Deteriorating Assets*, [GAO-25-107851](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 25, 2025).

¹⁵GAO, *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Better Manage Shore Infrastructure*, [GAO-22-105513](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 16, 2021).

Figure 3: U.S. Coast Guard Air and Marine Operating Locations by District, as of September 2020

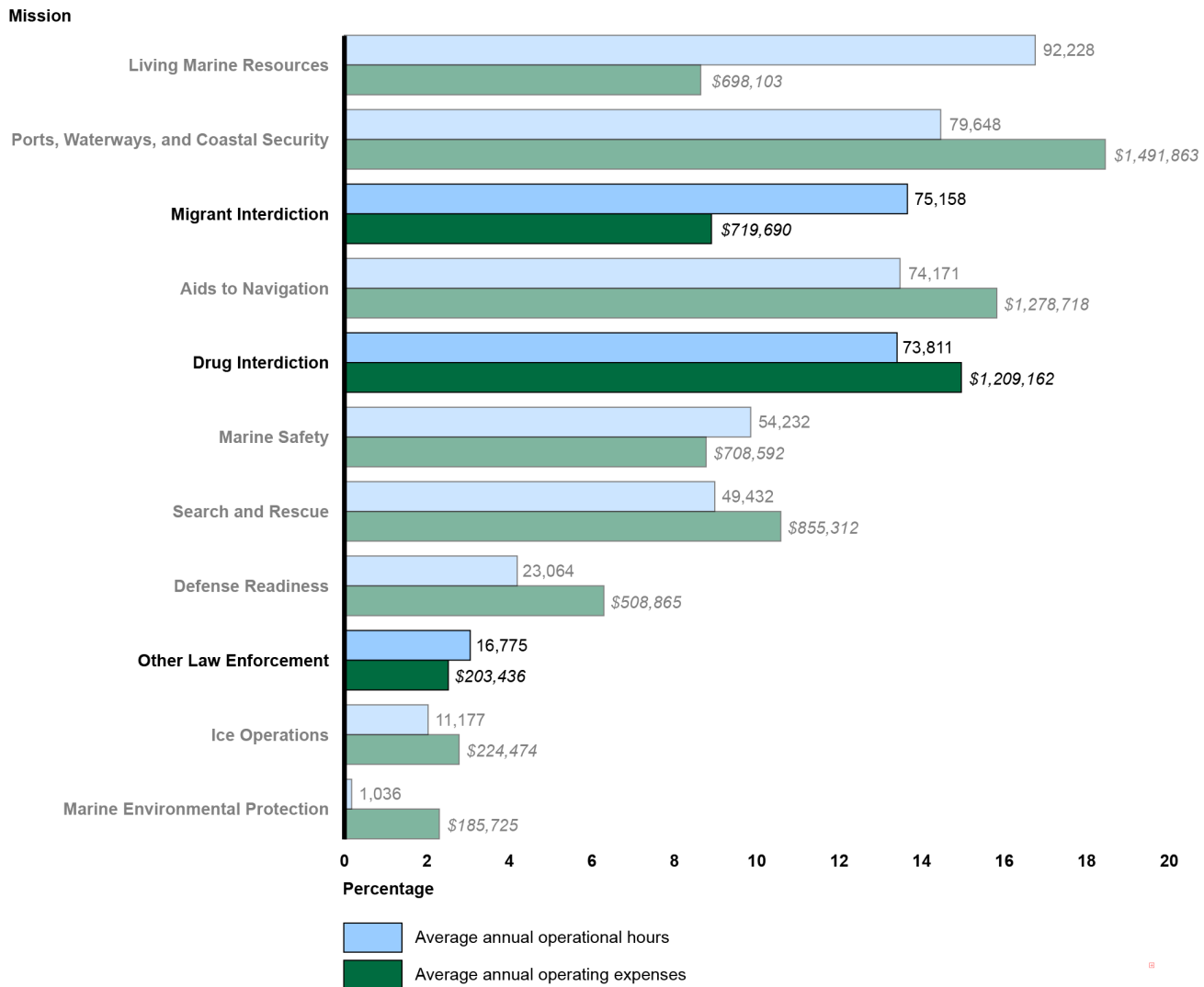


Source: GAO analysis of Department of Homeland Security information; U.S. Census Bureau (state boundaries). | GAO-25-108525

Note: Boat stations shown above also include small boat stations. Air stations shown above also include air facilities. The district numbers are not consecutive because some districts were consolidated to reflect the U.S. Coast Guard's operational reorganizations since its creation in 1915.

Our analysis of Coast Guard data showed more than a quarter of its total estimated operating expenses were for law enforcement missions related to homeland security. Specifically, from fiscal years 2015 through 2024, drug interdiction accounted for 15 percent of its average estimated operating expenses, migrant interdiction 9 percent, and other law enforcement (which includes preventing illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing) 3 percent. Figure 4 shows that the operating expenses of these three missions annually averaged more than \$2.1 billion over this period.

Figure 4: Coast Guard Average Annual Vessel and Aircraft Operational Hours and Average Estimated Operating Expenses (in thousands), by Statutory Mission, Fiscal Years 2015 through 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-25-108525

CBP Resources

Within CBP, Air and Marine Operations and Border Patrol are the uniformed law enforcement arms responsible for securing U.S. borders between ports of entry in the air, land, and maritime environments.¹⁶

CBP's Air and Marine Operations operates a fleet of 250 fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft and about 300 vessels to secure U.S. borders, as of March 2023.¹⁷ The majority of CBP's Air and Marine Operations' activities support its law enforcement mission, including providing surveillance capabilities to detect and support the interdiction of illicit cross-border activity.¹⁸ For example, in May 2023, CBP Air and Marine Operations personnel and Puerto Rico police forces seized over 4,000 pounds of cocaine found inside a vessel that landed on the southeastern coast of Puerto Rico. In addition, as of March 2024, CBP's Border Patrol operates over 100 vessels along the coastal waterways of the United States and Puerto Rico and interior waterways common to the United States and Canada.¹⁹

In September 2024 we reported on staffing levels for CBP law enforcement positions, including for Air and Marine Operations and Border Patrol.²⁰ We found that staffing levels for Air and Marine Operations positions varied from fiscal year 2018 through the first half of fiscal year 2024. In particular, staffing levels for the Air Interdiction Agent position generally decreased and staffing levels for Aviation Enforcement Agents and Marine Interdiction Agents generally increased during this period. Regarding Border Patrol, we found that it met its staffing targets

¹⁶CBP's Office of Field Operations also has border security responsibilities, such as inspecting pedestrians, passengers, and cargo—including international mail and express cargo—at the more than 320 air, land, and sea ports of entry.

¹⁷CBP Air and Marine Operations owns and maintains CBP's 290 vessels, including riverine vessels that are operated by the U.S. Border Patrol, as of March 2023. Jonathan P. Miller, Executive Director of Operations, Air and Marine Operations, CBP, *Securing America's Maritime Border: Challenges and Solutions for U.S. National Security*, testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security, 118th Cong., 1st sess., March 23, 2023.

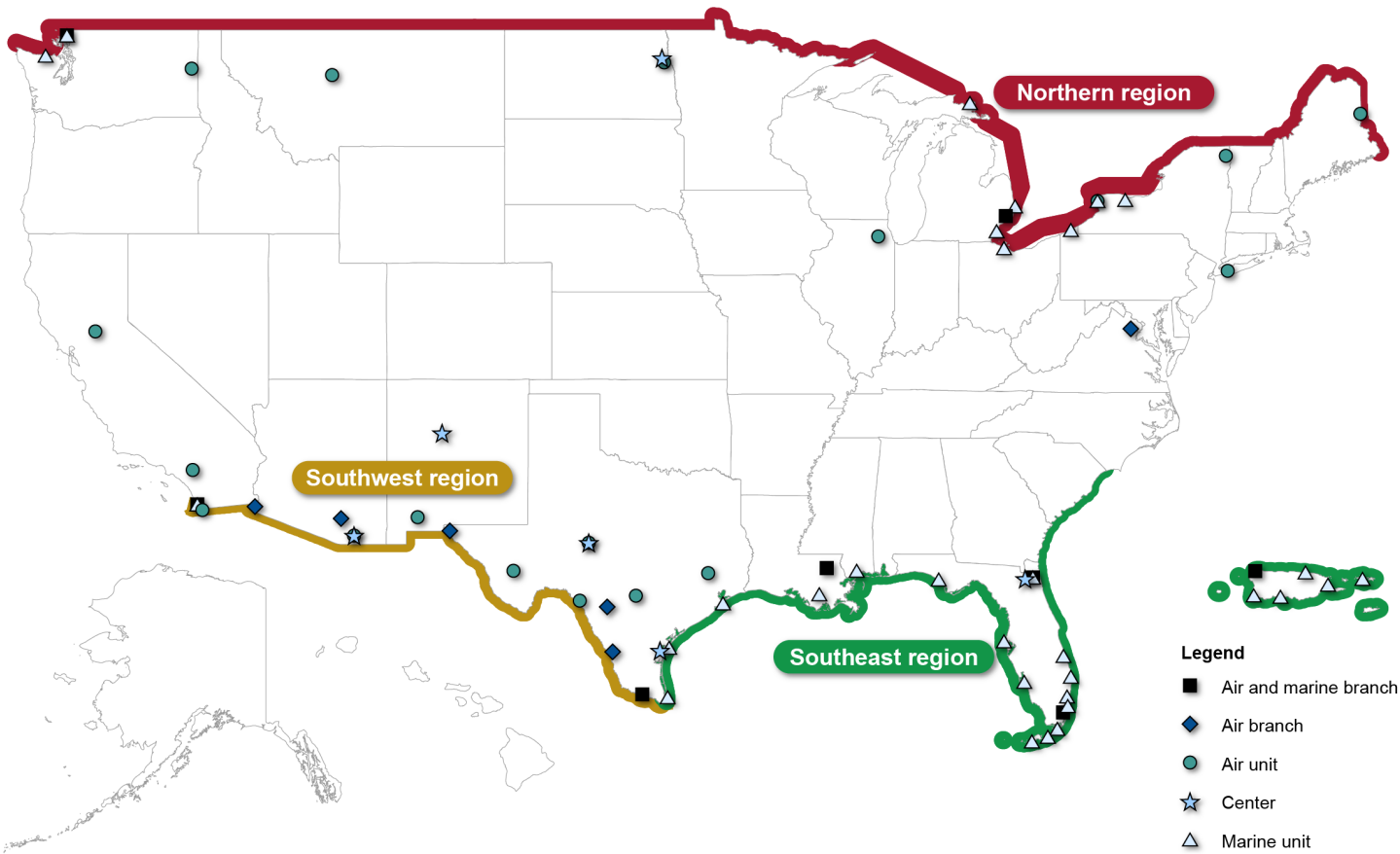
¹⁸GAO, *Department of Homeland Security: Assessment of Air and Marine Operating Locations Should Include Comparable Costs across All DHS Marine Operations*, [GAO-20-663](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 24, 2020).

