

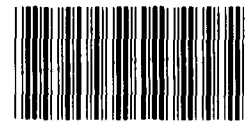
BY THE U.S. GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
Report To The Chairman, Subcommittee On
Government Information, Justice And Agriculture
Committee On Government Operations
House Of Representatives

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Coordination Of Federal Drug Interdiction Efforts

GAO reviewed operations of the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System (NNBIS) and concluded that the concept upon which NNBIS was founded--a need for improved cross-agency coordination of drug interdiction efforts--was sound. GAO found that there has been some improvement in inter-agency coordination and that NNBIS' efforts did result in some gain in drug interdictions. However, these improvements still fell far short of what is needed to substantially reduce the flow of drugs into the country.

In addition, the relationship of NNBIS (presently located in the Office of the Vice President) to the newly created National Drug Enforcement Policy Board is unclear in light of the Board's statutory objectives.



127418

GAO/GGD-85-67
JULY 15, 1985

532559/127418

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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
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GENERAL GOVERNMENT
DIVISION

B-217643

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 April 24, 1984, request that we review the operations of the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System (NNBIS). NNBIS' mission is to coordinate the work of federal agencies that have responsibilities and capabilities for interdicting seaborne, airborne, and other cross-border importation of narcotics. As agreed with your office, we reviewed NNBIS' development and activities since its inception in 1983; NNBIS' involvement in drug interdiction cases; and the perceptions of federal, state, and local law enforcement officials who interact with NNBIS. We focused our review on the four NNBIS regional centers along the southern border of the United States because of the Subcommittee's interest in drug smuggling from Latin America. (A detailed description of our objectives, scope, and methodology is included as app. II.)

The concept upon which NNBIS was founded--the coordination of drug interdiction efforts--is sound, and NNBIS has made positive contributions toward enhancing communications among agencies involved in drug interdictions. However, the results of NNBIS' activities as a nationwide coordinator of drug interdictions, have been minimal, and the improvements NNBIS has achieved have fallen far short of substantially reducing the flow of illegal drugs into the United States. In addition, the relationship of NNBIS, located in the Office of the Vice President, to the newly created National Drug Enforcement Policy Board is unclear in light of the Board's statutory objective of overseeing and coordinating all federal drug law enforcement efforts, including drug interdiction. Our findings are summarized below and described in detail in appendix I.

FEDERAL DRUG INTERDICTION
AT THE U.S. BORDER

Large quantities of illegal drugs--heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and other dangerous drugs, such as amphetamines--continue

to be smuggled into the United States from other countries. Primary authority and responsibility for federal drug interdiction activities are divided among three agencies in three executive departments--the Treasury Department's U.S. Customs Service, the Transportation Department's U.S. Coast Guard, and the Justice Department's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Other federal agencies are also involved to a lesser degree, including the military and the national intelligence community. Some state and local law enforcement agencies also have responsibilities relating to drug interdiction.

In a 1983 GAO report on federal drug interdiction efforts, we pointed out that the interdiction component of the federal drug enforcement program was fragmented, with Customs, Coast Guard, and DEA having different drug enforcement programs, priorities, and goals. We concluded that federal drug interdiction efforts have been hindered by a lack of coordination among federal law enforcement agencies.

MISSION, ORGANIZATION, AND MANAGEMENT OF NNBIS

The President announced the establishment of NNBIS on March 23, 1983, and directed the Vice President to head NNBIS. The President said that the mission of NNBIS was to coordinate the work of those federal agencies that have existing responsibilities and capabilities for the interdiction of seaborne, airborne, and other cross-border importation of illegal drugs. He directed NNBIS to monitor suspected smuggling activity originating outside and destined for the United States and to coordinate agencies' seizures of contraband and arrests of persons involved in illegal drug importation. NNBIS coordinates the drug interdiction activities of other organizations but does not interdict drugs itself. NNBIS' activities are carried out by a headquarters staff in Washington, D.C., and six regional centers located in Miami, New Orleans, El Paso, Long Beach, Chicago, and New York City.

NNBIS is, and was intended to be, an informal coordinating body that recommends, but does not direct, actions by agencies involved in drug interdiction. NNBIS is not a separate and distinct agency--it does not have a legislative charter or a budget. It attempts to achieve its objectives and obtain its resources through the cooperation and contributions of its participating agencies. The agencies, primarily Customs and Coast Guard, contribute funding, equipment, facilities and staffing from their existing budgets. The NNBIS Staff Director said that headquarters has not developed detailed plans, procedures, or guidelines for the regional centers because NNBIS was not intended to be an agency or bureaucracy and because the Vice President wants NNBIS to have an informal, coordinative, non-command structure.

Each NNBIS regional center has an Intelligence Information Coordination Center and an Operations Information Center. The intelligence center is designed to gather and collate drug smuggling intelligence and pass information to the operations center and law enforcement agencies. The operations center is designed to help law enforcement agencies detect and track suspected smugglers; review the availability of civilian and military interdiction resources; make recommendations to the appropriate agency or agencies for surveillance, interception, and seizure of illegal drug shipments; and coordinate joint special operations involving civilian law enforcement agencies and the military.

INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES

Most of NNBIS' intelligence activities are carried out by the NNBIS regional centers, with assistance from NNBIS headquarters in the acquisition of intelligence from the national intelligence community. The intelligence centers in the regions primarily collect intelligence that has been gathered by others, but they also actively acquire information by conducting surveillances and developing and interviewing informants. In addition, they coordinate special intelligence projects carried out by other organizations.

NNBIS officials said the amount of intelligence they had received has been limited, particularly tactical intelligence which provides specific information about the time and place of drug shipments. Some NNBIS officials told us they were unsure whether other agencies possess additional tactical intelligence that they are not providing NNBIS.

To help gather intelligence, NNBIS headquarters has worked to improve the coordination and participation of the national intelligence community. Most of the NNBIS centers were just starting to receive information from the national intelligence community at the time of our field work (May 1984 through November 1984). The NNBIS officials were optimistic that information coming from the national intelligence community will help increase the availability of tactical intelligence.

COORDINATING DRUG INTERDICTION OPERATIONS

NNBIS has worked to facilitate communications involving both civilian law enforcement agencies and the military. However, NNBIS has not played a coordinating role in most drug interdiction operations, and the extent of NNBIS participation as an operations coordinator has varied widely among NNBIS' regional centers.

From June 10, 1983, to June 9, 1984, NNBIS recorded 2,289 drug interdiction cases occurring in the areas served by the four NNBIS regional centers we visited. The four centers identified

136 cases in which they reported participation from June 1983 through June 1984. The Miami center accounted for 101 of the 136 cases. It should be recognized that many drug interdictions involve only a single agency and may not require NNBIS participation as a coordinator.

We analyzed 77 of the 136 drug interdictions in which the four centers reported participation. NNBIS' records sometimes did not show at what point NNBIS became aware of the case or the nature of their participation. Our review of the records and our discussions with NNBIS and other agency personnel often failed to clarify the exact nature of NNBIS' actions. Consequently, in 29 of the 77 cases we analyzed, we could not determine whether the interdiction would have occurred if NNBIS had not participated. In our judgment, 14 of the remaining 48 interdictions would not have occurred without NNBIS' participation and 34 would have occurred even if NNBIS had not participated. Our determinations were based on our analysis of the action that NNBIS took in each case and our assessment of each action's contribution to an interdiction.

The regional centers concentrate on drug smuggling between ports-of-entry. NNBIS officials believe this is where NNBIS can make the greatest contribution to drug interdiction efforts. In 69 of the 77 cases we analyzed, marijuana or marijuana residue was seized.

VIEWS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICIALS

We sent a standardized questionnaire to 58 federal, state, and local law enforcement officials in the regions covered by the four NNBIS centers we visited. The views of the officials responding to the questionnaires were mixed on how NNBIS had affected drug interdiction efforts in their areas. Thirty-five percent said NNBIS had improved the efforts to some extent, 48 percent said NNBIS had no effect, and 2 percent said NNBIS had somewhat worsened the efforts. Fifteen percent of the respondents indicated that they had no basis to judge NNBIS' effect on drug interdiction efforts.

We asked the officials responding to our questionnaire whether they foresee NNBIS as a valuable resource for improving their office's drug interdiction activities in the future. Twenty-seven percent answered either definitely or probably yes, 38 percent were uncertain, and 35 percent said probably or definitely no.

Both the questionnaire respondents and the officials we talked with gave credit to NNBIS for facilitating access to military resources. While some officials we talked with said the

Posse Comitatus Amendment of 1981¹ is responsible for increased Department of Defense (DOD) cooperation, they were pleased with NNBIS' efforts in facilitating access to military resources. They also said that getting military assistance through NNBIS is quicker, easier, and less costly to them than before.

NATIONAL NARCOTICS ACT
OF 1984 RAISES QUESTIONS
CONCERNING NNBIS' ROLE

The National Narcotics Act of 1984 (Public Law 98-473) established a National Drug Enforcement Policy Board to oversee and coordinate all federal drug law enforcement efforts, including drug interdiction. It is not clear from the act what effect the establishment of this new board is intended to have on NNBIS.

The Board is responsible for reviewing and developing U.S. drug law enforcement policy, strategy, and resources, including budgetary priorities; facilitating the coordination of all federal drug law enforcement operations; and coordinating the collection and evaluation of information necessary to implement U.S. drug law enforcement policy. The Attorney General is designated as Chairman of the Board. Other members include the Secretaries of State, Treasury, Defense, Transportation, and Health and Human Services; the Director of the Office of Management and Budget; the Director of Central Intelligence; and other such officials as may be appointed by the President.

Through the act, the Congress intended to strengthen central direction of U.S. anti-drug efforts. While the 1984 act establishes a framework for strengthening the central direction of all federal drug law enforcement activities, the relationship of NNBIS, presently located in the Office of the Vice President, to the Board is unclear in light of the Board's statutory objective. The Vice President is not a member of the National Drug Enforcement Policy Board. The present organizational placement of NNBIS may limit the Board's ability to facilitate coordination of drug interdiction, a major component of the drug law enforcement effort.

