

GAO

United States General Accounting Office

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee on
Information, Justice, and Agriculture,
Committee on Government Operations
House of Representatives



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DRUG SMUGGLING

Large Amounts of Illegal Drugs Not Seized by Federal Authorities





United States
General Accounting Office
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General Government Division

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The Honorable Glenn English
Chairman, Subcommittee on Government
Information, Justice, and Agriculture
Committee on Government Operations
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

This report responds to your request that we review the capabilities of the federal government to interdict illegal drug smuggling. We testified before your Subcommittee on the preliminary results of our review on September 9, 1986. As agreed with your office, our review focused on federal air and marine interdiction programs, which are primarily aimed at preventing drug smuggling across the southern border of the United States.

As arranged with your office, unless you publicly release its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution until 30 days after the date of this report. At that time, we will send copies to the Chairmen of the House Committee on Ways and Means and the Senate Committee on Finance, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of Transportation, the Attorney General, the Secretary of Defense, and other interested parties.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "W. J. Anderson".

William J. Anderson
Assistant Comptroller General

Executive Summary

Purpose

Customs estimated that 136 tons of cocaine, 11,000 tons of marijuana, 7 tons of heroin, and 165 tons of hashish were smuggled into the United States in 1986. In fiscal year 1986 the federal government spent \$822 million on drug interdiction programs— efforts to seize illegal drugs while they are being smuggled and thereby reduce the supply of illegal drugs within the United States.

At the request of the Chairman, Subcommittee on Government Information, Justice, and Agriculture, House Committee on Government Operations, GAO reviewed the air and marine drug interdiction programs of the Customs Service and the marine drug interdiction efforts of the Coast Guard. These programs account for most federal spending on drug interdiction.

Background

The Customs Service and the Coast Guard are the principal federal interdiction agencies. At the time of our review, Customs was the lead federal agency for air interdiction efforts aimed at controlling smuggling by private aircraft. However, Customs and the Coast Guard were assigned joint responsibilities for air interdiction in May 1987. The Coast Guard shares responsibilities with Customs for interdicting marine smugglers. The Department of Defense provides support for air and marine interdiction efforts. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 authorized substantial increases in federal funding for drug interdiction. (See pp. 8 and 13.)

According to the National Drug Policy Board, most cocaine and marijuana are smuggled across the southern coastal and land borders of the United States from Florida to California. Air and marine interdiction efforts are primarily aimed at preventing drug smuggling across the southern border and mainly result in cocaine and marijuana seizures. (See pp. 14 to 17.)

Results in Brief

Relatively small proportions of the cocaine, marijuana, and other illegal drugs smuggled into the United States are seized by drug interdiction agencies. GAO could not determine whether drug interdiction efforts have prevented greater influxes of illicit drugs by increasing the smugglers' risks of apprehension. However, cocaine, marijuana, and other illegal drugs remain widely available.

There are several reasons for the federal government's inability to stop illegal drug smuggling. The amounts of equipment and numbers of staff

devoted to interdiction leave large gaps in the interdiction system's coverage of the lengthy southern coastal and land borders of the United States. As a result, the system is unable to detect or respond to all illegal border crossings 24 hours a day. Smugglers use methods and tactics that exploit gaps in the interdiction system's coverage of the border and other weaknesses such as inadequate security over interdiction plans and operations. Interdiction agencies also are hindered by the lack of timely and accurate tactical intelligence—information about the identity, type, location, timing, and method of potential smuggling operations. Finally, the demand for illegal drugs makes smuggling highly profitable, which would encourage smugglers to continue their activities.

The increased resources for drug interdiction authorized by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 should fill some gaps in the present interdiction system with more equipment and additional staff. However, smugglers have responded successfully to changes in the interdiction system in the past and may continue to do so.

GAO's Analysis

Drug Seizures Are Small Compared to Total Drug Imports

Interdiction agencies have seized substantial amounts of illegal drugs in recent years, but the seizures are small compared to the amounts successfully smuggled into the United States. Customs estimates that 70 percent of the cocaine seizures and 79 percent of the marijuana seizures occurred in the southeastern United States. (See pp. 38 to 40.)

Air Smuggling

Air interdiction efforts focus on drug smuggling across the southern border via private aircraft, which typically land illegally or airdrop drugs for pickup by marine and land vehicles. Air interdiction efforts primarily have resulted in cocaine and marijuana seizures, because these are the main drugs currently smuggled into the United States by private aircraft. (See pp. 14 and 16.)

There are weaknesses in the air interdiction system. Interdiction personnel and equipment do not operate around the clock. The southern border lacks 24-hour-a-day radar coverage with the ability to detect smuggling flights at low elevations. The coverage and detection capabilities of radar systems are especially limited along the southern coastal and land

borders outside south Florida. Inadequate security measures allow smugglers to obtain sensitive information about interdiction plans and operations. Smugglers have adopted methods and tactics that take advantage of these weaknesses. (See pp. 19 to 26.)

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 provided additional resources for air smuggling detection, which will increase the coverage and detection capabilities of radar systems along the southern border. (See p. 21)

Marine Smuggling

The Coast Guard's principal interdiction effort is against large ships transporting marijuana through the Caribbean. Coast Guard vessels routinely patrol the Caribbean and sea passages between the Caribbean islands in an effort to detect and apprehend freighters carrying marijuana before they can transfer their loads to small boats near the U.S. coastline. The Coast Guard also periodically conducts special marine interdiction operations using increased numbers of Coast Guard vessels and Navy vessels with Coast Guard personnel on board to patrol the Caribbean. (See pp. 26 to 29.)

The Coast Guard does not have sufficient personnel or vessels to detect and interdict all of the marine smugglers traveling through the Caribbean, and some marine smugglers are able to evade apprehension. (See pp. 27 to 29.)

Both the Coast Guard and Customs attempt to interdict drugs brought into coastal areas by small boats. Resources devoted to coastal interdiction efforts are limited compared with the extensive coastal area in which smugglers can operate and the volume of coastal smuggling traffic. It is therefore difficult for Customs and the Coast Guard to control drug smuggling in coastal waters. Smuggling methods, such as the use of secret compartments to conceal cocaine, increase the difficulty of apprehending coastal smugglers. (See pp. 29 to 32.)

Lack of Tactical Intelligence Is a Problem

Interdiction officials said the lack of timely and accurate tactical intelligence (information about the identity, type, locations, timing, and method of potential drug smuggling operations) adversely affects their ability to identify and apprehend smugglers. The federal government's stated strategy for drug law enforcement emphasizes the need to develop new sources and methods of intelligence collection. (See pp. 34 and 35.)

Recommendations

GAO is making no recommendations in this report.

Agency Comments

GAO did not obtain official agency comments on this report.

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Abbreviations

BLOC	Blue Lightning Operations Center
DEA	Drug Enforcement Administration
DOD	Department of Defense
FAA	Federal Aviation Administration
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GAO	General Accounting Office
NIDA	National Institute on Drug Abuse
NNBIS	National Narcotics Border Interdiction System

Introduction

Interdiction is one of several law enforcement strategies the federal government uses to reduce the supply of illegal drugs in the United States. Most of the cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and hashish illegally consumed in this country is produced in other countries and smuggled into the United States. The objective of interdiction is to reduce the availability of illegally imported drugs by seizing drug smuggling shipments in transit or upon arrival before they penetrate U.S. borders.

The Department of the Treasury's U.S. Customs Service and the Department of Transportation's U.S. Coast Guard are the principal interdiction agencies. At the time of our review, Customs was the lead federal agency for drug interdiction efforts aimed at smuggling by private aircraft (air interdiction). However, on May 22, 1987, Customs and the Coast Guard were assigned joint responsibility for air interdiction efforts. Customs has primary responsibility for interdicting drug smugglers through ports of entry, where Customs inspectors are stationed to inspect cargo and passengers entering the United States, and across the land border between ports of entry. However, the Immigration and Naturalization Service's U.S. Border Patrol has recently been granted increased interdiction authority along the Mexican border as part of a new drug enforcement initiative known as Operation Alliance.¹ The Coast Guard shares marine interdiction responsibilities with Customs in coastal waters (waters within 12 miles of the U.S. coastline) and is the primary interdiction agency on the high seas. In support of air and marine interdiction efforts, the Department of Defense (DOD) provides equipment and conducts operations aimed at detecting drug smugglers. Air and marine interdiction efforts primarily result in cocaine and marijuana seizures because these are the main drugs currently smuggled into the United States by private aircraft and marine vessels. However, smugglers could and may attempt to smuggle other drugs, such as heroin and hashish, by air and sea in the future.