¹⁹"Border Patrol Overview," CBP, last modified: Mar. 4, 2024, <https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/along-us-borders/overview>.

²⁰GAO, *U.S. Customs and Border Protection: Efforts to Improve Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention of Law Enforcement Personnel*, [GAO-24-107029](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 25, 2024).

from fiscal years 2018 through 2020 but fell short from fiscal year 2021 through the second quarter of fiscal year 2024. Figure 5 shows CBP’s Air and Marine Operations field structure, which is divided into three regions—northern, southeast, and southwest—and operating locations in these regions.

Figure 5: Air and Martine Operations Air and Marine Operating Locations by Region, as of September 2020



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Homeland Security information; U.S. Census Bureau (state boundaries). | GAO-25-108525

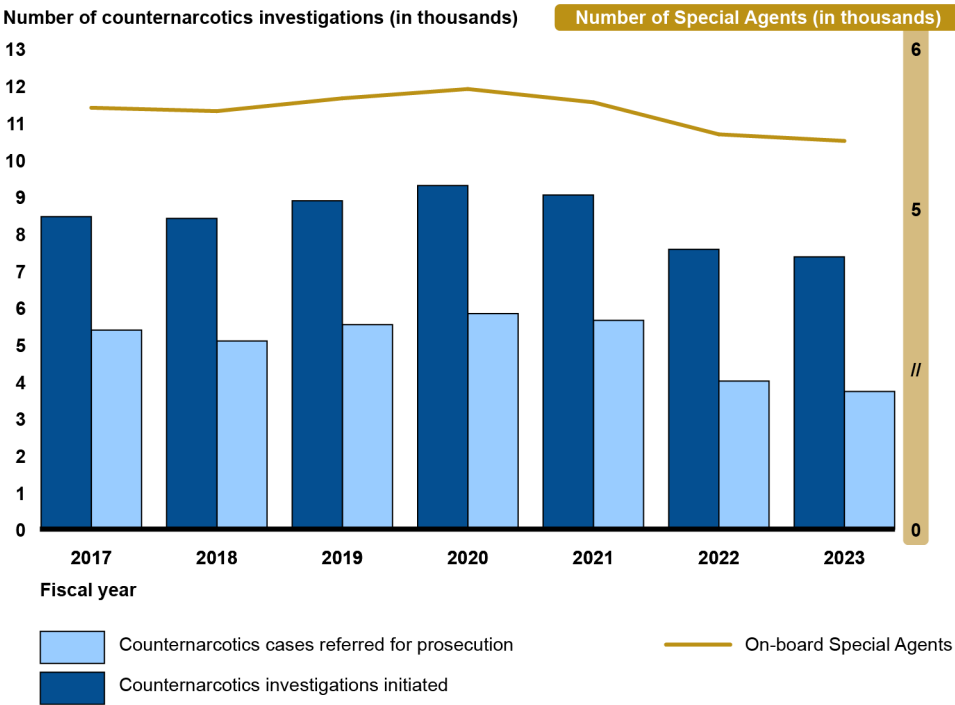
HSI Resources

HSI agents conduct federal criminal investigations into the illegal movement of people, goods, money, contraband, weapons, and sensitive technology into, out of, and through the U.S., including narcotics. Specifically, as it relates to counternarcotics investigations, HSI’s mission includes tracking, intercepting, investigating, and stopping illicit narcotics from flowing into the U.S. through targeting criminal networks; strengthening global partnerships; and enhancing domestic collaboration.

HSI is also involved in countering other illicit maritime activity. For example, in November 2024, HSI, in coordination with the Coast Guard and other federal agencies, investigated the Gulf Cartel’s involvement in criminal activities associated with illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, human smuggling, and narcotics trafficking in the maritime environment. Illegal fishing is often a revenue stream for criminal organizations, according to HSI, and is also a threat to U.S. maritime security, as criminal organizations may use the same vessels for smuggling narcotics and humans across borders.

As shown in figure 6, over a 7-year period—fiscal years 2017 through 2023—HSI initiated over 58,000 counternarcotics investigations and referred over 35,000 counternarcotics cases for prosecution (an annual average of over 8,000 initiated investigations and over 5,000 cases referred for prosecution). During this period, HSI was annually staffed with about 5,600 special agents working on HSI’s law enforcement activities, including activities that work to combat illicit drugs in the U.S.

Figure 6: Number of HSI Counternarcotics Investigations, Cases Referred for Prosecution, and Special Agents in Its Workforce, Fiscal Years 2017 through 2023



Source: GAO analysis of reported U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) information.
| GAO-25-108525

Coordination and Operational Challenges Hinder Federal Efforts to Confront Illicit Maritime Activities in U.S. Waters

Coordination Challenges

Combating the trafficking of illicit drugs and other illicit maritime activities is a government-wide priority that requires a coordinated effort by federal departments and agencies. In prior work, we have identified coordination challenges that hinder U.S. efforts to confront illicit maritime activities and recommended actions to improve oversight, measure effectiveness, and build organizational capacity.

Improve oversight. DOD and DHS lead and operate certain task forces—Joint Interagency Task Force (JIATF)-South, JIATF-West, and DHS Joint Task Force-East.²¹ For example, DHS components, including the Coast Guard and CBP, coordinate with DOD on counterdrug missions through the Joint Interagency Task Force South. For example, the task force is allocated assets, such as ships and surveillance aircraft, from DOD and DHS components, such as the Coast Guard, as well as from foreign partners. The task force coordinates these assets, in conjunction with available intelligence, to detect and monitor the trafficking of illicit drugs, such as cocaine, being smuggled north on noncommercial maritime vessels across its area of responsibility.

In 2019, we reported that the task forces generally coordinated effectively using means that aligned with leading practices.²² These included

²¹An additional task force—Joint Task Force-North—consists solely of DOD personnel and does not generally operate in the maritime domain.

²²See GAO, *Drug Control: Certain DOD and DHS Joint Task Forces Should Enhance Their Performance Measures to Better Assess Counterdrug Activities*, [GAO-19-441](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 9, 2019). As established, the DHS task forces aimed to, among other things, combat terrorism threats, the smuggling of illicit drugs, unlawful migration, and other security concerns along the southern border and approaches to the U.S.

working groups and liaison officers, which helped to minimize duplication of missions and activities.

However, our recent work has shown that these task forces and DOD should improve coordination and assess their efforts.²³ In 2024, we made four recommendations to improve agencies' assessment efforts, including two recommendations to DHS to improve oversight of Joint Task Force-East. DHS agreed with the recommendations, which remain open as of May 2025.²⁴ Fully implementing them is essential for making decisions about priorities, resource allocations, and strategies for improvements.

Measure effectiveness. The Coast Guard and DOD also collaborate to combat illicit maritime activities and mitigate risks in the Arctic region. According to the Coast Guard's Arctic Strategy these risks range from increased militarization of the Arctic region and potential conflict with Russia or China, to the increased risk posed by greater shipping traffic, and potential damage to the marine ecosystem from illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. Officials from the Coast Guard and DOD also told us they collaborate in several ways, including sharing relevant information and expertise, providing operational assistance and conducting joint exercises in the region. Further, they reported collaborating on the development of their respective Arctic strategies. However, we found in August 2024 that the Coast Guard's Arctic Strategic Outlook Implementation Plan generally does not include mechanisms to measure progress on its Arctic efforts. This may make it difficult for the Coast Guard to plan activities, determine resource needs, assess its progress toward strategic objectives, and ensure its efforts are aligned with national efforts. As a result, we recommended that the Coast Guard include performance measures with associated targets and time frames in its implementation plan. The Coast Guard concurred with our recommendation, and we continue to monitor its progress.²⁵

²³GAO, *Counternarcotics: DOD Should Improve Coordination and Assessment of Its Activities*, [GAO-24-106281](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 16, 2024) and *Department of Homeland Security: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Oversight of Joint Task Forces*, [GAO-24-106855](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 7, 2024).

²⁴[GAO-24-106855](#). DHS agreed with the two recommendations and identified ongoing and planned steps to address them. Actions include plans to review its performance measures for the task force and document the methodology used calculate such measures, including performance targets. See also [GAO-24-106281](#).

