



Highlights of [GAO-06-200](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

One of the U.S. National Drug Control Strategy's priorities is to disrupt the illicit drug market. To this end, the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security provide ships and aircraft to disrupt the flow of illicit drugs, primarily cocaine, shipped from South America through the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean—an area known as the transit zone. The Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) oversees the U.S. anti-drug strategy. The Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South) directs most transit zone operations. We examined U.S. efforts to interdict maritime movements of cocaine. We analyzed the (1) changes in cocaine seizures and disruptions since calendar year 2000, (2) trends in interdiction assets provided since fiscal year 2000, (3) challenges to maintaining transit zone interdiction operations, and (4) performance measures the agencies use to assess their progress.

What GAO Recommends

We recommend that Defense and Homeland Security (1) plan for likely declines in interdiction assets and (2) develop measures with ONDCP to better assess interdiction operations. We also recommend that ONDCP address prior recommendations to improve drug data. The agencies generally agreed, but did not detail when and how they will address these recommendations.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-200.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4268 or FordJj@gao.gov.

DRUG CONTROL

Agencies Need to Plan for Likely Declines in Drug Interdiction Assets, and Develop Better Performance Measures for Transit Zone Operations

What GAO Found

Cocaine seizures and disruptions in the transit zone have increased about 68 percent since calendar year 2000—from 117 metric tons in 2000 to 196 metric tons in 2004. About two-thirds of the disruptions were in the western Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean where the United States has most of its interdiction assets. JIATF-South and other cognizant officials attribute the increase to improved interagency cooperation and intelligence, the introduction of armed helicopters to stop go-fast boats, and increased cooperation from nations in the region.

Since fiscal year 2000, the availability of assets—ships and aircraft—to disrupt drug trafficking in the transit zone have varied. On-station ship days peaked in fiscal year 2001 and flight hours peaked in 2002, but both have generally declined since then, primarily because the Department of Defense has provided fewer assets. Declines in Defense assets have been largely offset by the Coast Guard, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and certain allied nations. Nevertheless, in recent years, JIATF-South has detected less than one-third of the “known and actionable” maritime illicit drug movements in the western Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean. Yet, once detected, over 80 percent of the drug movements were disrupted.

Various factors pose challenges to maintaining the current level of transit zone interdiction operations. The reduced availability of the U.S. Navy's P-3 maritime patrol aircraft due to structural problems will degrade the U.S. capability to detect suspect maritime movements, readiness rates of older Coast Guard ships have declined since fiscal year 2000, and the surface radar system on the Coast Guard's long-range surveillance aircraft is often inoperable. Coast Guard and CBP officials also noted that they may not be able to sustain their level of assets in light of budget constraints and other homeland security priorities that may arise. These officials expressed concern that the long-term implications of likely declines in transit zone assets have not been addressed.

The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 requires agencies to develop performance measures to assess progress in achieving their goals. The Coast Guard's measures relate to reducing cocaine flow through the transit zone, CBP's planned measures are not specific to the transit zone, and Defense's planned measures focus on the number of disruptions of cocaine movements. But data that would help in assessing transit zone interdiction operations are problematic. For instance, in its assessment for 2004, ONDCP reported that between 325 metric tons and 675 metric tons of cocaine may be moving towards the United States. Such a wide range is not useful for assessing transit zone interdiction operations. In addition, data on U.S. drug usage are difficult to obtain and often cannot be generalized to the United States. In a 2001 report for ONDCP, the National Research Council made similar observations and recommended ways to improve the collection and analysis of illicit drug data, but ONDCP has not fully addressed them.