In fiscal year 1986 the federal government spent about \$627 million on air and marine interdiction efforts, including military equipment and operations in support of Customs and the Coast Guard, or about 76 percent of the total \$822 million spent on all drug interdiction efforts. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 authorized substantial increases in federal funding for drug interdiction. The federal government is expected to

¹Operation Alliance is a multi-agency effort begun in August 1986 to improve interdiction capabilities along the southwest border of the United States. (See p. 36 for details.)

spend about \$1,158 million on air and marine interdiction efforts in fiscal year 1987, or about 85 percent of total projected spending on drug interdiction.

Objective, Scope, and Methodology

In a letter dated August 21, 1985, the Chairman, Subcommittee on Government Information, Justice, and Agriculture, House Committee on Government Operations, asked us to examine and assess federal capabilities and activities relating to drug interdiction. On September 9, 1986, we testified before the Subcommittee on the preliminary results of our work.

As agreed with the Chairman's office, the scope of our review was limited to the air and marine interdiction programs of the Customs Service and the marine interdiction efforts of the Coast Guard, which are primarily aimed at preventing drug smuggling across the southern coastal and land borders of the United States. Our objective was to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the air and marine interdiction system. As agreed with the Subcommittee, we did not examine Customs' cargo inspection activities as part of this review. However, information on Customs' efforts to detect drugs in commercial cargo is included in our recent report on Customs' Cargo inspection process.² We also did not review Customs' procedures for inspecting international air passengers for drugs or the interdiction operations of Customs and the Immigration and Naturalization Service between ports of entry on the U.S. land border with Mexico.

To accomplish our objective, we interviewed Customs and Coast Guard headquarters and field officials and examined records at Customs and Coast Guard headquarters and field offices. We also interviewed officials and reviewed records of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA); the DOD, including the Air Force, Army, and Navy; the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System (NNBIS); and the National Drug Policy Board. To observe air and marine interdiction operations at the working level, we visited field locations where Customs, Coast Guard, and the military services conducted interdiction-related activities. A list of the field locations we visited is presented in table 1.1.

²Cargo Imports: Customs Needs to Better Assure Compliance With Trade Laws and Regulations (GAO/GGD-86-136, September 1986).

**Table 1.1: List of Field Locations Visited,
February to July 1986**

Customs Air Facilities

Jacksonville, Florida
Miami, Florida
New Orleans, Louisiana
San Antonio, Texas
Houston, Texas
San Diego, California
Tucson, Arizona
El Paso, Texas

Customs Marine Facilities

Jacksonville, Florida
Miami, Florida
Key West, Florida
Houma, Louisiana
Galveston, Texas
San Diego, California

U.S. Coast Guard Facilities

Seventh District Office,
Miami, Florida
Eighth District Office,
New Orleans, Louisiana
Eleventh District Office,
Long Beach, California

National Narcotics Border Interdiction Centers

Miami, Florida
Long Beach, California
New Orleans, Louisiana
El Paso, Texas

Drug Enforcement Administration Facility

El Paso Intelligence Center
El Paso, Texas

Department of Defense Facilities

Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma
Norfolk Naval Air Station, Virginia
Miramar Naval Air Station, California

Because interdiction agencies feel that prior intelligence on specific drug shipments greatly aids their operations, we discussed the availability and use of such intelligence with the cognizant Customs, Coast Guard, and DEA officials. However, we did not review the actual collection, analysis, or dissemination of this intelligence by responsible federal agencies. In the course of our work, it was necessary to make extensive use of statistical data prepared by the agencies that we reviewed. We did not verify this data in most instances.

Our work was conducted from September 1985 to May 1987 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Field visits to interdiction units were conducted from October 1985 to July 1986. As requested by the Chairman, we did not obtain official agency comments on this report.

Federal Drug Abuse Control Strategy and the Drug Smuggling Threat

The Drug Abuse Problem

Drug abuse affects nearly every segment of our society, and the problem is growing. Cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and hashish, four widely abused illegal drugs, are produced primarily in foreign countries and smuggled into the United States. Table 2.1 shows the estimated number of Americans who have used these drugs.

Table 2.1: Estimates of Drug Abuse in the U.S. in 1985

(in millions of persons)

	Ever used	(Percent of population) ^a	Current user ^b	(Percent of population) ^a
Marijuana/ Hashish	61.94	(33%)	18.19	(10%)
Cocaine	22.24	(12%)	5.75	(3%)
Heroin	1.93	(1%)	^c	^c

^aThe survey on which this table is based covers only persons 12 years of age and older living in households in the contiguous United States. It excludes such groups as prison and jail inmates, military personnel living in installations, and the homeless

^b“Current user” is defined as someone who used a drug within the 30 days prior to the survey.

^cThe survey did not estimate the number of current users of heroin. However, the National Institute on Drug Abuse has estimated that there were about 490,000 heroin users in the United States from 1981 to 1984 and that the number increased slightly in 1985

Source: 1985 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, National Institute on Drug Abuse, issued October 1986.

As shown in table 2.2, thousands of persons have suffered adverse health effects requiring hospital emergency treatment or have died as a result of using illegal drugs.

Table 2.2: Drug-Related Emergency Room Visits and Deaths Reported by a Sample of Emergency Rooms and Medical Examiners, FY 1986^a

	Emergency room visits	Deaths
Cocaine	15,116	812
Heroin	11,423	1,522
Marijuana	4,064	15 ^b

^aVisits and deaths reported by a small, nonrandom sample of emergency rooms and medical examiner facilities in metropolitan areas throughout the continental United States. Data does not include all emergency room visits and deaths

^bIn combination with other drugs

Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse, Drug Abuse Warning Network

Cocaine has become a serious drug abuse threat in the United States because of its wide availability and use as well as the serious health hazards it poses. The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) estimates that the number of current cocaine users increased 38 percent from 1982 to 1985, from 4.2 million to 5.8 million. Statistics from NIDA’s Drug Abuse Warning Network show that deaths and emergency room visits

that were at least partially attributable to cocaine use have tripled since 1981. The recent introduction into the drug market of "crack," a form of cocaine that can be smoked, has increased the cocaine problem. Inhaling crack intensifies the effects of cocaine and is extremely addictive and hazardous. Crack is a growing problem in some major cities.

According to the 1985 NIDA survey, there were an estimated 18.2 million current users of marijuana and hashish in the United States. This was down from NIDA's estimate of 20 million users in 1982.

Heroin use has stabilized in recent years at about 500,000 regular users. Heroin-related injuries have risen, primarily because heroin is being used in combination with other drugs and because traffickers began importing a highly potent, inexpensive form of heroin known as "black tar" from Mexico in 1984.

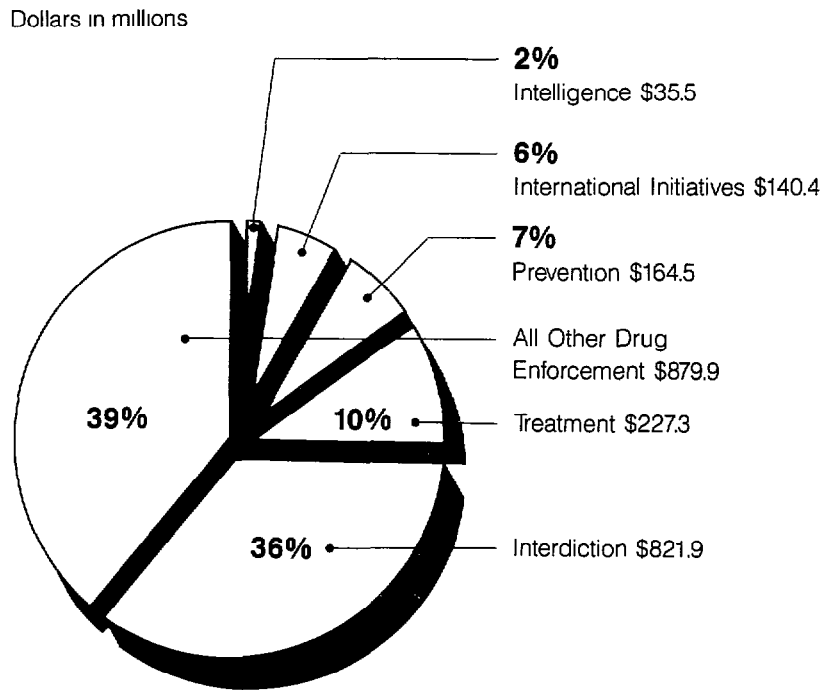
Federal Drug Abuse Control Strategy

To combat the problem of drug abuse, the federal government employs a dual strategy of simultaneously reducing the supply of illicit drugs and the demand for these drugs. The federal supply reduction strategy is described in the National and International Drug Law Enforcement Strategy, issued in January 1987 by the National Drug Enforcement Policy Board.¹ Major components of the strategy include efforts to: (1) interdict and deter shipments of illicit drugs from foreign countries before they penetrate U.S. borders and enter the domestic distribution network (drug interdiction); (2) investigate, prosecute, and immobilize drug trafficking organizations; (3) control the diversion of legitimately produced drugs into the illicit drug market; (4) improve drug law enforcement intelligence; and (5) encourage foreign governments to reduce drug production within their countries, by providing assistance in carrying out eradication and interdiction operations and economic aid to counter the economic advantages of drug production (international initiatives). The Policy Board report identifies two major components of the federal demand reduction strategy: (1) drug abuse prevention and (2) drug abuse treatment.