²⁵GAO, *Coast Guard: Complete Performance and Operational Data Would Better Clarify Arctic Resource Needs*, [GAO-24-106491](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 13, 2024).

Build collaborative capacity through training. While HSI agents may obtain Title 21 authority in order to collaborate with DEA on certain investigations of illicit activities, interagency disagreement on training has hindered effectiveness.²⁶ DEA cross-designated an average of over 4,000 HSI agents per year with the authority to participate in counternarcotics investigations under Title 21 of the U.S. Code during fiscal years 2019 through 2023. Additionally, while DEA and HSI have taken some steps towards implementing their training requirements, they have not completed this effort due to disagreements over the content of the trainings.

In March 2025, we made three recommendations, including that DEA and ICE develop and implement the training.²⁷ Without jointly developing and implementing the training modules, DEA and HSI cannot ensure that their agents are properly trained to collaborate effectively with each other on counternarcotics investigations.

Operational Challenges

DHS assets, such as aircraft and vessels, and federal personnel are vital to confronting and mitigating illicit maritime activities. However, our prior work has found that the Coast Guard faces significant operational challenges balancing tradeoffs among its assets and personnel across its 11 statutory missions where more work needs to be done. By comparison, CBP has strategically addressed certain operational challenges, such as recruitment and retention, through incentive pay.

Coast Guard tradeoffs. The Coast Guard faces challenges balancing its varied mission priorities which have grown as it is called on to do more with its resources. In particular, in recent years, the Coast Guard has prioritized deploying its assets for its migrant interdiction mission. In doing so, it has reduced its operational activities to support other missions. The Coast Guard has not met its annual primary drug interdiction mission performance target in any year from fiscal years 2014 through 2024. Most notably, from fiscal years 2021 through 2023, the Coast Guard increased its migrant interdiction operations considerably in response to the highest

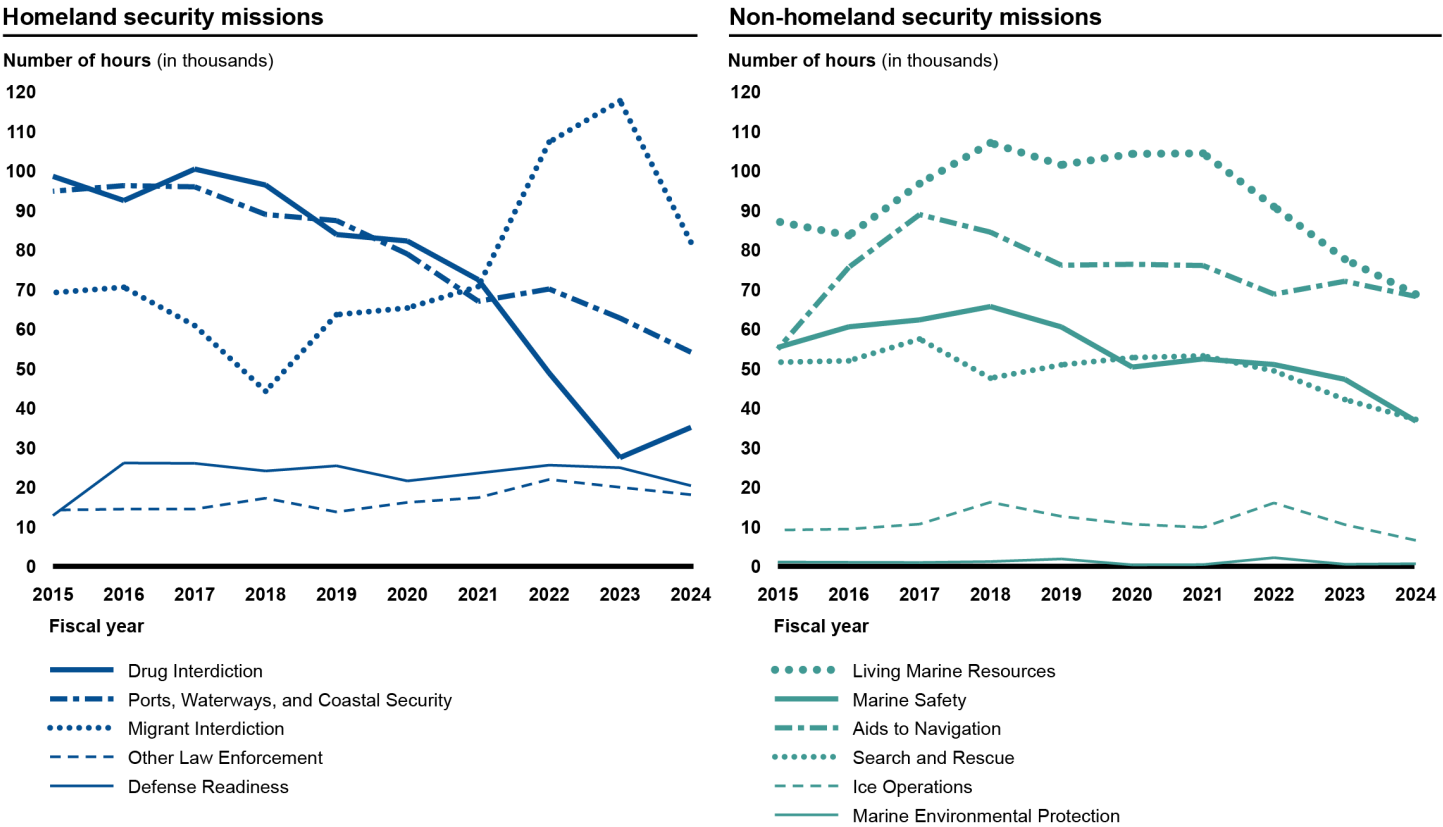
²⁶Under section 873 of Title 21 of the U.S. Code, DEA can cross-designate HSI agents with the authority to investigate the smuggling of controlled substances across U.S. international borders or through ports of entry.

²⁷See GAO, *Combatting Illicit Drugs: Improvements Needed for Coordinating Federal Investigations*, [GAO-25-107839](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 5, 2025). The agencies agreed with our recommendations. DHS described planned actions to address the recommendation to HSI, stating that HSI plans to work with DEA to develop and implement training modules.

maritime migration levels in the Caribbean in nearly 30 years. This tradeoff further challenges the Coast Guard’s ability to meet its drug interdiction mission demands.

As shown in figure 7, from fiscal years 2021 through 2023, the Coast Guard increased its operational hours for aircraft and vessels by 66 percent for its migrant interdiction mission, while decreasing its deployments for drug interdiction by 62 percent.²⁸

Figure 7: Coast Guard Aircraft and Vessel Resources Deployed to Homeland Security Missions and Non-Homeland Security Missions, Fiscal Years 2015 through 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-25-108525

²⁸From fiscal years 2023 through 2024, Coast Guard resources deployed to support its migrant interdiction mission decreased, while Coast Guard resources deployed to support its drug interdiction mission remained at relatively low levels.

Coast Guard assets. Moreover, the condition of the assets the Coast Guard manages have been in a state of decline for decades. Our work has shown that the Coast Guard's aircraft and vessels have faced readiness and availability challenges in carrying out their statutory missions.

For example, the Coast Guard relies on its Medium Endurance Cutters for its drug interdiction mission. However, we reported in July 2012 that Medium Endurance Cutters did not meet operational hours targets from fiscal years 2005 through 2011 and that declining operational capacity hindered mission performance.²⁹ In June 2023, we reported that Medium Endurance Cutters were not consistently meeting operational availability targets, and the Coast Guard noted that the declining physical condition of the cutters puts them at significant risk of decreased capability for meeting mission requirements.³⁰

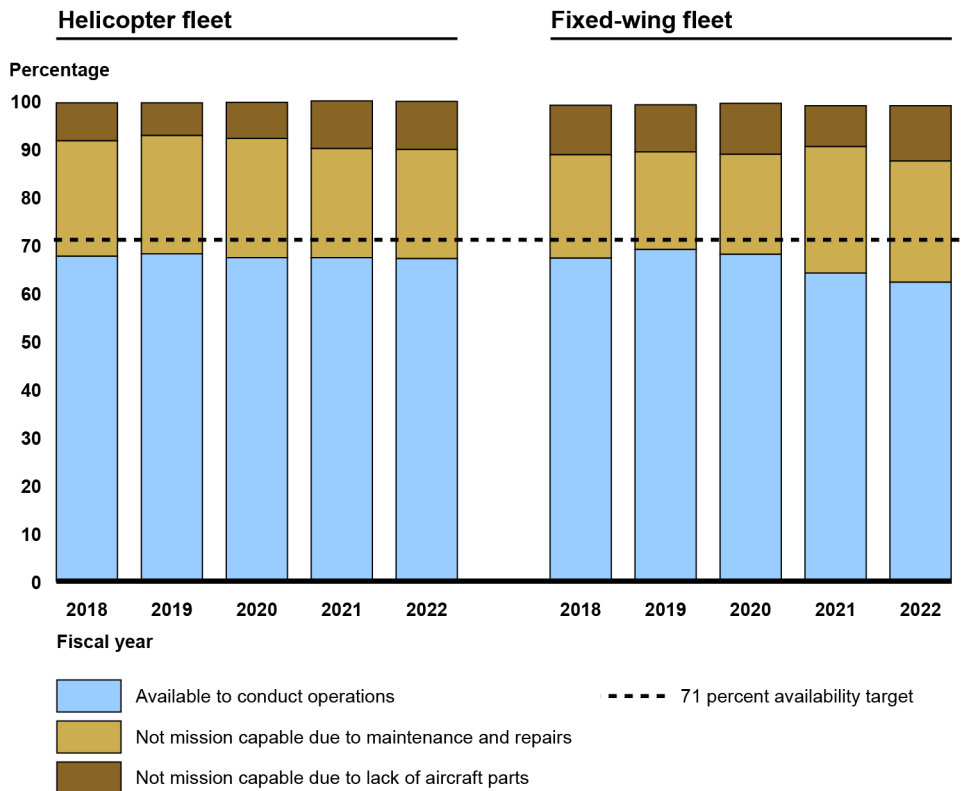
The Coast Guard's asset readiness challenges are not limited to its cutters. In April 2024, we reported that the Coast Guard's aircraft generally did not meet the Coast Guard's 71 percent availability target during fiscal years 2018 through 2022, as shown in figure 8.³¹

²⁹GAO, *Coast Guard: Legacy Vessels' Declining Conditions Reinforce Need for More Realistic Operational Targets*, [GAO-12-741](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 31, 2012).