Three basic alternatives are available when considering the future approach to drug interdiction coordination. These alternatives include (1) maintaining NNBIS under the direction of the Vice President, (2) keeping some NNBIS functions under the direction of the Vice President and placing other NNBIS functions under the direction of the Board, or (3) placing all of NNBIS' functions under the direction of the Board. Each alternative has benefits and drawbacks. Keeping all or part of NNBIS' functions

¹This legislation clarified the extent of military cooperation allowed under the Posse Comitatus Act which became law in 1878.

in the Office of the Vice President gives the mission of drug interdiction coordination high visibility and provides an important leadership factor in securing the support and participation of involved agencies. However, such an arrangement would leave two separate entities--NNBIS and the Board--and their relationship would have to be explicitly delineated.

Placing all of the functions of NNBIS under the Board would combine all the interdiction efforts of the government with other drug law enforcement activities and might facilitate centralized direction of federal efforts in drug law enforcement. The Board could oversee drug interdiction coordination, determine priorities, and decide how interdiction resources should be deployed in the context of the entire federal drug law enforcement effort.

CONCLUSIONS

NNBIS has made some improvements in interagency coordination for drug interdiction. However, these improvements still fall far short of what is needed to substantially reduce the flow of illegal drugs into the United States.

NNBIS officials told us that the amount of drug smuggling intelligence their centers had received has been limited. Because the centers lacked such intelligence, it was difficult to make useful recommendations to interdicting agencies for effective actions against drug smugglers. The four NNBIS regional centers along the southern U.S. border told us they played a coordinating role in 136 interdictions between June 1983 and June 1984. This represents a small proportion of the total number of interdictions that occurred. Moreover, one regional center, Miami, accounted for 101 of the 136 cases. Our analysis of 77 of the interdiction cases in which the NNBIS centers reported participation disclosed that many of the interdictions would have occurred even if NNBIS had not participated. The regional centers concentrate on drug smuggling between ports-of-entry. NNBIS officials believe this is where NNBIS can make the greatest contribution to drug interdiction efforts. Focusing on this type of smuggling has generally resulted in interdictions involving marijuana and not other drugs (such as heroin and cocaine) that represent a serious threat to the Nation. These factors may explain why various law enforcement officials we contacted were divided in their views on whether NNBIS has improved, or will improve, drug interdiction activities.

We believe, however, that the concept upon which NNBIS was founded is sound. A 1983 GAO report identified the need for improved cooperation and communication among drug interdiction agencies to enhance the fight against drug smuggling. The

presence of NNBIS has helped to open the lines of communication among the involved agencies. We believe this aspect of NNBIS' mission is vital regardless of any specific role NNBIS may assume in operational responsibilities, such as gathering intelligence, prioritizing interdiction targets, and recommending specific interdiction actions to agencies.

NNBIS' continued mission and role in drug interdiction activities present an issue that should be addressed in the context of the overall federal drug strategy. The National Narcotics Act of 1984 established the National Drug Enforcement Policy Board to oversee and coordinate all federal drug law enforcement efforts, including drug interdiction. Through the act, the Congress intended to strengthen the central direction of U.S. anti-drug efforts. NNBIS, however, is headed by the Vice President, who is not a member of the Board. The relationship of NNBIS to the Board is unclear in light of the Board's statutory objective, and the location of NNBIS in the Office of the Vice President may limit the Board's ability to oversee and coordinate drug interdiction.

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More detailed information on the results of our work is presented in the appendixes. We trust the information provided will be useful to your continuing oversight efforts. We did not obtain agency comments on this report; however, we have discussed the information contained in this report with NNBIS officials and considered their comments.

As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no distribution of the contents of this report until 30 days from the date of the report. At that time we will send copies to interested parties and make copies available to others upon request.

Sincerely yours,



William J. Anderson
Director

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COORDINATION OF FEDERAL DRUG
INTERDICTION EFFORTS BY THE
NATIONAL NARCOTICS BORDER
INTERDICTION SYSTEM

At the request of the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Government Information, Justice, and Agriculture, House Committee on Government Operations, we reviewed the activities of the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System (NNBIS). This appendix provides information on NNBIS'

- mission, organization, and management;
- acquisition and dissemination of drug smuggling intelligence;
- coordination of drug interdiction operations;
- participation in interdictions;
- emphasis on interdicting drugs between ports-of-entry; and
- process for securing military assistance.

This appendix also provides information on the views of law enforcement officials on NNBIS.

FEDERAL DRUG INTERDICTION
AT THE U.S. BORDER

For years, the federal government has carried out a variety of efforts intended to reduce the supply of illegal drugs available in this country. Federal domestic law enforcement efforts have sought to immobilize drug trafficking organizations; drug interdiction¹ activities at the Nation's borders have taken

¹Drug interdiction means the seizure by law enforcement agencies of illegal drugs being smuggled into the United States.

place to seize drugs, arrest smugglers, and obtain intelligence² concerning drug trafficking; and international programs have been established to encourage and assist foreign governments to decrease the production and interdict the flow of illicit drugs.

Drug interdiction is considered to be an important element in drug supply reduction efforts. Interdiction removes drugs from the illicit market, increases the risk to drug traffickers, and discourages some would-be traffickers from attempting drug smuggling. In addition, successful interdiction of drugs provides intelligence and evidence which can lead to the destruction of major drug trafficking organizations.