Drug interdiction, the subject of this report, is one of the most expensive elements of the federal anti-drug strategy, as indicated in figure 2.1.

¹The National Drug Enforcement Policy Board was established in 1984 with responsibility for coordinating federal drug enforcement policy and operations. By an Executive Order dated March 26, 1987, the Board was assigned additional duties and responsibilities and renamed the National Drug Policy Board. (See p. 37 for details.)

Figure 2.1: Fiscal Year 1986
Expenditures to Control Drug Abuse—
Total \$2,269.5 Million



The \$821.9 million spent on interdiction programs in fiscal year 1986 represented 36 percent of the total \$2,269.5 million in federal resources devoted to anti-drug efforts. The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 authorized substantial increases in spending for drug control programs, and these increases were appropriated for fiscal year 1987 by the Omnibus Drug Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1987. As a result, the federal government expects to spend nearly \$4 billion on drug control programs in fiscal year 1987, including \$1.37 billion on drug interdiction. (See table 2.3.)

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 Federal Drug Abuse Control Strategy and the
 Drug Smuggling Threat

Table 2.3: Federal Budget Authority for Drug Abuse Control by Strategic Category

Dollars in millions				
	FY 1986 (% of total)		FY 1987 (% of total)	
Interdiction	821.9	(36%)	1,369.3	(35%)
Intelligence	35.5	(2%)	53.5	(1%)
All other drug law enforcement ^a	879.9	(39%)	1,343.2	(34%)
International initiatives	140.4	(6%)	205.2	(5%)
Prevention	164.5	(7%)	505.4	(13%)
Treatment	227.3	(10%)	454.5	(12%)
Totals	\$2,269.5	(100%)	\$3,931.1	(100%)

Source: National and International Drug Law Enforcement Strategy, National Drug Enforcement Policy Board, January 1987.

^aIncludes investigation, prosecution, corrections, regulatory and compliance, assistance to state and local agencies, and law enforcement-related research.

The Drug Smuggling Threat²

Illicit drugs are produced in countries throughout the world and are exported to the United States and other markets through a complex, clandestine distribution chain. In general, cocaine and marijuana are produced in countries south of the United States (cocaine in South America; and marijuana in South and Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean) and are smuggled across the southern tier of the United States from Florida to California. Most heroin is produced in Southeast and Southwest Asia and enters the United States across the Atlantic and Pacific coast borders. However, an increasing amount of heroin is produced in Mexico and is smuggled across the southwest border. Hashish is produced primarily in the Middle East and Southwest Asia and is smuggled through South Asian ports to the northeast coast of the United States. Customs estimates of the amounts of drugs entering the various geographic regions of the United States are presented in table 2.4.

²This discussion of the drug smuggling threat is based on information contained in the National and International Drug Law Enforcement Strategy, National Drug Enforcement Policy Board, January 1987, as well as information supplied by Customs and Coast Guard intelligence units.

Table 2.4: Amounts of Drugs Estimated to Have Entered the United States in 1986

In Pounds		
Region	Drug	Amount
Northeast	Marijuana	902,000
	Hashish	148,500
	Cocaine	825
	Heroin	260
New York	Marijuana	528,000
	Hashish	99,000
	Cocaine	11,000
	Heroin	5,850
North Central	Marijuana	110,000
	Hashish	6,600
	Cocaine	825
	Heroin	650
Pacific	Marijuana	2,882,000
	Hashish	33,000
	Cocaine	20,625
	Heroin	4,290
Southwest	Marijuana	5,522,000
	Hashish	6,600
	Cocaine	29,700
	Heroin	1,690
South Central	Marijuana	2,046,000
	Hashish	3,300
	Cocaine	11,275
	Heroin	130
Southeast	Marijuana	10,010,000
	Hashish	33,000
	Cocaine	200,750
	Heroin	130

Source: U.S. Customs Service, Office of Intelligence

Smugglers have responded flexibly to U.S. interdiction efforts using indirect routes and varying their methods of operation. They choose points of entry where they expect to encounter the least resistance from law enforcement organizations. For example, most cocaine is smuggled from Colombia to the southeastern border of the United States, often by way of the Bahamas. However, according to Customs intelligence reports, traffickers are increasingly transporting cocaine loads through Mexico for entry into the United States along the southwest border. Cocaine smugglers can choose from a variety of transportation modes because valuable quantities of cocaine can be shipped in relatively small loads that are easily concealed.³ Based on the Customs Service's 1986 estimates, commercial and private aircraft and private marine vessels all were used extensively to smuggle cocaine into this country. (See table 2.5.)

³According to DEA, a kilogram (2.2 lbs.) of cocaine has a wholesale value of \$20,000 to \$40,000.

Table 2.5: Estimated Amounts of Drugs Smuggled Into the United States by Transportation Mode, CY 1986

In Thousands of Pounds				
	Marijuana	Hashish	Cocaine	Heroin
Aircraft				
Private	3,540.3	1.5	52.4	.1
Commercial	150.2	36.3	61.4	6.1
Total air	3,690.5	37.8	113.8	6.2
Vessel				
Private	12,388.9	162.3	93.0	0.0
Commercial	1,984.0	122.7	50.8	2.2
Total vessel	14,372.9	285.0	143.8	2.2
Land vehicle				
Private	375.2	5.1	3.9	3.4
Commercial	1,874.6	1.9	9.9	.5
Total vehicle	2,249.8	7.0	13.8	3.9
Other Transportation modes	1,686.8	0.2	3.6	.7
All Transportation modes grand totals	22,000.0	330.0	275.0	13.0

Source: U.S. Customs Service, Office of Intelligence

About 81 percent of the marijuana available in the United States in 1985 was produced abroad, and the remaining 19 percent was grown domestically. Marijuana cultivated in Mexico makes up the largest share of the U.S. market, accounting for about 40 percent in 1985. About 38 percent of the marijuana available in this country in 1985 came from Colombia. Other countries exporting marijuana to the United States in significant quantities include Jamaica and Belize.

Marijuana from Colombia, Jamaica, and Belize is normally shipped to the United States aboard large freighters referred to as "motherships." Motherships usually carry loads of between 5 and 50 tons of marijuana (and occasionally carry smaller loads of cocaine). They typically anchor 50 to 100 miles off the U.S. coast in international waters and unload the marijuana onto smaller vessels that bring it ashore. Mexican marijuana is smuggled across the U.S. border in amounts ranging from a few pounds up to several tons depending on the mode of transportation employed. Pedestrians, automobiles, campers, and trucks have all been used by traffickers to transport marijuana across the border. Smugglers also use private aircraft to convey marijuana from Colombia and Mexico into the United States. (See table 2.5.)

Hashish, which is a concentrated form of the drug contained in marijuana plants, is mainly produced in Lebanon, Pakistan, and Afghanistan

according to the January 1987 report by the National Drug Enforcement Policy Board. Customs estimates indicate that most hashish enters the United States along the northeast coast. (See table 2.4.)

Heroin comes into the United States from three primary opium-producing areas: Southwest Asia, including Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan; Southeast Asia, including Burma, Thailand, and Laos; and Mexico. In 1985, DEA analyzed a number of seized heroin samples to determine their region of origin. The DEA analysis found that 47 percent of the analyzed heroin came from Southwest Asia, 39 percent from Mexico, and 14 percent from Southeast Asia. Southwest Asian heroin primarily enters east coast cities, especially New York City, while Southeast Asian heroin comes into the country through west coast cities. (See table 2.4.) Asian heroin arrives in the United States mainly by way of commercial air passengers and air cargo. Mexican heroin, including the potent black tar, is smuggled across the border by land vehicles, aircraft, and pedestrians.

Federal Interdiction Efforts Have Been Insufficient to Stop Illegal Drug Smuggling

Large amounts of cocaine, marijuana, and other illegal drugs are smuggled into the United States, but relatively small proportions are seized by drug interdiction agencies. There are several reasons for the federal government's inability to stop illegal drug smuggling. The amounts of equipment and numbers of staff devoted to drug interdiction efforts leave large gaps in the interdiction system's coverage of the lengthy southern coastal and land borders of the United States. As a result, the system is unable to detect or respond to all illegal border crossings 24 hours a day. Smugglers use methods and tactics that exploit gaps in the interdiction system's coverage of the border and other weaknesses in the interdiction system, such as inadequate security over interdiction plans and operations, in order to avoid detection and apprehension by interdiction agencies. Interdiction efforts also are hindered by the lack of timely and accurate "tactical" intelligence: information about the identity, type, location, timing, and method of potential drug smuggling operations that helps interdiction agencies to identify and apprehend drug smugglers. Finally, the demand for illegal drugs makes smuggling highly profitable, which would encourage smugglers to continue their activities.