³⁰GAO, *Coast Guard Acquisitions: Offshore Patrol Cutter Program Needs to Mature Technology and Design*, [GAO-23-105805](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 20, 2023).

³¹[GAO-24-106374](#). GAO found that the Coast Guard had not assessed the type and number of helicopters it requires to meet its mission demands, as part of an analysis of its assets, among other things.

Figure 8: Coast Guard Helicopter and Fixed-wing Fleet Availability, Fiscal Years 2018 through 2022



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard data. | GAO-25-108525

Coast Guard personnel. Compounding deteriorating assets is a shortage of personnel to operate them. The Coast Guard exceeded its recruiting goal in fiscal year 2024 for the first time in 5 years by taking actions such as increasing recruiting offices, marketing, and outreach efforts. It also revised enlistment eligibility standards and took steps to address a significant increase in medical waiver requests in recent years. However, despite these efforts, the Coast Guard remained about 2,600 enlisted members short of its workforce target.

The Coast Guard has taken steps to address its retention challenges through monetary and nonmonetary incentives and in 2022 began to require service members to complete a career survey to help identify key issues affecting retention. However, survey response rates have been consistently low. In April 2025, we recommended that the Coast Guard take actions to address response rates and develop a clear plan to gauge

the performance of its initiatives.³² The Coast Guard agreed with our recommendations, and we will monitor their implementation.

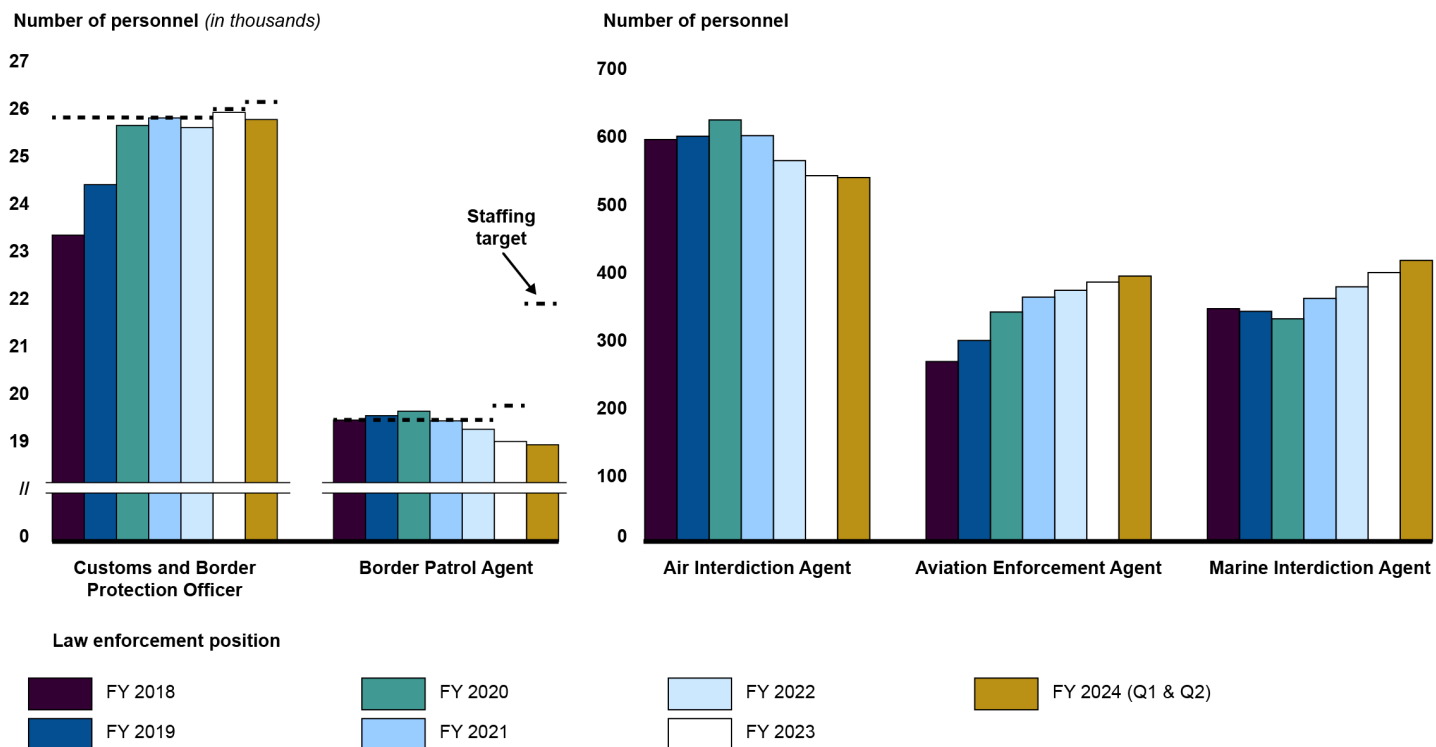
CBP personnel. We reported in September 2024 that in recent years, CBP has also generally fallen short of staffing targets for its law enforcement positions, as shown in figure 9.³³ We also reported that CBP has taken action to strengthen its recruitment, hiring, and retention efforts. For example, each of CBP's operational components—the Office of Field Operations, U.S. Border Patrol, and Air and Marine Operations—have offered recruitment incentives for law enforcement positions.

In particular, in 2024 Border Patrol offered recruitment incentives of \$20,000 per recipient, with an additional \$10,000 for recipients stationed in remote locations. CBP has also offered retention incentives, relocation incentives, and special salary rates as part of its efforts to improve retention of law enforcement personnel. For example, Air and Marine Operations has offered retention incentives for positions and locations experiencing high rates of attrition. CBP anticipates a steep increase in attrition rates across all positions starting in 2027 because a significant number of its law enforcement personnel will become eligible to retire. CBP has a strategic plan to address this expected retirement surge, and retention- and morale-related efforts will be increasingly important to help mitigate the loss of these personnel.

³²[GAO-25-107869](#).

³³[GAO-24-107029](#).

Figure 9: Target versus Actual Staffing Levels for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Law Enforcement Positions, Fiscal Year 2018 through the Second Quarter of Fiscal Year 2024



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data. | GAO-25-108525

Note: The Office of Field Operations determines staffing targets for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Officers by assessing available funding, statutory provisions, current staffing levels, and projected attrition. Border Patrol's staffing targets are determined by authorized staffing levels that represent the number of agents supported by the component's appropriations, informed by provisions of explanatory statements and other legislative documents accompanying annual appropriations. Executive Order 13767, which was in effect from January 2017 to January 2021, called for CBP to hire 5,000 additional Border Patrol Agents, subject to available appropriations. According to CBP officials, CBP was not appropriated funding to hire an additional 5,000 agents; therefore, they are not included in Border Patrol's staffing targets. Air and Marine Operations does not have staffing targets for its three law enforcement positions. Fiscal year 2024 staffing levels are as of the end of the second quarter of the fiscal year.

In summary, DHS components and their law enforcement missions are vital to confronting and mitigating illicit maritime activities. Addressing our recommendations on setting performance measures and targets and managing assets and personnel will help ensure that DHS efficiently uses its available resources to carry out its law enforcement missions to protect our maritime borders.

Chairmen Guest and Gimenez, Ranking Members Correa and McIver, and Members of the Subcommittees, this completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have at this time.

GAO Contacts and Staff Acknowledgments

If you or your staff have any questions about this testimony, please contact Heather MacLeod, Director, Homeland Security and Justice at MacLeodH@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this statement. GAO staff who made key contributions to this statement are Andrew Curry (Assistant Director), Ricki Gaber (Analyst-in-Charge), Dawn Hoff, Jay Berman, Michele Fejfar, Eric Hauswirth, Sierra Hicks, Paul Hobart, Sasan J. "Jon" Najmi, Ben Neverov, and Kevin Reeves.

Appendix I: Related Open Recommendations to the Department of Homeland Security as of May 2025

Coast Guard: Enhanced Data and Planning Could Help Address Service Member Retention Issues, [GAO-25-107869](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 23, 2025).

- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the Office of Workforce Requirements, Systems, and Analytics implements additional mechanisms to increase response rates for its Career Intention Survey.
- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the Office of Workforce Requirements, Systems, and Analytics analyzes the potential for nonresponse bias in its Career Intention Survey results.
- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the Talent Management Transformation Program Integration Office develops a clear plan, including how retention initiatives align with strategic objectives and time frames and milestones for implementation, to track progress and gauge program performance.

Combatting Illicit Drugs: Improvements Needed for Coordinating Federal Investigations, [GAO-25-107839](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 5, 2025).

- **Recommendation:** The Director of ICE should work with the DEA Administrator to develop and implement the two training modules in accordance with their January 2021 agreement, using agreed-upon dispute resolution mechanisms as appropriate.