Primary authority and responsibility for federal drug interdiction activities are divided among three agencies in three executive departments--the Treasury Department's U.S. Customs Service, the Transportation Department's U.S. Coast Guard, and the Justice Department's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Other federal agencies are also involved to a lesser degree, including the military and the national intelligence community.³ Some state and local law enforcement agencies also have responsibilities relating to drug interdiction.

In a 1983 GAO report⁴ on federal drug interdiction efforts, we pointed out that the interdiction component of the federal drug enforcement program was fragmented, with Customs, Coast Guard, and DEA having different drug enforcement programs, priorities, and goals. We concluded that federal drug interdiction efforts have been hindered by a lack of coordination among federal law enforcement agencies.

²Drug intelligence consists of knowledge and experience concerning (1) drug trafficking and abuse patterns and trends, including geographic areas involved and types of smuggling activities (strategic intelligence); (2) specific individuals and organizations responsible for importing and distributing illegal drugs, the extent of their criminal activity, and details on drug trafficking organizations (operational intelligence); and (3) information concerning anticipated drug or drug-related criminal acts so that enforcement agencies can take action (tactical intelligence).

³The national intelligence community includes the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, and other intelligence units in the departments of Defense, State, Justice, Treasury, and Energy.

⁴Federal Drug Interdiction Efforts Need Strong Central Oversight, (GAO/GGD-83-52, June 13, 1983).

MISSION, ORGANIZATION, AND
MANAGEMENT OF NNBIS

The mission of the National Narcotics Border Interdiction System is to coordinate federal drug interdiction efforts. NNBIS is a coordinating body--it coordinates the drug interdiction activities of other organizations but does not interdict drugs itself. Most of NNBIS' activities are carried out by six regional centers located in Miami, New Orleans, El Paso, Long Beach, Chicago, and New York City. NNBIS regional centers were modeled on the drug interdiction coordination and intelligence gathering activities of the South Florida Task Force, a broad anti-crime program established in 1982 in Miami under the direction of the Vice-President. NNBIS headquarters supports the regional operations by performing various coordinating functions at the national level. As agreed with the Subcommittee on Government Information, Justice, and Agriculture, we focused our review on the four regional centers located along the southern border of the United States--Miami, New Orleans, El Paso, and Long Beach. A detailed description of our objectives, scope, and methodology is included as appendix II.

Mission

The President announced the establishment of NNBIS on March 23, 1983, and directed the Vice President to head NNBIS. According to the President, the mission of NNBIS was to coordinate the work of those federal agencies that have existing responsibilities and capabilities for the interdiction of seaborne, airborne, and cross-border importation of illegal drugs. The President directed NNBIS to monitor suspected smuggling activity originating outside the United States and destined for the United States and to coordinate agencies' seizures of contraband and arrests of persons involved in illegal drug importation.

NNBIS is, and was intended to be, an informal coordinating body that recommends, but does not direct, actions by agencies involved in drug interdiction. NNBIS is not a separate and distinct agency--it does not have a legislative charter or a budget. It attempts to achieve its objectives and obtain its resources through the cooperation and contributions of its participating agencies. The agencies, primarily Customs and Coast Guard, contribute funding, equipment, facilities, and staffing from their existing budgets.

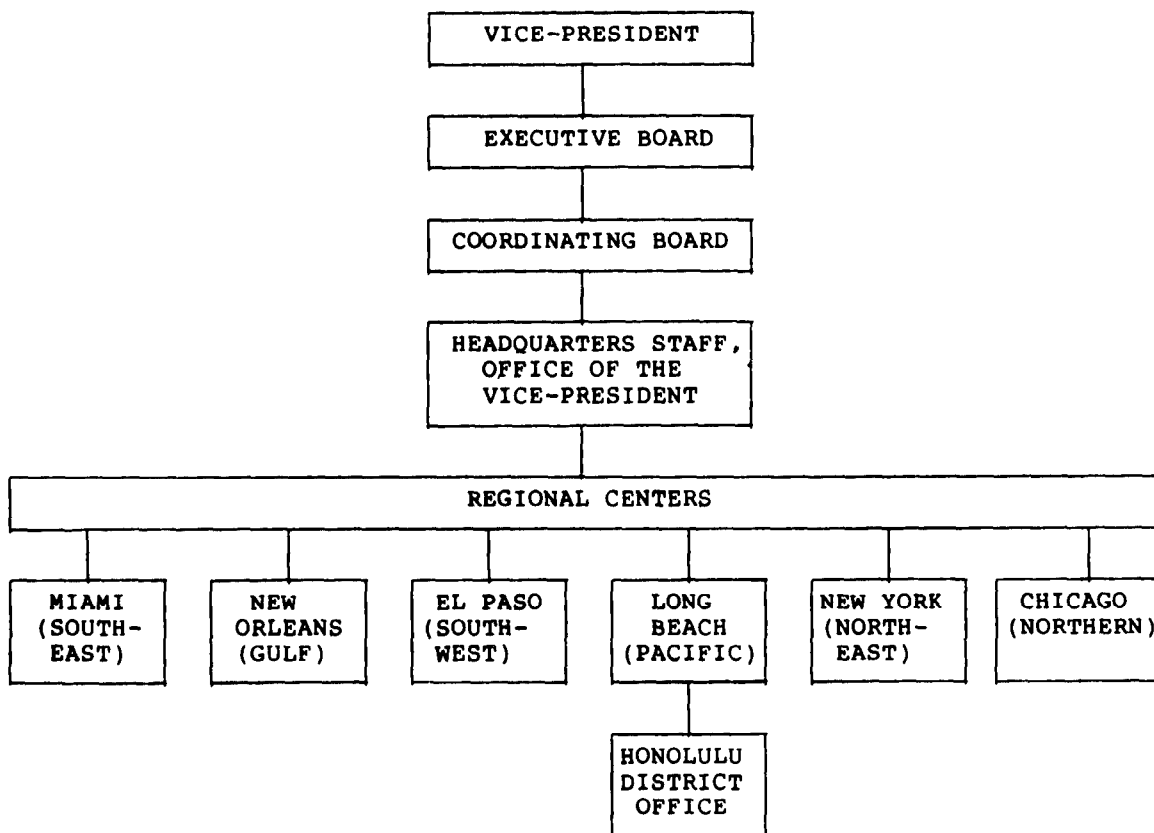
On June 17, 1983, when the Vice President announced the establishment of the NNBIS regional centers, he said that NNBIS was a permanent program that would use the general principles and most successful interdiction coordination techniques of the South Florida Task Force. The Vice President directed the regional centers to gather and analyze intelligence, assess the local drug smuggling threat, assign priorities to interdiction targets,