Federal Drug Interdiction Strategy

The current federal drug interdiction strategy is described in a report entitled National and International Drug Law Enforcement Strategy, issued by the National Drug Enforcement Policy Board dated January 20, 1987. (The Board is now known as the National Drug Policy Board.) According to the Board:

"The primary objective of the drug interdiction strategy is to reduce the amount of illegal drugs entering the United States. Interdiction focuses on the detection, identification, and interception of shipments of illegal drugs as they move from departure points in source countries, along smuggling routes to our land, sea, and air borders. Successful interdiction programs deter potential traffickers from entering the drug trade, disrupt the flow of drugs into the United States, and force traffickers to develop more expensive methods to avoid detection and use longer, more difficult smuggling routes."

The U.S. Customs Service and the U.S. Coast Guard are the federal agencies primarily responsible for drug interdiction. The Drug Enforcement Administration and the Department of Defense also are involved in drug interdiction, mainly in support of Customs and the Coast Guard. The Immigration and Naturalization Service has recently been given increased responsibility for drug interdiction efforts, primarily along the

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southwest land border. The National Narcotics Border Interdiction System (NNBIS) and the National Drug Policy Board are responsible for coordinating federal interdiction programs. The Policy Board is also responsible for formulating the federal government's interdiction policy and strategy.

The federal government has devoted substantial funds in recent years to drug interdiction efforts, as shown in table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Federal Interdiction Funding, FY 1981 - FY 1987

Dollars in millions	
Fiscal year	Budget authority
1981	394.0
1982	502.0
1983	522.2
1984	757.2
1985	861.5
1986	821.9
1987	1,369.3

Air Smuggling¹

At the time of our work, the Customs Service was primarily responsible for detecting, intercepting, tracking, and apprehending aircraft attempting to smuggle illicit drugs into the United States. However, on May 22, 1987, the National Drug Policy Board directed Customs and the Coast Guard to be jointly responsible for air interdiction. Customs now has primary responsibility for all aspects of air interdiction along the southwest land border. Along the southeast coastal border, the Coast Guard has primary responsibility for surveillance and detection, while Customs has primary responsibility for interception, tracking, and apprehension. This discussion of air smuggling focuses on Customs air interdiction operations since Customs had primary responsibility for air interdiction during the period covered by our review.

Customs' air interdiction program is carried out by eight aviation branches and seven smaller aviation units, most of which are located along the southern border of the United States. (See figure 3.1.)

¹This discussion of air smuggling is primarily based on information obtained from Customs' Office of Aviation Operations, field visits to Customs air interdiction units, and information supplied by Customs intelligence units and NNBIS.

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Figure 3.1: Customs Aviation Branches and Units

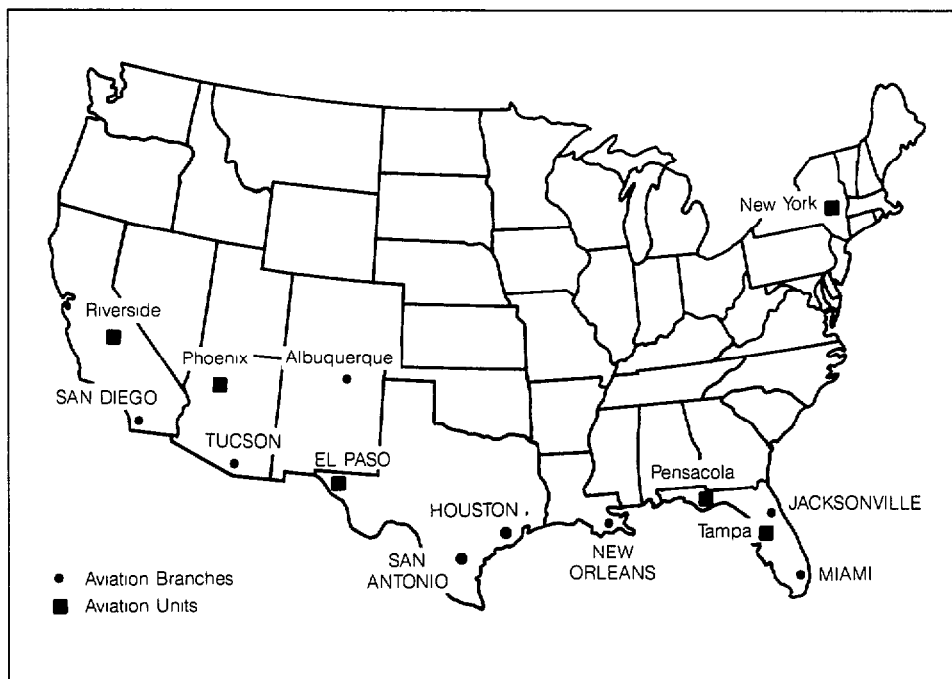


Table 3.2 shows the type and deployment of the aircraft Customs uses for detecting and capturing drug smugglers. A total of 92 aircraft were distributed among the aviation branches and units as of January 1987. Customs sometimes moves these aircraft from location to location.

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Table 3.2: Type and Deployment of Customs' Aircraft

Customs Air Branch ^a	P3A ^b	Interceptors	Trackers	Blackhawk Helicopters	Other Airplanes	Other Helicopters	Total
Miami		2	2	2	7	1	14
Jacksonville		1		1	10	2	14
New Orleans		1	2	1	4	1	9
San Antonio		1	2		4	1	8
Houston			2		4	1	7
Albuquerque			1		5	2	8
Tucson	4	1	2	2	10	2	21
San Diego			1	2	5 ^c	3	11
Total	4	6	12	8	49	13	92

^aIncludes resources of associated air units.

^bP3As are surveillance aircraft used as airborne radar platforms to detect air smugglers

^cIncludes one jet aircraft that lacks the sensor equipment needed to perform intercept missions.

Source: U.S. Customs Service, Office of Aviation Operations.

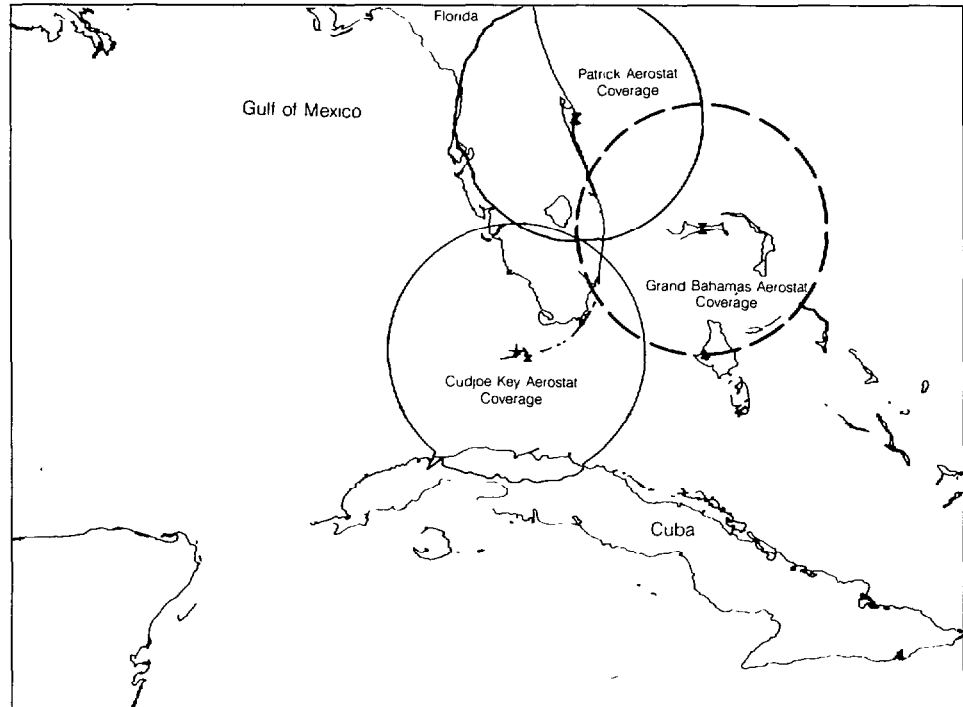
The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 authorizes the procurement of seven additional radar equipment tethered balloons (known as aerostats) most of which will be deployed along the southern border outside south Florida. The act also authorized the Navy to loan two E2C surveillance aircraft to Customs and two E2C aircraft to the Coast Guard. Customs expects to deploy the two E2Cs along the southwest border for use in detecting air smugglers. The Coast Guard plans to use its two E2Cs primarily to detect air smugglers off the southeast coast of the United States.