Coast Guard: Complete Performance and Operational Data Would Better Clarify Arctic Resource Needs, [GAO-24-106491](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 13, 2024).

- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that District 17 collects and reports complete information about resource use and mission performance in accordance with Coast Guard guidance.
- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the Coast Guard's Arctic implementation plan includes performance measures with associated targets and time frames for the action items described in the plan in accordance with Coast Guard guidance.

Coast Guard: Aircraft Fleet and Aviation Workforce Assessments Needed, [GAO-24-106374](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 9, 2024).

- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should establish procedures requiring the Coast Guard to uniformly collect and maintain air station readiness data.
- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should establish a process to regularly evaluate Coast Guard-wide air station readiness data.
- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should assess the type of helicopters the Coast Guard requires to meet its mission demands, as part of an analysis of alternatives.
- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should assess the number of helicopters the Coast Guard requires to meet its mission demands, as part of a fleet mix analysis.
- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should assess and determine the aviation workforce levels it requires to meet its mission needs.

Department of Homeland Security: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Oversight of Joint Task Forces, [GAO-24-106855](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 7, 2024).

- **Recommendation:** The Secretary of Homeland Security should ensure the Office of the Military Advisor develops and documents criteria for establishing a joint task force.
- **Recommendation:** The Secretary of Homeland Security should ensure the Office of the Military Advisor develops and documents criteria for terminating a joint task force.
- **Recommendation:** The Secretary of Homeland Security should ensure the Office of the Military Advisor, as it finalizes performance measures for Joint Task Force-East, establishes targets for those measures, as required.
- **Recommendation:** The Secretary of Homeland Security should ensure the Office of the Military Advisor develops and documents the methodology used in establishing the performance measures for Joint Task Force-East.

Coast Guard Acquisitions: Offshore Patrol Cutter Program Needs to Mature Technology and Design, [GAO-23-105805](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 20, 2023).

- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that Offshore Patrol Cutter (OPC) program officials develop a

technology maturation plan for the davit prior to builder's trials. This plan should identify potential courses of action to address davit technical immaturity, including assessing technology alternatives should the current davit continue to face development challenges, and a date by which the Coast Guard will make a go/no-go decision to pursue such a technology alternative.

- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that OPC program officials test an integrated prototype of the davit in a realistic environment prior to stage 1 builder's trials.
- **Recommendation:** The Commandant of the Coast Guard should ensure that the OPC stage 2 program achieves a sufficiently stable design prior to the start of lead ship construction. In line with shipbuilding leading practices, sufficiently stable design includes 100 percent completion of basic and functional design, including routing of major distributive systems and transitive components that effect multiple zones of the ship.

Related GAO Products

Coast Guard: Enhanced Data and Planning Could Help Address Service Member Retention Issues, [GAO-25-107869](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 23, 2025).

Combatting Illicit Drugs: Improvements Needed for Coordinating Federal Investigations, [GAO-25-107839](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 5, 2025).

Coast Guard Shore Infrastructure: More Than \$7 Billion Reportedly Needed to Address Deteriorating Assets, [GAO-25-107851](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 25, 2025).

U.S. Customs and Border Protection: Efforts to Improve Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention of Law Enforcement Personnel, [GAO-24-107029](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 25, 2024).

Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Address Persistent Challenges Hindering Efforts to Counter Illicit Maritime Drug Smuggling, [GAO-24-107785](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 19, 2024).

Coast Guard: Complete Performance and Operational Data Would Better Clarify Arctic Resource Needs, [GAO-24-106491](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 13, 2024).

Counternarcotics: DOD Should Improve Coordination and Assessment of Its Activities, [GAO-24-106281](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 16, 2024).

Coast Guard: Aircraft Fleet and Aviation Workforce Assessments Needed, [GAO-24-106374](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 9, 2024).

Department of Homeland Security: Additional Actions Needed to Improve Oversight of Joint Task Forces, [GAO-24-106855](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 7, 2024).

Coast Guard Acquisitions: Offshore Patrol Cutter Program Needs to Mature Technology and Design, [GAO-23-105805](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 20, 2023).

Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Better Manage Shore Infrastructure, [GAO-22-105513](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 16, 2021).

Department of Homeland Security: Assessment of Air and Marine Operating Locations Should Include Comparable Costs across All DHS Marine Operations, [GAO-20-663](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 24, 2020).

Drug Control: Certain DOD and DHS Joint Task Forces Should Enhance Their Performance Measures to Better Assess Counterdrug Activities, [GAO-19-441](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 9, 2019).

Coast Guard: Resources Provided for Drug Interdiction Operations in the Transit Zone, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, [GAO-14-527](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jun. 16, 2014).

Coast Guard: Legacy Vessels' Declining Conditions Reinforce Need for More Realistic Operational Targets, [GAO-12-741](#) (Washington, D.C.: Jul. 31, 2012).

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Testimony
of

Jonathan P. Miller
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U.S. Customs and Border Protection
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Regarding a Hearing
on

*“From Cartels to Coastlines: An Examination of U.S. Federal Efforts to Confront Illicit
Maritime Activities in U.S. Waters”*

Before the

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security
Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement

June 10, 2025
Washington, DC

Introduction

Chairman Gimenez, Chairman Guest, Ranking Member McIver, Ranking Member Correa, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees, it is a privilege to appear before you today to discuss U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Air and Marine Operations' unwavering commitment to interdicting illegal drugs, preventing human smuggling, and securing our nation's borders, maritime domain, and approaches. As a frontline law enforcement component of CBP, Air and Marine Operations operates in source and transit zones, between ports of entry, in coastal waters, and interior waterways.

Born out of the legacy U.S. Customs Service, Air and Marine Operations was established in 2006 as an integral part of CBP's comprehensive border security mission and the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) risk-based and multi-layered approach to national security. Air and Marine Operations agents are federal law enforcement officers¹ with a broad range of legal authorities, specialized assets, and unique operational capabilities that enable them to detect and interdict illegal activity at and beyond our nation's borders in the land, air, and sea domains, providing a critical layer of continuity in border security operations.

State of the Maritime Border

While CBP reasserts control of our borders² in accordance with President Trump's directives, transnational criminal organizations and foreign terrorist organizations continue their efforts to smuggle people and contraband into our country. These organizations operate with immense capability, capacity, and nearly unlimited resources. Their smuggling operations are sophisticated, and they continually adjust their tactics, techniques, and routes to circumvent detection and interdiction by law enforcement.

Illicit activity in the maritime environment is a threat to U.S. border and national security. The maritime domain is generally less restricted than the air and land environments. Thousands of vessels enter or operate in U.S. territorial waters every day. Detecting illegal activity can be challenging, as many smuggling craft hide in plain sight among legitimate traffic, while others transit remote areas far offshore to try to elude detection. Additionally, smugglers use a variety of craft tailored to the area and cargo they are smuggling, including modified fishing boats, go-fast vessels, pangas,³ low profile vessels, and semi-submersibles. Vessels are much faster than they were 20 years ago, often leaving law enforcement little time to interdict them before reaching our shores.

Encounters with smugglers can also be extremely dangerous. Since its creation in 2006, Air and Marine Operations has used disabling fire on the engines of fleeing smuggler vessels nearly 350 times. Additionally, in November 2022, three Air and Marine Operations Marine Interdiction Agents were shot – and one of them, Michel Maceda, tragically killed -- during a vessel stop off the coast of Puerto Rico.⁴ Precise engagement and rapid neutralization of risk is key to safely resolving water-based law enforcement actions. Air and Marine Operations continually refines its maritime interdiction capabilities and tactics to meet ever evolving threats.

¹ 6 U.S.C. § 211(f); 19 U.S.C. § 1589a; 8 U.S.C § 1357

² <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/04/28/100-days-most-secure-border-american-history>

³ A small boat, often used for fishing, and typically powered by an outboard motor.

⁴ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/speeches-and-statements/cbp-marine-interdiction-agent-dies-line-duty-near-puerto-rico>

Air and Marine Operations' Maritime Border Security Operations

Air and Marine Operations remains at the forefront of the nation's efforts to combat drug smuggling and illegal immigration through the maritime domain. Immediately following President Trump's declaration of a national emergency at the southern border, Air and Marine Operations – in concert with our other CBP and DHS partners – took action to expand its maritime enforcement efforts and safeguard the American people.

With the historic decrease in illegal crossings in the land environment, Air and Marine Operations realigned maritime aircraft and increased patrols, resulting in a 90 percent increase in maritime apprehensions of illegal aliens in Southern California.⁵ Since January 21, 2025, Air and Marine Operations enforcement efforts across all our maritime operational environments have led to the apprehension of over 750 aliens, with 60 percent occurring in South Florida and the Caribbean Sea.

Aliens attempting to make the journey to the United States along maritime routes take an enormous risk, putting their lives in the hands of transnational criminal organizations, foreign terrorist organizations, or other human smuggling networks and often in unsafe, rustic vessels. The weather at sea is unpredictable, and the vessels that make it far enough for Air and Marine Operations to encounter are often dangerously overloaded with illegal aliens. Air and Marine Operations encounters with these vessels typically become rescue missions in addition to apprehension actions. Just last month, Air and Marine Operations responded to reports of an overturned panga-style boat that washed ashore in San Diego.⁶ At least three people died, including one child. Another child on board was never recovered and is presumed dead. Not only was the vessel unsuitable for the quantity of people on board, but it was also incapable of handling the perilous sea conditions. This event was another tragic reminder of how smugglers operate with total disregard for human life. Secretary Noem is seeking capital punishment for these crimes.⁷

In addition to responding to increasing numbers of maritime alien encounters, Air and Marine Operations continues to intercept tons of dangerous illicit drugs, keeping them from reaching our shores and communities. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2024, Air and Marine Operations enforcement efforts led to the seizure of 233,662 pounds of illegal drugs.⁸ Approximately 76 percent of these drugs – including more than 160,000 pounds of cocaine, 15,000 pounds of marijuana, and 170 pounds of methamphetamine – were intercepted in the maritime environment.