identify resources, recommend the most effective action to be taken, and coordinate special operations involving activities by more than one federal agency. In carrying out its mission, NNBIS is responsible for coordinating requests by civilian law enforcement agencies for military assistance relating to drug smuggling. In addition, NNBIS is to act as a conduit for drug smuggling intelligence flowing from the national intelligence community to law enforcement agencies.

Organization

NNBIS is headed by the Vice President and governed by an Executive Board appointed by the President and a Coordinating Board composed of ranking officials from participating federal agencies. The bulk of NNBIS' operations are carried out by the regional centers while a headquarters staff coordinates with the regional centers and participating agencies. The organizational structure of NNBIS is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1
Organizational Structure of
National Narcotics Border Interdiction System



NNBIS' headquarters staff coordinates with the regional centers and the participating agencies. The Staff Director is from the Coast Guard, and the five other staff members are from the Coast Guard, Customs, Air Force, and Navy. NNBIS headquarters activities include coordinating with the Department of Defense (DOD) to obtain military assistance for drug interdiction efforts; working to increase the flow of drug smuggling intelligence, especially from the national intelligence community; and compiling information on drug interdictions.

Each NNBIS regional center has an Intelligence Information Coordination Center and an Operations Information Center. The intelligence center is designed to gather and collate drug smuggling intelligence and pass information to the operations center and law enforcement agencies. The operations center is designed to help law enforcement agencies detect and track suspected smugglers; review the availability of civilian and military interdiction resources; make recommendations to the appropriate agency or agencies for surveillance, interception, and seizure of illegal drug shipments; and coordinate joint special operations among law enforcement agencies and the military.

The organization, size, and composition of the staff at each of the four regional centers we examined is similar. On October 1, 1984, the number of staff ranged from 31 full-time and 2 part-time personnel in Miami to 20 full-time and 3 part-time personnel in Long Beach. Each center had staff from the Coast Guard, Customs, DEA, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the military services, and state and/or local law enforcement agencies. NNBIS headquarters and regional officials were generally satisfied with how the centers were staffed. However, officials identified some staffing problems in the four centers we visited.

Staff turnover was perceived by NNBIS regional officials (except at Miami) to be a hindrance during the first several months of operations. During that time, many positions were filled by agencies on a short-term basis. NNBIS officials said this resulted in a loss of the expertise that the departing staff had acquired. The NNBIS Staff Director told us that this situation has improved and that agencies are now assigning personnel for longer periods of time.

DEA's commitment of personnel was less than NNBIS had expected. According to DEA guidelines issued in August 1983 concerning coordination and participation with NNBIS, DEA planned to assign one criminal investigator and one intelligence analyst to each of the NNBIS centers. We noted, however, that El Paso had no DEA criminal investigator, New Orleans was without a DEA criminal investigator for a period of several months, and Long Beach had a DEA investigator and analyst working at the center

intermittently. The Administrator of DEA told us that DEA's initial commitment was not met during the first months of NNBIS' operations because DEA's assigned personnel were not being productively used by NNBIS. The DEA Administrator told us that DEA planned to fully meet its initial commitment.

The NNBIS Staff Director told us that the rank of the military personnel assigned was lower than what NNBIS had requested. We noted that most were enlisted personnel. NNBIS representatives at Long Beach and El Paso said higher ranking military personnel would be able to deal more effectively with local base commanders in securing and coordinating the use of military resources for drug interdiction.