Adequate staff and equipment to carry out all aspects of the air interdiction process—detection, interception, tracking, and apprehension—are necessary if air interdiction efforts are to be fully successful. None of Customs' air branches has sufficient personnel and equipment to work around the clock, 7 days a week. In Miami the Customs air branch currently operates 16 hours a day, 7 days a week. Other air branches operate fewer hours per week than the Miami air branch.

In south Florida, Customs relies heavily on monitoring radar signals from equipment attached to three aerostats and from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) radar system to detect suspected air smugglers. The aerostats are located at Patrick Air Force Base, Florida; Cudjoe Key, Florida; and in the Grand Bahamas. They allow Customs to detect aircraft flying at low altitudes. Smugglers are known to fly at low

altitudes so as to avoid FAA radar. Figure 3.2 shows the radar coverage provided by the aerostats.

Figure 3.2: South Florida Aerostat Radar Coverage



Source: U S Customs Service

Outside south Florida, Customs relies heavily on four P3A surveillance aircraft to detect drug smugglers who fly at low elevations. This is necessary because the North American Air Defense System and FAA radar system, which provide coverage of large segments of the southern border outside of south Florida, have limited capabilities for detecting the small low-flying aircraft generally used by smugglers. The military services also conduct surveillance missions in support of Customs air interdiction efforts, using radar-equipped aircraft—the Air Force AWACS and the Navy E2C—which have a much greater radar capability in terms of distance and area coverage than Customs P3A aircraft.²

To the extent it is available, Customs relies on tactical intelligence (information on the identity, type, location, timing, and method of potential smuggling operations) to enhance its air interdiction efforts.

²Military support for drug interdiction efforts is discussed on pp. 32 and 33.

Customs has established investigative units co-located with its aviation branches that provide intelligence support to Customs air operations. In addition, DEA agents stationed in foreign source countries and U.S. intelligence agencies may provide information to Customs on specific smuggling operations. However, gathering such tactical intelligence is of secondary concern to DEA.³

Customs' fiscal year 1988 budget submission listed 273 positions assigned to its air interdiction program in fiscal year 1986 and estimated that 442 personnel would be assigned to the program in fiscal year 1987. A 1985 Customs air interdiction 5-year plan calls for an increase in staffing to 1,109 in fiscal year 1990. According to the plan, the increase in staffing will allow Customs to keep all aviation branches and other operating sites on a continuous alert to respond to detections of air smuggling attempts.

Funding for Customs' air interdiction programs is shown in table 3.3. The large increase in fiscal year 1987 reflects the additional funding provided by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986.

Table 3.3: Budget Authority for Customs' Air Interdiction Program FY 1982 - FY 1987

Dollars in millions	
	Budget Authority
FY 1982	21.0
FY 1983	24.8
FY 1984	65.5
FY 1985	66.6
FY 1986	87.9
FY 1987	199.1

Smugglers Have Numerous Opportunities to Penetrate the Air Interdiction System Without Detection

Along the entire southern border of the United States, there are various radar systems for detecting airborne drug smugglers. These systems include aerostat radars, Customs P3A surveillance aircraft, military surveillance aircraft, land-based military radars, and FAA radars. However, gaps in the radar coverage provide opportunities for smugglers to enter the United States without being detected. For example, smugglers may avoid the threat of detection by aerostat radars by flying when the aerostats are not operating. Because the aerostats are at fixed locations,

³Tactical intelligence is discussed on pp. 34 and 35.

smugglers are able to visually determine when the aerostats are aloft and schedule their smuggling attempts accordingly.

According to Customs records, the Customs aerostat in the Grand Bahamas operated 43 percent of the total hours in fiscal year 1986. The Air Force aerostat in Cudjoe Key operated 47 percent of the time in fiscal year 1986. The Air Force aerostat at Patrick Air Force Base operated 23 percent of the time during fiscal year 1986 but was grounded from January to July 1986. Although there is some overlap of coverage by these three aerostats, there are areas without radar coverage when one of the aerostats is not operating. Those coastal areas left without aerostat coverage are still monitored by FAA radar, but this radar is not effective in detecting small, low-flying aircraft used for drug smuggling.

Radar surveillance by aircraft, unlike aerostat radar surveillance, denies smugglers the opportunity to visually determine where and when air surveillance is in operation. However, this advantage is offset by the limited time that surveillance aircraft operate and the wide area of the southern border that they monitor. In addition, the radars on Customs' P3A surveillance aircraft cover an area extending less than 100 miles in front of the aircraft, limiting their ability to detect targets. P3As must also be out of service at times in order to receive routine maintenance. During fiscal year 1986, the four Customs' P3A aircraft were flown a total of 2,020 hours. Individual aircraft rarely were flown more than 100 hours a month and most of the time were flown less than 60 hours a month. In comparison, there are about 720 hours each month in which smugglers can attempt to enter the United States.

Military surveillance aircraft extend Customs' surveillance capability; however, military readiness and training requirements limit the number of missions these aircraft can fly in support of Customs' interdiction efforts. The National Narcotics Border Interdiction System (NNBIS) meets with military service representatives quarterly to balance Customs' requests for surveillance with what the military services are able to contribute.

Because of the limitations of the P3A radar, and because military aircraft surveillance assistance has been limited, radar coverage has been very limited along the southern coastal and land border outside south Florida. Customs officials said they expect that the seven new aerostats and two E2C aircraft to be added to Customs' equipment as a result of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 will substantially improve radar coverage along the southern border.

Limitations of Radar Detection

Radar has inherent limitations in accurately sorting out smuggling flights from other air traffic, and it is usually unable to identify the most significant target in multiple target situations.

Customs identifies suspect flights from radar sightings by using clues that distinguish suspect aircraft from legitimate air traffic. Clues include the absence of a flight plan, signals from electronic tracking devices covertly installed by Customs personnel on the aircraft, low-flying aircraft, and an aircraft flying in a circular pattern as if the pilot is searching for a drop site. However, these clues are fragile evidence and sometimes are exhibited by legitimate flights. For example, in April 1986, the Miami Aviation Branch intercepted nine flights on a heading toward south Florida, but five later proved to be legitimate flights. Of these, two were identified as suspect because of radar malfunctions and three because the pilots' flight plans were not accessible to Customs at the time radar detection occurred.

Even though radar detection provides only clues, Customs usually has no choice but to launch intercept aircraft within minutes after suspect flights are identified on radar. Unless a Customs aircraft can intercept and identify the tail numbers of an aircraft without a registered flight plan before it crosses the U.S. border, Customs cannot distinguish the aircraft as a foreign arrival after it mixes with domestic air traffic, thus losing the ability to track the aircraft to its point of landing.

A potentially serious consequence may result from launching Customs aircraft to intercept flights that appear suspect on radar but turn out to be legitimate flights. Until a suspect flight's legitimacy is confirmed, Customs, with its limited number of interceptor, tracker, and apprehension aircraft and flight crews, is left with a critically weakened ability to respond to another target that could be an actual smuggling attempt. Thus, Customs is vulnerable to smugglers luring their scarce enforcement aircraft away from drug flights by first launching a "profile-fitting" flight without drugs aboard.

Smugglers also may avoid raising suspicions on radar by following legitimate flight patterns and airdropping drug loads to accomplices in boats or on land before or after crossing the border. After the air drop is made, the smuggling aircraft may then land and go through normal Customs processing or may exit United States airspace beyond Customs jurisdiction.

According to Customs personnel involved in interdiction operations, airdrops increasingly are being used by smugglers to place drugs in the Bahamas for later shipment into the United States by small boats. Customs and DEA are currently providing assistance to the Bahamian government in its efforts to apprehend drug smugglers. The absence of international airspace makes airdrops especially effective for smugglers crossing the U.S.-Mexican border. Pilots may fly normally in Mexican airspace up to the border without arousing suspicion, and then cross into the United States. They then may choose either to land on one of many isolated private landing strips along the border and quickly unload or airdrop the load and retreat into Mexican territory beyond reach of Customs pursuit.

Marine Smuggling⁴

The Coast Guard's principal interdiction role is to apprehend freighters known as motherships sailing outside U.S. coastal waters with large loads of marijuana. Coast Guard and Customs share responsibility for interdicting cocaine and marijuana smugglers in coastal waters.