Air and Marine Operations remains vigilant and continually adjusts our operations as transnational criminal organizations, foreign terrorist organizations, and human smugglers seek to shift their criminal activities from longstanding land-based pathways to alternative maritime routes.

⁵ From January 21, 2025 – May 19, 2025, compared to the same date range in 2024.

⁶ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdca/pr/five-charged-human-smuggling-event-led-least-three-deaths>

⁷ <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/05/06/secretary-noem-requests-death-penalty-against-alleged-human-smugglers-whose-actions>

⁸ <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/cbp-enforcement-statistics/air-and-marine-operations-statistics>

Maritime Enforcement Authorities

Despite Air and Marine Operations' unique cross-domain law enforcement capabilities, in the maritime environment, Air and Marine Operations' maritime law enforcement authority⁹ is generally limited¹⁰ to areas within the historical "customs waters"¹¹ – or 12 nautical miles from the coastline – of the United States. This constraint limits Air and Marine Operations' ability to effectively counter current and evolving modern threats in the maritime environment.

Specifically, as modern technology continues to change and advance rapidly, the performance and speed of maritime vessels improves, including those used to violate U.S. law or evade U.S. law enforcement. These advancements render Air and Marine Operations' authority to operate only within the 12-nautical-mile zone inadequate, placing our law enforcement capability at a significant disadvantage and often preventing Air and Marine Operations' interdiction of vessels in time to prevent their escape.

CBP appreciates our continuing collaboration with Congress on legislative changes that would extend the limits of customs waters. Expansion of Air and Marine Operations' authority to operate, through the extension of the 12-nautical-mile customs waters, would enable Air and Marine Operations to better leverage its cross-domain authorities, enhance its detection of and response to the modern and sophisticated capabilities of smugglers and transnational criminal organizations, and better support its law enforcement partners in the maritime environment.

Interdiction Assets, Capabilities, and Technology

Air and Marine Operations is committed to its maritime security mission and continues to make investments in its highly trained agents, vessels, aircraft, and technological capabilities to advance the effectiveness of its operations. These investments not only support Air and Marine Operations' ongoing ability to effectively respond to illegal drug activity in the maritime environment but also contribute to other Air and Marine Operations enforcement actions, including those that led to over 1,000 arrests as well as the seizure of 1,500 weapons and \$12.6 million in U.S. currency in FY 2024.

Specialized law enforcement personnel are essential to Air and Marine Operations' maritime border security mission. These highly skilled agents must be capable of not only enforcing a broad range of U.S. laws, but also safely and effectively doing so in the complex – and often dangerous -- maritime environment. While recruitment for these positions can be challenging, Air and Marine Operations is actively pursuing opportunities to attract and onboard qualified talent at all levels of experience. We are focused on maximizing the capacity of our marine units in the Caribbean, South Florida, and Southern California where we have a high tempo of maritime activity.

Vessels tailored for Air and Marine Operations' specific law enforcement operations are a key aspect of its maritime border security mission. For example, Air and Marine Operations deploys

⁹ See, e.g. 19 U.S.C. §§ 1581, 1587, 1589a.

¹⁰ In certain circumstances, Air and Marine Operations is authorized to operate on the high seas, for instance when enforcing laws on U.S. registered vessels (19 C.F.R. § 162.3), hovering vessels (19 U.S.C. § 1401(k); 19 U.S.C. § 1587(a)), and vessels subject to hot pursuit (19 U.S.C. § 1581(d)). Additionally, beyond the customs waters, Air and Marine Operations may enforce the Maritime Drug Law Enforcement Act (46 U.S.C. §§ 70501-70502), where appropriate.

¹¹ 19 U.S.C. §§ 1401(j), 1709(c).

a fleet of high-speed Coastal Interceptor Vessels engineered for rapid pursuit and interdiction of non-compliant vessels. These vessels are crewed by highly trained agents authorized to use all necessary force, including warning shots and disabling fire, to stop fleeing vessels.

In addition to our maritime interdiction efforts with our marine interceptors on the water, we also contribute a significant amount of air assets to these operations. Air and Marine Operations' fleet of maritime patrol aircraft are functionally designed and outfitted for maritime detection and surveillance. The P-3s and DHC-8 aircraft provide long range, high-endurance capabilities in remote source and transit zones while the Super King Air 350 Multi-Role Enforcement Aircraft further expand aerial surveillance, closing detection and enforcement gaps in the Caribbean. Equipped with advanced sensors, communications, and radar systems, these aircraft are credited with the interdiction of 150,380 pounds of cocaine and 11,670 flight hours within the Western Hemisphere Transit Zones in FY 2024, which equated to 13 pounds of narcotics interdicted per flight hour.

The use of unmanned aircraft systems in the maritime environment has also increased Air and Marine Operations' ability to effectively identify, detect, monitor, and track conveyances involved in illegal activity. In partnership with DHS's Science and Technology Directorate, Air and Marine Operations modified two MQ-9s to Big Wing variants, significantly increasing fuel capacity and flight endurance. These Big Wing aircraft have the added ability to surveil surface targets much longer while awaiting interdiction surface forces to arrive. Air and Marine Operations has been employing unmanned aircraft systems in the maritime environment since 2020, contributing to the seizure of over 81,000 pounds of cocaine and 46,000 pounds of marijuana.

Air and Marine Operations is heavily invested in a variety of ground-based radars and sensors increasing maritime domain awareness along our littoral borders. We strategically deployed several maritime approach surveillance towers in the Caribbean Basin that overlap to provide persistent wide-area surveillance and detection capabilities in high-risk areas. Additionally, we've taken tethered aerostats traditionally used for air detection and integrated maritime surface radars to utilize them in support of maritime interdiction operations. These tools have significantly increased our situational awareness of the maritime approaches around Puerto Rico, South Texas into the Gulf of America, and the Florida Straits. Other tower and ground-based radar systems have provided additional radar detection around Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands, South Florida, and the Great Lakes. Over the last three years, these systems have cumulatively contributed to the seizure of over 17,200 pounds of cocaine, 15,600 pounds of illegally obtained marine life from illicit fishing practices, and \$2 million in U.S. currency.

Advanced technology, including the BigPipe real-time video system and the Minotaur mission integration system, link Air and Marine Operations' tactical assets, aircraft, and vessels, thereby providing Air and Marine Operations with a streamlined and efficient information collecting and sharing capability. The Air and Marine Operations Center simultaneously tracks, processes, and integrates multiple sensor feeds and sources of information to provide comprehensive domain awareness in support of CBP's border security mission.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning initiatives at Air and Marine Operations are improving threat detection efforts by processing vast amounts of surveillance data in real time. By leveraging artificial intelligence, Air and Marine Operations is advancing the efficiency and effectiveness of our maritime domain awareness. In areas where there is a high concentration of recreational vessels, Air and Marine Operations uses artificial intelligence technology to assist in filtering nefarious from recreational traffic. We have had success in using this technology to build algorithms that can identify patterns among a high volume of tracks on the radar.

Air and Marine Operations will continue to modernize its fleet and sensor systems to enhance its data analysis capabilities and operational performance in diverse marine environments and increase its ability to adapt to the challenges of securing the maritime border and approaches to the United States.

Operational Coordination

Using a whole of government approach, Air and Marine operations leverages interagency partnerships through the Global Maritime Operational Threat Response Coordination Center including the U.S. Coast Guard, Department of State, Department of Defense, as well as collaborations with other state, local, tribal, and foreign partners. Air and Marine Operations works closely with DHS Joint Task Force East and is one of the largest contributors of flight hours to Joint Interagency Task Force South, supporting counternarcotics operations in the 42 million square miles of source and transit zones spanning the Pacific, Atlantic, and Caribbean. Frequent cooperation with foreign partners is imperative. Over the last few years, Air and Marine Operations has increased its focus on the Eastern Caribbean and strengthened partnerships in the Lesser Antilles, creating a force multiplier of surveillance and interdiction assets throughout the southern approaches to Puerto Rico.

Conclusion

Since its creation in 2006, Air and Marine Operations has evolved into one of the world's largest civilian forces for aviation and maritime law enforcement. A critical component of CBP's border security mission, Air and Marine Operations monitors and patrols vast areas of air, sea, and land around the clock, defending the United States against threats at and beyond our borders.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to answering your questions.



Testimony
of

James C. Harris III
Assistant Director
Homeland Security Investigations
U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Regarding a Hearing
on

“From Cartels to Coastlines: An Examination of U.S. Federal Efforts to Confront Illicit Maritime Activities in U.S. Waters”

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June 10, 2025
Washington, DC

Chairman Gimenez, Chairman Guest, Ranking Member McIver, Ranking Member Correa, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees, on behalf of Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), we wish to express our appreciation to you for inviting us to this hearing today as well as for your time, attention, and steadfast commitment to protecting our Homeland security through your service in your respective committees.

I also thank you for the opportunity to discuss the exceptional and exhaustive efforts the men and women of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Homeland Security Investigations perform to safeguard our nation's security, public health, and economy against those criminals who seek to exploit, victimize, and compromise our great nation, our industries, and our critical infrastructure. I am truly honored to represent their exemplary service to our nation, which is proudly conducted in accordance with the principles of Honor, Service, and Integrity.