Management is informal and decentralized

Each regional center determines how it will carry out the responsibilities assigned by the President and Vice President. According to the NNBIS Staff Director, each center was required to set up its operations using the President's and Vice President's announcements of NNBIS' responsibilities and the established organizational structure as guidance. The Staff Director said that headquarters has not developed detailed plans, procedures, or guidelines for the regional centers because NNBIS was not intended to be an agency or bureaucracy and because the Vice President wants NNBIS to have an informal, coordinative, non-command structure.

NNBIS has not developed a formal self-evaluation system. NNBIS headquarters monitors the regional centers' operations using daily messages, weekly reports, and monthly critiques of special operations prepared by each regional center. NNBIS headquarters also (1) reviews statistics on the number of drug seizures at the borders and (2) informally monitors the extent that agencies, particularly DOD, interact with NNBIS.

ACQUIRING AND DISSEMINATING DRUG SMUGGLING INTELLIGENCE

Most of NNBIS' intelligence activities are carried out by the NNBIS regional centers, with assistance from NNBIS headquarters in the acquisition of intelligence from the national intelligence community. The intelligence centers in the regions primarily collect intelligence that has been gathered by others, but they also actively acquire information by conducting surveillances and developing and interviewing informants. In addition, they coordinate various special intelligence projects that other organizations carry out.

Availability of intelligence

The staff of the regional intelligence centers consist mainly of investigators and intelligence specialists who pass intelligence to and from their home agencies. Primary sources of existing intelligence for the NNBIS intelligence centers are the El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC),⁵ Coast Guard, Customs, Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Department of Defense. However, NNBIS officials said the amount of intelligence they had received has been limited, particularly tactical intelligence which provides specific information about the time and place of drug shipments. Some NNBIS officials told us they were unsure whether other agencies possess additional tactical intelligence that they are not providing NNBIS.

The New Orleans intelligence center Director said success in acquiring drug smuggling intelligence depends on the extent that agencies cooperate, and the major barrier has been that law enforcement agencies have priorities other than drug interdiction. For example, DEA concentrates on investigating major domestic drug traffickers and not on collecting and disseminating tactical drug interdiction intelligence. The New Orleans Director also noted that agencies provide intelligence to NNBIS on specific cases when they need assistance, particularly military assistance. In New Orleans, the intelligence center was designing a questionnaire for DEA investigators to use so that more drug interdiction intelligence would be included in DEA's investigative reports.

The intelligence center Director in Miami told us that a hindrance to receiving intelligence is that NNBIS is new and incorrectly perceived by others. He told us that a perception exists among law enforcement agencies that NNBIS takes information, assets, and resources and gives little in return.

The Long Beach intelligence center's efforts were affected by various factors. Long Beach NNBIS officials told us that the limited amount of available intelligence had caused the Long Beach intelligence center to establish as a major goal the task of increasing the flow of intelligence among involved law enforcement agencies. We also noted that the Long Beach center's intelligence efforts were affected by the existence of a major drug smuggling intelligence unit operated by the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard's Pacific Area Intelligence unit also collects intelligence relating to maritime drug smuggling, analyzes what

⁵EPIC was established in 1974 as a multi-agency intelligence center operated by DEA. EPIC serves as a central point for collecting, analyzing, and disseminating intelligence on worldwide drug movements by land, sea, and air.

is gathered, and disseminates intelligence to its own interdiction units as well as others, including NNBIS. The Coast Guard unit's efforts have increased substantially since 1983. Long Beach NNBIS officials told us that because of the Coast Guard unit's activities, the Long Beach center's intelligence workload is less than it otherwise would be.

National intelligence
community involvement
is increasing

To help gather intelligence, NNBIS headquarters has worked to improve the cooperation and participation of the national intelligence community. The Staff Director said that NNBIS' intelligence coordination efforts have resulted in the dissemination of national intelligence community information to the regional centers and an increase in the amount of information that the intelligence community believes can lawfully be released to law enforcement agencies.

Most of the NNBIS centers were just starting to receive information from the national intelligence community at the time of our work (May 1984 through November 1984). According to NNBIS officials, the New Orleans and El Paso centers first received such intelligence in September 1984, and the Long Beach center started receiving it in November 1984. This type of intelligence had been provided to the South Florida Task Force before the establishment of NNBIS and continued to be provided to the Miami NNBIS center. The NNBIS officials were optimistic that information coming from the national intelligence community will help increase the availability of tactical intelligence.

Policy for operational
intelligence gathering
varies by regions

We noted that intelligence center staff at some regional centers gather original intelligence operationally (e.g., conducting surveillance and developing and interviewing informants) in addition to collecting existing intelligence from other agencies. There is no uniform NNBIS policy for operational intelligence gathering by regional centers. Regional officials in El Paso and Long Beach told us that operational intelligence gathering is generally performed by staff members under the authority of their home agency. The Staff Director at NNBIS headquarters told us that although NNBIS personnel sometimes actively gather intelligence, this type of intelligence work is an exception to the way they normally operate.

Our work disclosed that intelligence center staff at Miami, Long Beach, and El Paso had carried out such activities. For example, at the El Paso center, a Customs official contacted original sources of intelligence to verify information regarding

suspect aircraft. He told us that NNBIS officials have directed him to discontinue this type of intelligence gathering. He noted that such activities by NNBIS personnel can cause friction with law enforcement agencies.