Coast Guard Interdiction Activities

The Coast Guard's strategy for interdicting drugs on the high seas is geared toward stopping motherships coming from the northern coast of Colombia. These motherships usually carry loads of between 5 and 50 tons of marijuana and occasionally carry smaller loads of cocaine. They typically travel through the Caribbean to unloading points in the waters off the western Bahamas and off the U.S. coastline. The Coast Guard's main line of defense against motherships consists of large ships called cutters that patrol international waters between the Caribbean islands through which motherships traveling from South America must pass to exit into the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Ocean. These "chokepoints" as they are called by the Coast Guard include the inter-island channels in the Antilles; the Windward Passage separating Cuba and Haiti; the Yucatan Channel, between Mexico and Cuba; and the Mona Passage separating the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. Figure 3.3 depicts these chokepoints, as well as the routes normally used by motherships.

⁴This discussion of marine smuggling is primarily based on information obtained from Customs' Office of Enforcement, Coast Guard headquarters and district offices, field visits to marine interdiction units, and information supplied by Coast Guard and Customs intelligence units and NNBS.

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Figure 3.3: Maritime Chokepoints in the Caribbean



Note: Arrows indicate routes normally used by motherships

Source: Our map is based on data provided by the U.S. Coast Guard.

Funding for the Coast Guard's interdiction efforts is shown in table 3.4.

Table 3.4: Budget Authority for Coast Guard Interdiction Efforts Compared With Total Budget Authority FY 1982 - FY 1987

Dollars in millions

	FY1982	FY1983	FY1984	FY1985	FY1986	FY1987
Total Coast Guard budget authority	2,525.5	2,455.2	2,779.5	2,592.4	2,311.9	2,583.9
Coast Guard interdiction budget authority ^a	328.9	359.9	508.2	506.6	397.8	547.9
Interdiction budget authority as a percentage of total budget authority	13%	15%	18%	20%	18%	23%

^aIncludes funding for both high seas and coastal interdiction efforts.

Coast Guard Interdiction Resources Are Insufficient to Stop Mothership Operations

Coast Guard officials have acknowledged that they do not have enough cutters to control mothership operations even in the chokepoints and that mothership operators have many options to avoid the Coast Guard patrols. Further, they believe that some mothership operators evade Coast Guard interdiction efforts.

The Coast Guard could not provide information on the hours its cutters spend in the passages monitoring traffic; however, a Coast Guard official estimated that in a recent 2-year period, they have had at least one cutter in the Yucatan Channel 97 percent of the time, in the Windward Passage 98 percent of the time, and in the Mona and the Anegada (in the Antilles) Passages 36 percent of the time. These percentages include times when the cutters were performing functions other than drug interdiction surveillance, such as search and rescue or towing vessels to shore. Therefore, there are times when smugglers can pass through the chokepoints without being detected by Coast Guard surveillance.

Coast Guard officials said that special operations conducted with the Navy have demonstrated the potential for closing smuggling routes in the Caribbean, but the level of effort required for special operations cannot be sustained indefinitely because the personnel and equipment involved are diverted from the Coast Guard's other missions. Coast Guard officials told us that smugglers are able to determine the location of Coast Guard patrols by aerial surveillance and then schedule mothership operations along routes where the Coast Guard is not present.

At the time of our review, the Coast Guard had a total operational fleet of about 44 large cutters (180 feet to 378 feet in length), and 75 smaller patrol boats (82 feet to 110 feet in length) that perform various Coast Guard missions at sea. Not all of these vessels are used by the Coast Guard for drug interdiction operations. The Coast Guard primarily uses cutters assigned to the Seventh Coast Guard district in Miami for drug interdiction efforts outside coastal waters. At the time of our review, there were 9 cutters, 16 patrol boats, and 3 high-speed vessels specifically designed for interdiction assigned to the Seventh District. The Coast Guard also temporarily assigns cutters from other Districts to the Seventh District.

Coast Guard personnel are also deployed on Navy ships as tactical law enforcement teams. When Navy ships are expecting to sail in an area of interest to the Coast Guard for drug interdiction purposes, the Coast Guard will assign a team to the Navy ship. The Coast Guard team maintains a lookout for possible smugglers and conducts any boardings that may be necessary.

The Coast Guard has recently added to its capability to challenge mothership operations and further increases are planned. In 1986, the Coast Guard's Seventh District received eight new patrol boats that can sail at higher speeds than older patrol boats. The Coast Guard plans to

use the new boats in joint operations with large cutters in the chokepoints and, as noted below, in coastal interdiction efforts. The new boats enhance surveillance capability, provide more boarding platforms, and add towing capability. Using these vessels to tow smuggling vessels into port will allow the large cutters to remain on station after seizing a drug load.

To add to its surveillance capabilities, the Coast Guard is purchasing eight radar units mounted on aerostats and tethered to vessels for service in the chokepoints and in the Pacific coastal area. The aerostat radars have a surveillance range of about 70 miles, depending upon weather conditions and the type of vessel that is the radar's target, as compared to about 24 miles for shipboard radars used on cutters.

Controlling Drug Smuggling in Coastal Waters Is Difficult

The Customs Service and the Coast Guard are jointly responsible for intercepting and seizing shipments of drugs in small boats that penetrate U.S. coastal waters. Resources devoted to coastal interdiction efforts are limited compared with the extensive coastal area in which smugglers can operate and the volume of coastal smuggling traffic. It is therefore difficult for Customs and the Coast Guard to control drug smuggling in coastal waters. The interdiction agencies have made efforts to improve their ability to detect smugglers in coastal waters. However, detection does not ensure interdiction, especially against smugglers who use secret compartments to conceal cocaine, or small fast boats that limit the reaction time available to Customs and the Coast Guard after detection.

Smugglers use high-speed motorboats, sailboats, motor yachts, and fishing vessels to bring loads directly from drug source countries, from Caribbean islands used as storage or shipment points, and, as previously mentioned, from motherships anchored off the United States coast. Some smugglers attempt to blend in with the majority of law-abiding marine traffic. In addition, operators of small boats arriving in the United States from foreign countries may legally enter the United States between ports of entry if they declare goods they have brought to the United States within 24 hours. Thus, the threat of routine Customs inspection is not necessarily a deterrent, nor is a boat approaching the coast away from a port of entry even cause for suspicion. The Customs Service has estimated that the smuggling threat from small boats is most pronounced on the southeast coast.

Customs' coastal interdiction operations are carried out by 60 marine stations that are located mainly along the southern U.S. coast. Customs

maintains a fleet of 222 vessels, including radar-equipped surveillance vessels that have radar platforms, high-speed interceptors that are used primarily for coastal interdiction, and utility boats that are primarily used for support purposes. The location and type of these vessels is shown in table 3.5.

Table 3.5: Location of Customs' Boats by Customs Region

Customs regions	Radar platforms	Interceptors	Utility	Total
Southeast	19	92	32	143
South Central	4	5	13	22
Southwest	4	6	10	20
Pacific	5	6	13	24
Northeast	0	1	1	2
New York	2	4	4	10
North Central	0	0	1	1
Total	34	114	74	222

Customs' marine strategy emphasizes the use of investigations to develop leads on marine smuggling operations. Customs has reassigned some personnel, who previously conducted marine patrols as investigators, to gather information about smuggling activities. Customs' strategy also calls for using radar platforms in combination with its newly acquired high-speed boats to detect and intercept smuggling craft within coastal waters. During our field work in 1986, Customs had not fully implemented this strategy. For example, we observed that random patrols to visually identify suspect smugglers continued to be emphasized by the Miami marine unit.

Customs is currently using land-based radars in Miami and Houston to identify suspected smugglers in adjacent coastal waters. To counter the heavy smuggling traffic Customs believed to be entering the coastal waters off south Florida, Customs initiated the development of a marine operations center in Miami to coordinate the use of federal, state, and local marine resources in interdicting suspect vessels. This center, known as the Blue Lightning Operations Center (BLOC), began operations in April 1986. The center receives radar information from the aerostats in south Florida and from radars that Customs has installed on condominium rooftops at points along the south Florida coastline. This radar coverage is intended to allow the center to continuously monitor maritime traffic and detect potential targets in the coastal waters off southern Florida. The center does not direct the deployment of marine

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enforcement resources, but rather identifies and contacts law enforcement boats in the vicinity of suspected smuggling activity the center has detected. Signals from transmitters provided by Customs and placed aboard law enforcement boats allow BLOC personnel to determine the location of the law enforcement boats.

Another BLOC began operating in Houston in November 1986. This center is designed to operate like the one in Miami and is responsible for the Gulf of Mexico along the southwest coast of the United States.

Funding for Customs' marine interdiction program is shown in table 3.6. The large increase in fiscal year 1985 is mainly attributable to a \$12 million supplemental appropriation for the purchase of 40 interceptor boats and construction of the Miami BLOC.

