

Why GAO Did This Study

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), an estimated 1.3 million violent crimes occurred nationwide in 2009. The Department of Justice (DOJ) law enforcement components—the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; Drug Enforcement Administration; FBI, and U.S. Marshals Service—have overlapping jurisdiction over violent crime investigations, specifically when they involve illegal drugs, gang violence, firearms, explosives, arson, and fugitive apprehension. As requested, GAO assessed the extent to which selected agents are clear on their agencies’ roles and responsibilities, and how components determine and coordinate roles and responsibilities to avoid unnecessary use of resources. GAO reviewed documents such as department directives and interviewed DOJ component officials in headquarters and nine cities, which were selected based on population and the presence of all DOJ components. GAO also surveyed a randomly selected, nongeneralizable sample of 315 field agents. The results provide valuable information about the range of perspectives of surveyed agents.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOJ assess options to better identify and diagnose disagreements in the field and take action to limit the negative impacts from disagreements over jurisdictional overlap for some criminal investigations. DOJ agreed with GAO’s recommendation.

View [GAO-11-314](#) or key components. For more information, contact Eileen Larence at (202) 512-6510 or larencee@gao.gov.

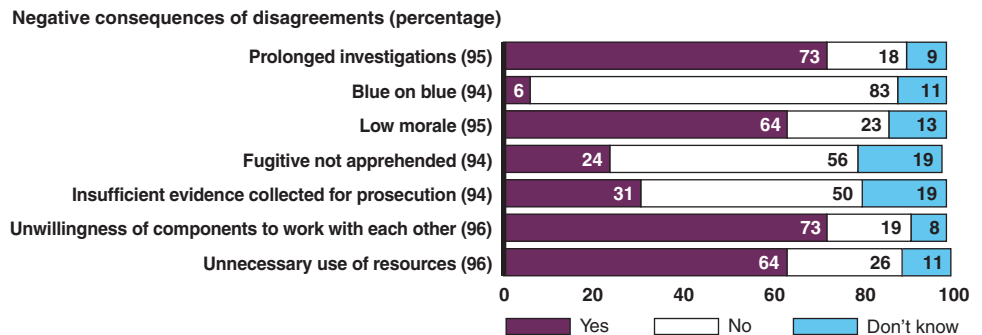
LAW ENFORCEMENT COORDINATION

DOJ Could Improve Its Process for Identifying Disagreements among Agents

What GAO Found

The majority of agents who responded to GAO’s survey reported that they are very clear about their components’ roles and responsibilities in the six investigative areas where they share jurisdiction—drugs, firearms, fugitives, gangs, arson, and explosives—and that mechanisms DOJ has in place to coordinate and clarify roles and responsibilities, such as memorandums of understanding, are somewhat effective. Agents who responded to GAO’s survey most frequently reported using interpersonal outreach and communication to clarify roles and responsibilities, such as relying on task force experience and conferring with agents with other components when jurisdictions overlapped on particular investigations. Though the majority of agents reported being clear on their agency’s roles and responsibilities, over one-third of survey respondents reported experiencing disagreements over the past 5 years with another DOJ component when determining roles and responsibilities during an investigation. Of the agents who reported disagreements, 78 percent reported that these disagreements negatively affected the investigation to some degree, for example, by prolonging investigations, calling for unnecessary use of resources, and causing low morale. Although the DOJ components have mechanisms in place to monitor how well components are coordinating, the scope of these mechanisms limits DOJ’s ability to identify some problems. DOJ components conduct inspections of field offices every 3 to 6 years, which cover areas such as working relationships, operational programs, leadership, and management. However, officials from three of four component inspection divisions GAO interviewed said that they rely on interviews with senior management, such as the highest official in the field office, to gauge coordination and the working relationships among the DOJ law enforcement components, and do not solicit input from agents. Though, considering that field office managers are not likely aware of all disagreements that occur among agents and survey respondents reported that disagreements and poor working relationships negatively affected investigations and morale, soliciting input from field agents may put DOJ in a better position to determine why disagreements are occurring and how to address them so as to limit their impact on agents and investigations.

Percentages of Agents Who Reported on Negative Consequences of Disagreements



Source: GAO analysis of survey responses.

Notes: The numbers in parentheses are the numbers of agents who answered about each negative consequence. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding. Blue on blue incidents are those in which the failure to deconflict events resulted in agents being misidentified as criminals.