NNBIS has been criticized for actively collecting intelligence. In January 1984, the Administrator of DEA said that active collection of intelligence by NNBIS representatives is an encroachment on DEA's mission. Likewise, Customs took exception to certain intelligence gathering activities conducted by the NNBIS center in New York. Customs officials said these activities included interviewing prisoners and taking photographs at ports. The Customs Assistant Commissioner, Office of Enforcement, told us that he believes NNBIS should not conduct operational intelligence gathering and that Customs personnel assigned to NNBIS should not actively gather intelligence as Customs employees.

Special intelligence projects

The intelligence centers also coordinate various types of special intelligence gathering projects that are carried out by others. For example, the Channel Islands Intrusion Survey was a special intelligence project developed and coordinated by the Long Beach intelligence center staff. It was designed to help determine whether or not there is a smuggling threat on the Channel Islands off the coast of California. On the basis of information gathered from law enforcement agencies and informants, NNBIS arranged for U.S. Marine Corps personnel to monitor some air landing strips on the islands. It also arranged for and used some Customs equipment for the operation.

COORDINATING DRUG INTERDICTION OPERATIONS

NNBIS operations coordination activities are primarily carried out by the NNBIS regional centers, with assistance from NNBIS headquarters primarily in the acquisition of military resources. Each NNBIS region operates an Operations Information Center.

The two main activities of the regional operations centers are (1) watch operations to identify and track possible drug smuggling activities and recommend interdictions to law enforcement agencies and (2) special operations involving both civilian law enforcement agencies and military resources. We observed that the extent and types of activities carried out by the watch operations varied by regional center.

Watch operations
vary widely

The Miami center's watch operation, which originated as part of the South Florida Task Force, was the model for the establishment of the other region's watch operations. The Miami operations center maintains a 24-hour per day watch which works as follows. The operations center receives intelligence from various sources, including the region's intelligence center, regarding suspect vessels and aircraft. When sufficient intelligence is gathered to indicate that a particular vessel or aircraft has a high potential for interdiction, the NNBS center may designate the vessel or aircraft as an interdiction target (which NNBS calls a "TAG").⁶ Once a TAG is established, the operations center attempts to obtain further information and to track the TAG's location through various means. When there is enough information and an interdiction is possible, the operations center recommends such action to law enforcement agencies and the TAG is classified as a case. The New Orleans operations center has a 24-hour watch and operates in the same manner as the Miami center.

In contrast, the Long Beach center maintained a 24-hour watch until August 18, 1984, when it was changed to 16 hours per day on Mondays through Fridays and 8 hours per day on weekends. The Long Beach operations center also differs from Miami and New Orleans in that while it had designated a number of TAGs it had not made any recommendations for interdictions of those TAGs through November 1984. Long Beach NNBS officials told us they had not received enough intelligence on the TAGs it had established to warrant recommendations for interdiction.

In El Paso, the watch was not a major activity of the operations center. The operations center staff did not have an active caseload of drug smuggling targets at the time of our fieldwork and had never established a TAG. El Paso NNBS officials attributed this to a lack of tactical intelligence. The El Paso watch operations consisted of activities such as receiving calls from law enforcement agencies alerting the center of drug smuggling suspects being tracked and then notifying other agencies of the tracking activities. El Paso NNBS officials told us that El Paso planned to reduce the watch operation from 24 to 16 hours per day by eliminating the midnight shift because the level of activity did not justify a longer watch.

⁶A TAG is established when NNBS obtains actionable intelligence on an aircraft or vessel suspected of being used for drug smuggling. For example, if the operations center receives information that a particular vessel meeting a drug smuggling profile had been sighted in an area, the vessel would be designated as a TAG.

Table 1 shows the number of TAGs established by each of the four regional centers from June 1983 through June 1984. The number of TAGs exceeds the number of actual vessels and aircraft involved because some TAGs were closed and reactivated as new TAGs.

Table 1

TAGs Established
June 1983 Through June 1984

<u>Regional center</u>	<u>Number of TAGs</u>
Miami	1,505
New Orleans	225
Long Beach	97
El Paso	0

Special operations

Another major operations center activity is coordinating and supporting joint special operations to detect and apprehend drug smugglers and to assess the regional smuggling threat. Special operations usually involve both law enforcement agencies and military resources. NNBIS headquarters may participate in planning and coordinating the operations.

We observed that the El Paso operations center concentrated its efforts on special operations. The following is an example of a special operation in which the El Paso center participated: Customs initiated Operation Snowflake along the Arizona-Mexico border for 5 days in January 1984. The operation was coordinated through the El Paso NNBIS center which requested the support of Navy E2-C and Marine Corps OV-10 aircraft. NNBIS personnel also observed and evaluated the operation. Customs made two drug seizures after the E2-C identified suspect aircraft and the OV-10 helped track the suspects. A total of about 3,300 pounds of marijuana, one aircraft, and three vehicles were seized, and five suspects were arrested.

Our work indicated that many special operations did not result in drug seizures or arrests. For example, the El Paso operations center was involved in 19 special air operations from July 1983 through October 1984. Two of the 19 operations focused on gathering intelligence of strategic value. In 15 of the remaining 17 operations, no drug seizures or arrests were made.