Table 3.6: Budget Authority for Customs Marine Program FY 1982 - FY 1987

Dollars in millions	
Fiscal year	Budget authority
1982	11.9
1983	11.4
1984	24.6
1985	43.3
1986	33.8
1987	24.2

The main area in which the Coast Guard is involved in coastal drug interdiction operations is south Florida, in the Coast Guard's Seventh District. Coast Guard boats patrol the sea lanes between the Bahamas and south Florida in search of small boats smuggling drugs. Coast Guard and Customs officials note that smugglers often use the Bahamas as a drop-off point for drug shipments transported from South America by air and sea and bound for the United States. Coast Guard officers in the Seventh District told us that most of the Coast Guard boats used for coastal interdiction are slower than the small fast boats smugglers now commonly use to bring drug loads to shore. They said the eight high-speed patrol boats delivered to the Seventh District in 1986 will improve the Coast Guard's ability to catch coastal smugglers using fast boats. The Coast Guard does not separately report the budget it devotes to its coastal interdiction efforts. Funding for its coastal interdiction operations is included in the total Coast Guard interdiction budget figures presented in table 3.4.

Coast Guard and Customs officials involved in marine interdiction said smugglers use secret compartments for cocaine smuggling that are difficult for marine interdiction units to detect. Searching certain types of vessels, such as yachts, for cocaine requires considerable time and damages the vessel. This makes random boardings impractical as a tactic for interdicting cocaine shipments. Only a few boats can be boarded and searched for cocaine with the interdiction resources available. For example, we observed two local enforcement officers and one Customs officer spend 4 hours searching one vessel for concealed compartments.

Military Support for Air and Marine Interdiction Efforts

Since the passage of the Posse Comitatus Act Amendment in December 1981, which clarifies the role that the military may play in assisting civilian law enforcement agencies, the military has played an increasing role in federal drug interdiction efforts. One of its main contributions has been airborne radar coverage of areas thought by Customs and Coast Guard to be major air and marine smuggling routes. Air Force AWACS and Navy E2 aircraft, which are equipped with wide-area coverage, long-range radar systems, have flown numerous missions to detect aircraft smuggling drugs across the border. Military aircraft also provide interdiction support in other ways. DOD aircraft take aerial photographs along potential smuggling routes. Marine Corps aircraft are used to visually identify and track suspect aircraft until a Customs interceptor is launched.

Other military support is provided to interdiction agencies in a variety of forms. Since 1983, Air Force helicopters, operated by Air Force personnel, have transported Bahamian law enforcement teams on drug apprehension missions in the Bahamas. This effort also involves DEA and is known as Operation Bat. As previously discussed, Coast Guard law enforcement teams have been stationed aboard Navy ships on maneuvers in the Caribbean in order to board suspect vessels encountered by the Navy ships. In addition, the Army has loaned equipment such as helicopters to interdiction agencies.

Direct expenses incurred by DOD in providing assistance to civilian drug interdiction agencies as a by-product of training and readiness missions, plus direct appropriations for drug law enforcement missions are shown in table 3.7.

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Table 3.7: Estimated Cost of Department of Defense Interdiction Support FY 1982 - FY 1987

Dollars in millions	
Fiscal year	Estimated cost ^a
1982	4.9
1983	9.7
1984	14.6
1985	54.8
1986	107.7
1987	386.5

^aIncludes direct appropriations for drug law enforcement missions in the following amounts: \$38 million in FY 1986 and \$314 million in FY 1987.

Source: National and International Drug Law Enforcement Strategy, National Drug Enforcement Policy Board, January 1987.

The above figures include the costs of assistance provided by all branches of the military. The following examples gathered in the course of our review illustrate the dimensions of the military's role in drug interdiction. The Air Force reports that from fiscal year 1984 through fiscal year 1986, AWACS aircraft flew 147 surveillance training missions specially designated to fly in areas of interest to Customs and about 1,000 regular surveillance training missions in areas of general interest to interdiction agencies. In fiscal year 1986, AWACS aircraft flew 62 specially designated missions. Air Force records show that the cost of specially designated AWACS missions flown in calendar year 1985 was about \$4 million. Navy E2 aircraft flew 1,048 surveillance missions in support of drug interdiction agencies from fiscal year 1984 through fiscal year 1986, including 370 missions in fiscal year 1986. The Navy reports that from fiscal year 1982 through fiscal year 1985, E2 aircraft drug interdiction missions cost \$5 million.

Insufficient Security Reduces Interdiction Capabilities

The interdiction system's resources—particularly radars used to identify smuggling attempts and the aircraft and vessels used to respond when suspects are identified—are limited in number and are not operating at all times. Interdiction agency officials said smugglers can use information on when equipment and personnel are operating to avoid detection. The extent to which smuggling organizations gather information to reduce their risks is not known, but security breaches have occurred. For example, the starting date of a major interdiction operation named Operation Blue Lightning had to be moved up 72 hours because smugglers obtained advance information about the operation through a security breach. Without adequate security procedures to

govern the handling of sensitive information as it passes to and from those who need to know, security breaches may occur. The following examples, based on discussion with interdiction officials and our own observations, illustrate how espionage can negate the effectiveness of interdiction efforts. We do not know how often smugglers have employed these tactics.

- Knowledge of the duty hours of Customs' radar watch personnel, who monitor the extensive network of radars beamed at smuggling traffic by air into south Florida, allows smugglers to choose the time to leave with their loads to minimize their risk of detection. This information can be obtained by observing the arrival and departure of Customs' watch personnel at their work sites.
- Knowledge of when the Coast Guard cutters are in the chokepoints, which can be monitored by use of air patrols, could allow smugglers to choose the time and the particular marine passage they will use to evade detection.
- Knowledge of the radar surveillance capabilities to spot low-flying aircraft along most of the U.S. borders, outside south Florida, can be used to plan points of border entrance with minimal risk of detection. The vulnerabilities of the radar detection system along parts of the southwest border were published in a metropolitan newspaper, which graphically showed the elevations between geographical points at which radar surveillance did not exist.

More Tactical Intelligence Is Needed

Tactical intelligence is information about the identity, type, location, timing, and method of potential drug smuggling operations. Tactical intelligence allows the interdiction agencies to use their resources more effectively. Depending upon how reliable, timely, accurate, and specific the intelligence is, staff and equipment can be deployed in a way that increases the chances of a successful seizure. Information we obtained from Customs' computerized seizure reporting system demonstrates the value of obtaining intelligence before conducting interdiction operations. A relatively small percentage (16 percent) of fiscal year 1986 cocaine seizure cases was based on intelligence information, but approximately 29,000 pounds of cocaine were seized in these cases. Customs data indicates that this accounted for 53 percent of the total cocaine seized in fiscal year 1986.

Although Customs and the Coast Guard collect intelligence on narcotics trafficking, they do not have the responsibility to develop overseas tactical intelligence. This responsibility rests with DEA. However, gathering

intelligence related to specific drug shipments is of secondary concern to DEA agents stationed in source countries. Recently, Customs and DEA began a trial program aimed at increasing the amount of tactical intelligence Customs receives from source countries. Under the program, Customs officers have been stationed at the DEA offices in Bogota, Columbia; Caracas, Venezuela; and Mexico City, Mexico and have access to the information DEA agents collect in the course of their work. Customs hopes that these officers will be able to obtain tactical interdiction intelligence that DEA agents may not have otherwise reported and that the Customs officers will disseminate the intelligence while it is still timely.

Customs and Coast Guard officials have stated that more tactical intelligence is needed to improve their agencies' ability to detect and intercept drug shipments. The National and International Drug Law Enforcement Strategy issued in January 1987 emphasizes the need to develop new sources and methods of intelligence collection relating to drug trafficking, including tactical intelligence.

Ports of Entry and Land Border Smuggling

We did not review federal interdiction efforts relating to drug smuggling through Customs ports of entry (where Customs inspectors are stationed to inspect cargo and persons entering the United States) and across the U.S. land borders between ports of entry. However, heroin and hashish mainly enter the United States through Customs ports of entry concealed in commercial cargo.

The Customs Service has exclusive authority for the interdiction of drugs at ports of entry and primary responsibility for intercepting drugs entering across the land border between ports of entry. The primary responsibility of the Immigration and Naturalization's Border Patrol is intercepting aliens illegally crossing the border. However, some Border Patrol officers are being given additional authority to search persons and vehicles for drugs. In fiscal 1987, budget authority for the Customs Service's drug interdiction efforts other than its air and marine programs was \$276.5 million, and budget authority for INS' drug interdiction efforts was \$800,000.

As noted in our recent report, Cargo Imports: Customs Needs to Better Assure Compliance With Trade Laws and Regulations (GAO/GGD-86-136, Sept. 1986), Customs' routine inspections at ports of entry are limited in scope and intensity. Customs has established two types of special teams to focus on detecting drugs concealed in cargo, in conveyances, and in

the personal belongings of passengers and crew. Contraband enforcement teams rotate among inspection sites in a given locale and apply special inspection techniques to "high-risk" shipments, such as those originating or stopping in drug-producing countries. Freighter intelligence and surveillance teams recruit informants among freighter crew members to provide information about concealed drugs on board.