ICE Homeland Security Investigations History and Role

As one of our country's premier federal law enforcement agencies, Homeland Security Investigations, stands dedicated to protecting the United States through detecting and dismantling Transnational Criminal Organizations targeting the American people, threatening our businesses, abusing our financial institutions, and exploiting our prosperity. With our unique authorities and footprint, Homeland Security Investigations is perfectly situated to investigate and dismantle Transnational Criminal Organizations through the enforcement of over 400 federal laws. At Homeland Security Investigations, we are comprised of approximately 8,800 personnel across 243 domestic locations and more than 90 international locations, where we leverage more than 4,500 task force officers from various federal, state, tribal, territorial, local and international partners. Homeland Security Investigation's mission, as the principal investigative component of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is to combat a wide range of transnational crimes, including terrorism, illicit drug trafficking, human trafficking, child exploitation, human smuggling, and cybercrimes.

Under the Trump Administration, Homeland Security Investigations aggressively pursues investigations into criminal networks and activities which compromise the global supply chain. A key focus among these investigative efforts resides within the maritime environment. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Maritime Administration, *"about 99% of overseas trade enters or leaves the U.S. by ship. This waterborne cargo and associated activity contribute more than \$500 billion dollars to the U.S. GDP, generates over \$200 billion in annual port sector federal/state/local taxes and sustains over 10 million jobs."*¹ This vast amount of cargo movement allows Transnational Criminal Organizations the ability to exploit the global supply chain to smuggle contraband into the United States and around the globe.

Homeland Security Investigations works to identify, intercept, and eventually prosecute those exploiting maritime transportation and cargo supply chains. We utilize critical industry, open source, and law enforcement data, along with collaboration and information sharing among other federal, state, local, and international law enforcement agencies, to identify highly effective information to support criminal and civil investigations and enforcement activities primarily

¹ U.S. DOT Maritime Administration updated February 21, 2025
(<https://www.maritime.dot.gov/outreach/maritime-transportation-system-mts/maritime-transportation-system-mts>)

focused on the smuggling of illicit narcotics, such as fentanyl and precursor chemicals, weapons, sensitive U.S. military equipment, and dual-use technology, and the prevention of human smuggling, human trafficking, and drug trafficking.

Illegal drug smuggling is a global crime with local impacts. Illegal drugs — such as cocaine, methamphetamine, and synthetic opioids including fentanyl — largely come from other countries. Drug cartels and other Transnational Criminal Organizations employ complex schemes to evade detection as they attempt to smuggle their deadly products into the United States. Once here, local networks distribute and sell those drugs in our cities and on our streets — to our communities, our fellow citizens, and our loved ones — with devastating effects. In fiscal year 2025 alone, HSI investigations are credited with the seizure of over 501,036 lbs. of cocaine, 192,225 lbs. of precursor chemicals, 7,897 firearms, and the arrest of over 23,972 individuals.

Homeland Security Investigations fights daily to stem this terrible threat. Thanks to our efforts and those of our colleagues within DHS, illegal border crossings at the U.S. southern border are at a historic low. This has caused fentanyl seizures at our Ports of Entry to continue to fall. And as DHS personnel tighten border security at our land borders – cartels will continue to look for new ways to smuggle contraband and people into the United States, including through maritime means.

To combat those who seek to exploit our maritime environment, Homeland Security Investigations special agents work closely with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and the U.S. Coast Guard through interdiction and investigative efforts. With every successful interdiction – we leverage our expertise in conducting complex criminal investigations to identify the sources of supply, target the distribution hubs, and intercept financial networks to degrade and dismantle the entire transnational criminal organization.

As just one example of Homeland Security Investigation’s prioritization of maritime investigations and our commitment to partnerships, Homeland Security Investigations is a steadfast partner in the Organized Crime and Drug Enforcement Task Force’s Panama Express Strike Force. This prime example of a successful multi-agency operation is comprised of seven signatory partner agencies. Additionally, Panama Express Strike Force collaborates closely with the U.S. Department of Defense’s Southern Command Joint Interagency Task Force – South.

As an intelligence-driven, criminal enterprise combatting strike force, Panama Express Strike Force personnel have created and maintained one of law enforcement’s most robust, productive, and reliable human intelligence networks ever operated in Central and South America. The daily collection, analysis, and dissemination of highly actionable intelligence targets Transnational Criminal Organizations linked to designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations. This intelligence also identifies operators involved in large-scale drug trafficking, money laundering, and related activities, primarily using maritime and air transportation conveyances.

The cycle of human intelligence employed by Panama Express Strike Force identifies Transnational Criminal Organizations operating in the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean, disrupts their operations through maritime and air interdictions, develops witnesses and intelligence, and

dismantles the Transnational Criminal Organizations through strategic utilization of all developed evidence. This approach has produced historical law enforcement results.

It is important to note that drugs are not the only forms of contraband encountered in the maritime environment. Most of the cargo entering the United States from foreign countries arrives via maritime vessels. As such, Homeland Security Investigations routinely encounters counterfeit and mis-manifested cargo, which, if allowed to enter the commerce of the United States, can have devastating impacts on public safety and the U.S. economy.

Additionally, maritime human smuggling continues to pose a serious threat to both national security and human life. Human smugglers routinely exploit vulnerabilities along the United States' maritime borders, often utilizing overcrowded and unseaworthy vessels that place migrants, many of them women and children, at significant risk. These operations are frequently organized by Transnational Criminal Organizations operating off the coasts of California, Florida, and U.S. territories in the Caribbean. Homeland Security Investigations prioritizes the investigation of high-impact smuggling organizations through two key initiatives: Joint Task Force Alpha and the Extraterritorial Criminal Travel program. In coordination with U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the U.S. Department of Justice Criminal Division, Human Rights and Special Prosecutions Section, and other law enforcement partners, these programs focus on dedicating investigative, analytical, and prosecutorial resources to dismantle the highest priority of human smuggling organizations and their affiliated networks.

A recent example underscores the heartbreaking human cost of these Transnational Criminal Organizations. On May 5, 2025, a panga-style vessel carrying 16 migrants, including two minors, capsized and washed ashore near Torrey Pines, San Diego. Rescue efforts managed to identify six survivors but tragically, three Indian nationals lost their lives and seven others remain missing. Homeland Security Investigations is currently investigating this smuggling event.

During this investigation, as with our other investigations, Homeland Security Investigations targets every aspect of the criminal enterprise, from the recruiters and transporters to the organizers, financiers, and ultimately the leaders. This may include tracing the illicit funds used to purchase vessels, the freezing or forfeiture of connected bank accounts, the tracking of complicit commercial vessels, or the interceptions of communication devices.

These techniques, along with many others, are often most notably deployed through Homeland Security Investigation's capitalization of our unique authorities to employ a multi-layered strategy that integrates intelligence, operational coordination, and international cooperation within the task-force methodology. Traditionally exemplified through our Border Enforcement Security Task Forces units, and our Transnational Criminal Investigative Units, Homeland Security Investigations task forces bring together federal, state, local and international partners to target criminal networks along U.S. coastlines, among other threat areas. Additionally, we rely on U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine Operations, and the U.S. Navy, to ensure the rapid response capability and maritime intelligence sharing. Globally, there are 115 Border Enforcement Security Task Forces units located across the United States, Puerto Rico, Guam, Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, comprised of more than 1,500 task

force officers and personnel representing more than 200 federal, state, local, tribal, and international law enforcement agencies, and National Guard units. There are over 600 foreign law enforcement officers and prosecutors assigned to 14 Transnational Criminal Investigative Units and three International Task Force units operating in 17 countries worldwide. Together, these partnerships exponentially multiply Homeland Security Investigation's ability to affect investigative outcomes, disrupt criminal activity, and protect the Homeland and our allies. Building upon these two highly successful programs, under Executive Order 14159, signed by President Trump on January 20, 2025, Homeland Security Investigation and partners from the U.S. Department of Justice have taken steps to establish Homeland Security Task Forces, in all states and U.S. territories. Homeland Security Task Forces are charged with investigating, prosecuting, and removing criminal cartels, foreign gangs, and Transnational Criminal Organizations operating in the United States. Homeland Security Task Forces coordination of activities comes through a national coordination center in collaboration with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Drug Enforcement Administration, other federal law enforcement partners, U.S. Attorney's Offices, and relevant state, tribal, territorial, and local law enforcement agencies. Each Homeland Security Task Force targets the most prolific Foreign Terrorist Organization targets. The Homeland Security Task Force network aligns with Executive Orders 14159 and 14157 and is focused on dismantling cross-border human smuggling and human trafficking networks, especially those involving children, and enforcing U.S. immigration laws.

Conclusion

Maritime security is especially challenging as the U.S. government must protect over 12,400 miles of maritime borders. Transnational Criminal Organizations constantly probe maritime borders for gaps to smuggle people, hundreds of thousands of pounds of illegal narcotics, dangerous weapons, illicit proceeds, and other contraband into the United States. Homeland Security Investigations uses this challenge to embody the dedication and service the American people expect and deserve. Our employees strive daily to achieve our mission and to ensure the safety and security of this great nation, its people, and its economic prosperity.

Chairman Guest, Chairman Gimenez, and esteemed Committee members, thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and for your continued support of Homeland Security Investigations and our efforts to safeguard America and its people by disrupting and dismantling Transnational Criminal Organizations throughout the world. On behalf of the men and women of Homeland Security Investigations, I would like to extend an invitation to the members of both committees and their staff to visit our various facilities and engage with personnel from our headquarters components located here in the National Capitol Region as well as our domestic and international offices to garner firsthand knowledge of Homeland Security Investigations' operations and the diverse array of challenges we continuously face.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today, I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.