Operation Alliance Is Intended to Stem the Flow of Drugs Across the Southwest Border

According to the National Drug Policy Board, drug smuggling across the Mexican land border has increased substantially in recent years. The Policy Board has also stated that the federal government's efforts to interdict drugs smuggled across the southwest border have been inadequate. On August 14, 1986, the Vice President, as head of the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System, and the Attorney General, as the Chairman of the National Drug Enforcement Policy Board (now the National Drug Policy Board), announced the commencement of Operation Alliance on the southwest border to improve federal interdiction capabilities.

Operation Alliance is a multi-agency effort currently commanded by an official of the Immigration and Naturalization Service's Border Patrol. The federal agencies involved include the Customs Service, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the FBI, the DEA, the Border Patrol, U.S. Attorneys in judicial districts along the southwest border, U.S. Marshals, the Coast Guard, the FAA, the Internal Revenue Service, the Secret Service, and all branches of the military.

According to the National Drug Policy Board, which oversees Operation Alliance, when the project is fully implemented in 1988, 350 additional Customs inspectors and 60 new federal prosecutors will be assigned to the southwest border area, and 200 FBI, DEA, and Internal Revenue Service agents and other enforcement personnel will be reassigned to the area. In addition, specified Border Patrol officers are being given drug search and arrest authority between ports of entry, and some Customs agents have been authorized to conduct drug investigations in conjunction with DEA. The National Drug Policy Board reports that during the period October 15, 1986, to December 16, 1986, nearly 18,000 pounds of marijuana and about 1,200 pounds of cocaine were seized and 170 arrests made as a result of Operation Alliance.

Other Agencies Involved in Drug Interdiction Efforts

Customs and the Coast Guard receive assistance from other federal agencies as well as state and local law enforcement authorities. In addition, two federal organizations provide policy guidance and coordination to drug interdiction agencies and efforts.

DEA has primary authority for drug investigations and drug-related intelligence. Since 1982 the FBI has had concurrent jurisdiction with DEA for conducting these investigations. These investigations may produce information on pending drug smuggling attempts, which DEA is responsible for passing on to Customs or the Coast Guard. DEA agents assigned to the agency's offices in source countries are responsible for gathering interdiction-related intelligence. However, as previously stated, this is a secondary concern of these agents. DEA also operates the El Paso Intelligence Center, which is jointly staffed by several federal drug enforcement agencies, including Customs and the Coast Guard, and disseminates drug smuggling intelligence to interdiction agencies.

State and local law enforcement agencies, when asked, assist interdiction agencies in apprehending smugglers, participate in special operations, and exchange intelligence and investigative information. State and local agencies were principals in about 20 percent of the cocaine seizures and about 5 percent of the marijuana seizures in fiscal year 1986, according to Customs statistics. These were seizures in which Customs had some participation, and state and local agencies may have been involved in additional seizures.

Policy and Coordinating Agencies

The National Drug Enforcement Policy Board was created by the National Narcotics Act of 1984 and focused on the enforcement aspect of drug abuse control. The Board, which was recently expanded by an Executive Order, is now responsible for reviewing, evaluating, and developing and coordinating strategy and policy for all federal agencies with responsibilities in either the drug law enforcement or prevention and treatment fields. The new Board, now called the National Drug Policy Board, is chaired by the Attorney General and vice-chaired by the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Its membership includes the Directors of Central Intelligence and the Office of Management and Budget; the Secretaries of the Departments of Defense, State, Transportation, Treasury, Education, Agriculture, Energy, Labor, Interior, and Housing and Urban Development; the Director of the White House Drug Abuse Policy Office; the Vice President's Chief of Staff; and the Assistant to the President for National Security.

The National Narcotics Border Interdiction System, under the direction of the Vice-President, was created in March 1983 to coordinate support for interdiction operations. NNBIS is staffed with personnel detailed from participating agencies, which include the Coast Guard, Customs, DEA, FBI, INS, the military services, and state and local law enforcement agencies. NNBIS does not have direct operating authority but functions as an intermediary between the interdiction and military agencies in arranging military support and as a conduit to the interdiction agencies for drug intelligence developed by intelligence agencies. NNBIS also has assisted interdiction agencies in planning and coordinating "special operations" that temporarily bring together resources of several agencies to concentrate on a particular smuggling threat. In addition to its Washington headquarters staff, NNBIS has regional centers in El Paso, Chicago, New York, Miami, New Orleans, Long Beach, and Honolulu.

Drug Seizures Are Small Compared to Total Drug Imports

The drug interdiction efforts of the Customs Service, the Coast Guard, and supporting agencies have resulted in the seizure of substantial amounts of drugs in recent years, but these seizures are relatively small compared to the amounts of drugs estimated to be smuggled into the United States. Table 3.8 compares the estimated amounts of cocaine, marijuana, heroin, and hashish smuggled into the United States in calendar years 1985 and 1986 with the amounts seized by interdiction agencies in FY 1985 and FY 1986. We recognize the statistics in table 3.8 are for slightly different time periods, but we believe that the comparison reflects the disparity between the amounts smuggled and drugs seized. The amounts shown include drugs seized directly by Customs and the Coast Guard, as well as seizures by state, local, and other federal agencies in which Customs participated. Customs records Coast Guard seizures because the Coast Guard turns its seized drugs over to Customs.

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Table 3.8: Estimated Amounts of Drugs Smuggled Into the U.S. Compared to Amounts Seized 1985 - 1986

In Tons	Estimated amounts smuggled into the U.S.		Amounts seized	
	CY 1985	CY 1986	FY 1985	FY 1986
	Cocaine	65 ^a	138	25
Marijuana	15,300	11,000	1,206	1,106
Heroin	5	7	^b	^b
Hashish	150	165	12	9

^aCustoms has acknowledged that it underestimated the amount of cocaine smuggled into the United States in 1985.

^bLess than 0.5 tons.

Source: U.S. Customs Service

Customs is the primary seizing agency for cocaine and the Coast Guard the primary seizing agency for marijuana. We estimated the percentages of illegal drugs seized by interdiction agencies in fiscal year 1986, using seizure data compiled by Customs' computerized law enforcement activity reporting system. Our estimates are shown in table 3.9.

Table 3.9: Proportions of Illegal Drugs Seized, by Interdiction Agency FY 1986

Type of drug	Agency	Percent of drugs seized
Cocaine	Customs	66
	Coast Guard	3
	DEA	11
	State & local	19
	Other	^a
	Total	100^b
Marijuana	Customs	26
	Coast Guard	65
	State & local	5
	Other	3
	Total	100^b
Heroin	Customs	94
	State & local	2
	Other	4
	Total	100
Hashish	Customs	99
	State & local	^a
	Other	^a
	Total	100^b

^aLess than 1 percent.

^bPercentages do not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Our estimates are based on data from Customs Law Enforcement Activity Reporting System.

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According to Customs data, the bulk of cocaine and marijuana seizures occur in the south Florida area and the Caribbean. As shown in table 3.10, 70 percent of the cocaine and 79 percent of the marijuana seized in fiscal year 1986 was seized in Customs' Southeast Region. This region encompasses the south Florida area, as well as the Coast Guard's Seventh District.

Table 3.10: Cocaine and Marijuana Seizures FY 1986

	Amount seized in tons			
	Southeast		Rest of U.S.	
	Amount Seized	Percent of Total Seized	Amount Seized	Percent of Total Seized
Cocaine	19	70	8	30
Marijuana	870	79	236	21

Source: Customs Law Enforcement Activity Reporting System.

Conclusions

Relatively small proportions of the cocaine, marijuana, and other illegal drugs smuggled into the United States are seized by drug interdiction agencies. Drug interdiction efforts may have prevented greater influxes of illicit drugs by increasing the smugglers' risks of apprehension. However, cocaine, marijuana, and other illegal drugs remain widely available.

There are several reasons for the federal government's inability to stop illegal drug smuggling. The amounts of equipment and numbers of staff devoted to interdiction leave large gaps in the interdiction system's coverage of the lengthy southern coastal and land borders of the United States. As a result, the system is unable to detect or respond to all illegal border crossings 24 hours a day. Smugglers use methods and tactics that exploit gaps in the interdiction system's coverage of the border and other weaknesses in the interdiction system, such as inadequate security over interdiction plans and operations. Interdiction agencies also are hindered by the lack of timely and accurate tactical intelligence: information about the identity, type, location, timing, and method of potential smuggling operations. Finally, the demand for illegal drugs makes smuggling highly profitable, which would encourage smugglers to continue their activities.

The increased resources for drug interdiction authorized by the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 should fill some gaps in the present interdiction system with additional staff and more equipment. However, smugglers have responded successfully to changes in the interdiction system in the past and may continue to do so.

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