Testimony
of

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Regarding a Hearing
on

*“From Cartels to Coastlines:
An Examination of U.S. Federal Efforts to Confront Illicit Maritime Activities in U.S. Waters”*

Before the

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security
Subcommittee on Border Security and Enforcement

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Washington, DC

Introduction

Chairman Gimenez, Chairman Guest, Ranking Member McIver, Ranking Member Correa and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am thankful for your enduring support of the United States Coast Guard and honored to be here today to discuss the Service's role in controlling, securing, and defending America's maritime border.

The United States is a maritime nation with 95,000 miles of shoreline and 361 commercial ports connecting 25,000 miles of navigable channels facilitating the flow of \$5.4 trillion dollars of maritime economic commerce. More than 90% of overseas trade cargo enters or leaves the United States by ship. As a vital instrument of national power within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Coast Guard is one of the six military services, a federal law enforcement agency, and member of the Intelligence Community. We control, secure, and defend the U.S. border and maritime approaches from maritime threats; ensure the safe and secure flow of commerce; respond to natural disasters; and save lives. I am pleased to share with you how we leverage our unique authorities, capabilities, and relationships with international, federal, state, local, and tribal partners, and how we operationalize a layered approach to securing our maritime border and protecting our communities from Transnational Criminal Organizations and other maritime threats.

Transnational Criminal Organizations pose a significant threat to our nation's maritime border security, as they operate across national boundaries, smuggling illicit drugs like cocaine, fentanyl, heroin, and methamphetamine into the United States, bringing violence, death, destruction, and crime into our communities. These commodities provide lucrative revenue streams that fund terrorism and other nefarious activities such as the trafficking of people, weapons, and illicit goods, destabilizing the region and promoting illegal migration – we must continue to take action against these organizations. No single agency can dismantle this threat alone.

U.S. Coast Guard Authorities, Responsibilities, & Capabilities

The Coast Guard is the lead federal agency for maritime law enforcement, including drug interdiction on the high seas; we share the lead for drug interdiction in U.S. territorial seas with the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). The Coast Guard partners with the Department of Defense through Joint Interagency Task Force - South for detection and monitoring of illicit drugs bound for the United States. Coast Guard drug interdictions historically focused on cocaine and marijuana, and serve the whole-of-government effort to combat Transnational Criminal Organizations. Cocaine interdictions at sea cut off a critical source of funding for the same Transnational Criminal Organizations that produce and smuggle fentanyl, and in turn impair their efforts to produce and smuggle fentanyl into the United States. Furthermore, our Coast Guard Intelligence personnel work closely with our Intelligence Community partners to combat Transnational Criminal Organizations that threaten the U.S.

Coast Guard forces deploy to the two major drug transit corridors in the Western Hemisphere, the Eastern Pacific and Caribbean, to deter, detect, and interdict maritime drug trafficking events. Coast Guard deployments are complementary to U.S. Navy, Canadian, British, and Dutch naval deployments with embarked Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachments, capitalizing on the Coast Guard's authorities and expertise to interdict narcotics before they approach our borders.

These surface assets are supported by Coast Guard, CBP Air and Marine Operations, U.S. Navy, and Dutch fixed-wing aircraft, and are of critical importance to the detection and monitoring of these Transnational Criminal Organizations. This has proven to be a successful approach and asset composition.

In addition to our at-sea assets and Law Enforcement Detachments, the Coast Guard maintains a physical presence in 30 countries around the world to serve in various capacities to include security cooperation officers, maritime advisors, attachés, liaisons, interdiction and prosecution team support, or technical experts. Through these integrated touchpoints, we work with our partners to identify challenges to overcome and opportunities to increase their capabilities to combat Transnational Criminal Organizations inside their own borders and maritime jurisdictional zones. The Coast Guard maintains more than 40 bilateral maritime law enforcement agreements that enable operations on partner nation flagged vessels suspected of illicit trafficking on the high seas and in waters subject to their jurisdiction. These types of international activities enable partner nations to increase the expertise of their workforce, enhance their maritime capabilities, and empower regional countries to lead coordinated efforts to combat Transnational Criminal Organizations at the source.

Along the U.S. coast, the Service's sectors, boat stations, air stations, and patrol boat fleet provides an integrated law enforcement capability that protects our shores from invasion. These assets and skilled personnel work closely with interagency partners to identify and interdict illegal smuggling activities that seek to traffic drugs and aliens across the border.

Approximately 80% of drug seizures each year occur in the maritime domain in operations executed by the Coast Guard and its interagency and international partners. Year-over-year, seizures by Coast Guard personnel account for roughly 50% of all drug seizures by U.S. law enforcement conducted in the transit and arrival zones. In FY 2024, the Coast Guard removed over 106 metric tons of cocaine, bringing our six-year total to 873.5 metric tons removed. To date in FY 2025, the Coast Guard has removed 135 metric tons of cocaine from the maritime domain, including a February offload of over 16.9 metric tons of cocaine worth over \$275 million that will never hit the streets and poison the American people. Our layered approach to combat Transnational Criminal Organizations as far away from U.S. shores as practical is successful only through security cooperation and integrated deployments and engagements.

Southeast Border & Maritime Approaches

The southeast maritime approaches to the United States experience significantly higher levels of irregular maritime migration than other maritime vectors and present the greatest risk of a mass migration event. Primary nationalities encountered in this region are Cubans, Haitians, and Dominicans. Cuban and Haitian aliens primarily use transit routes into Florida directly or via the Bahamas. Dominican and some Haitian aliens tend to transit routes across the Mona Passage to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Common conveyances used in this region range from fishing vessels, coastal freighters, sail freighters, go-fast type vessels, or rudimentary vessels called "rusticas." With the leadership of the DHS Secretary, the Coast Guard maintains an increased and active presence in these regularly transited vectors to quickly respond to reports of suspicious vessels by international, federal, state, and local partners, and deter departures from countries of origin.

Southwest Border & Maritime Approaches

The southwest maritime border vector continues to record above average illegal maritime migration events, but not to the same historical magnitude as in the southeastern maritime approaches. However, human smugglers rely primarily on “panga”-style personal watercraft and makeshift vessels with a capacity of approximately 30 aliens to continuously attempt illegal entries. Although aliens with a variety of nationalities are interdicted in this vector, the vast majority are Mexican. The Coast Guard relies heavily on CBP, our partners for processing.

The Gulf of America

In the Gulf of America, illegal maritime migration events are organized and facilitated by human smuggling networks. In response to the national emergency on the border, the Coast Guard surged assets to the Rio Grande and is leveraging the capabilities of our deployable specialized forces to assist the United States Border Patrol in detecting and deterring aliens attempting to illegally cross the river. In FY 2025, the Coast Guard has interdicted or deterred over 50 illegal aliens in the region. In these cases, the Coast Guard works with regional interagency partners to transfer interdicted aliens ashore to CBP.

Due to a perceived lack of legal consequences, illegal fishing activity by Mexican small craft fishing boats (“lanchas”) in our Exclusive Economic Zone has continued to increase over the last 25 years, with the recidivism rate of many offenders exceeding 90%. One recently apprehended offender was previously caught by the Coast Guard more than 40 times. The Coast Guard has worked diligently with the interagency over the last several months to address this issue by enabling criminal prosecution of lancha crews. In one of the first cases pursued with this new approach, on May 13, 2025, a grand jury in Brownsville, Texas indicted four suspects for illegally harvesting red snapper in U.S. waters.

Northern Border

The northern border is expansive and diverse, with numerous islands and waterways. The short distances between United States and Canadian territorial seas create unique opportunities for nefarious actors to exploit vulnerable maritime areas with a relatively small law enforcement presence. Maritime security threats along the northern border include both illegal maritime migration and drug trafficking.

To combat these threats and secure our northern border, the Coast Guard and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police have developed a program to train and designate law enforcement officers to co-crew boats and aircraft to enforce Canadian and United States federal laws on either side of the shared border. These operations provide the ability to share encrypted Automatic Identification System data to vastly improve cross-border domain awareness and provide a common tactical picture. Coast Guard and Royal Canadian Mounted Police teams conducted 123 cross-border operations in Fiscal Year 2024, resulting in over 500 boardings, fifteen violations, and actively deterred illicit activity. This program exemplifies the collaborative efforts between the Coast Guard, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, CBP, and other state and local law enforcement working in concert to prevent Transnational Criminal Organizations from exploiting our northern border and endangering the American people.

Combatting Fentanyl

Combatting Fentanyl and its illegal precursors is one of the Administration's top priorities and the Coast Guard has taken significant action. Fentanyl has been the leading cause of U.S. drug-related deaths since 2016, accounting for approximately 70% of U.S. drug overdose deaths in 2023. Mexican Transnational Criminal Organizations are the primary source of synthetic opioid flow into the U.S., predominantly across our southwest border. While bulk fentanyl has not been encountered in the maritime domain, the Coast Guard is leveraging our broad authorities, capabilities, and policies to seek out and interdict both fentanyl and illegal precursor chemicals. On January 31, 2025, the Acting Commandant directed immediate action to bolster operations to combat illegal fentanyl and the Service is seeking new ways to leverage our broad authorities and partnerships with other agencies.

Conclusion

The Coast Guard provides the nation a tremendous return on investment. We control, secure, and defend the borders and maritime approaches in direct support of President Trump's Executive Orders. In order to conduct these vital missions, we must continue to invest in our workforce, re-capitalize aging assets and infrastructure, and integrate new technologies to position the Service to dismantle the Transnational Criminal Organizations that threaten our citizens and interdict aliens attempting to illegally enter our country. Thank you for your continued support of the Coast Guard and our work to ensure the safety and security of the American people.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.