The Long Beach operations center was involved in seven special air operations from June 1983 through July 1984 and 13 marine operations from August 1983 through August 1984. The marine operations produced no drug interdictions. The air operations were conducted primarily by Customs, with NNBIS securing

military resources and monitoring the operations. One of these operations resulted in a successful drug interdiction (600 pounds of marijuana and two arrests). The Long Beach operations center also secured Navy resources for special marine operations conducted by the Coast Guard and the Navy.

The NNBIS Staff Director stated that even though special operations are not always successful in identifying drug smugglers for interdiction, they provide other benefits. According to the Staff Director, the operations help in determining relative threats in specific areas, identifying potential smugglers, and educating both DOD and enforcement agencies on working together.

NNBIS PARTICIPATION IN
INTERDICTIONS VARIES
WIDELY AMONG REGIONS

As requested by the Subcommittee, we analyzed NNBIS' participation in interdictions. Our analysis indicates that NNBIS regional centers do not participate in most drug interdictions and that the extent of NNBIS participation varies widely among regions. NNBIS is not expected to participate in all drug interdictions because many drug interdictions involve only a single agency and may not require NNBIS participation as a coordinator.

From June 10, 1983, to June 9, 1984, NNBIS recorded 2,839 cases involving the interdiction of drugs. Many of these cases took place at ports-of-entry and involved relatively small amounts of illegal drugs. Such cases would typically have no need for NNBIS' participation. Of the recorded cases, 2,289, or 81 percent, occurred in the four NNBIS regions we visited (see table 2).

Table 2

Drug Interdiction Cases Occurring in the
Areas Served by 4 NNBIS Regional Centers

<u>Location</u>	<u>Cases</u>
Miami	1,180
New Orleans	84
El Paso	602
Long Beach	<u>423</u>
Total	<u><u>2,289</u></u>

We asked NNBIS officials at each of the four centers we visited to identify those drug interdiction cases that NNBIS participated in from June 1983 through June 1984. The number of

drug interdictions in which each of the four centers identified NNBIS participation is shown in table 3. However, the four centers may have been involved in or contributed to other drug seizures besides the 136 interdictions they identified for us. For example, all regional centers exchange intelligence with various agencies. The results of such activities are not always readily apparent and could include contributions to successful interdictions of which the center is not aware.

Table 3

Drug Interdiction Cases in Which
NNBIS Reported Participation (4 Regions)
June 1983 through June 1984

<u>Regional center</u>	<u>Cases</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Miami	101	74
New Orleans	25	18
El Paso	3	2
Long Beach	<u>9</u>	<u>7</u>
Total	<u>136^a</u>	<u>100^a</u>

^aTwo interdiction cases were identified by both Miami and New Orleans. The percentage of the 4 centers added together will total over 100 percent.

We analyzed 77 of the 136 drug interdictions in which the four centers reported participation. We analyzed all 37 of the interdictions in which New Orleans, El Paso, and Long Beach reported participation and 40 of the 101 interdictions in which Miami reported participation.⁷ For each interdiction, we attempted to determine how NNBIS first found out about the case, the nature and extent of NNBIS' activities, the source(s) of information that led to the interdiction, and whether the interdiction would have occurred without NNBIS' participation. Because NNBIS' written records were not always complete, our analysis included discussions with NNBIS personnel and, in some cases, personnel from involved law enforcement agencies.

Most of the interdictions we analyzed involved vessels and marijuana. In the 77 cases, 62 involved vessels as a means of

⁷We randomly selected the 40 Miami interdiction cases from the 101 interdictions that the Miami staff identified.

smuggling, 16 involved aircraft, and 2 involved automotive vehicles.⁸ Marijuana was seized in 69 of the cases,⁹ cocaine in 5 cases, and heroin in 1 case. In 2 of the cases identified by New Orleans, no drugs were seized.¹⁰

NNBIS' records sometimes did not show at what point NNBIS became aware of the case or the nature of their participation. Our review of the records and our discussions with NNBIS and other agency personnel often failed to clarify the exact nature of NNBIS' actions. Consequently, in 29 of the 77 cases we analyzed, we could not determine whether the interdiction would have occurred if NNBIS had not participated. In our judgment, 14 of the remaining 48 interdictions would not have occurred without NNBIS' participation and 34 would have occurred even if NNBIS had not participated. Our determinations were based on an understanding of the action that NNBIS took in each case and our assessment of each action's contribution to a successful interdiction.

Although we conducted a detailed examination of each of the 77 interdiction cases, our conclusions are judgmental. We therefore discussed the results of our analysis with NNBIS officials in the four regional centers. In New Orleans, El Paso, and Long Beach, NNBIS officials agreed with our judgments regarding the extent of NNBIS' participation in interdictions. In Miami, NNBIS officials disagreed with our judgment that 6 of the 40 Miami cases would not have occurred without NNBIS participation. They believe that 13 cases fell into this category.

We found that NNBIS' participation in interdictions took such forms as gathering intelligence from other agencies, disseminating intelligence, obtaining confirmation of intelligence, securing military assistance, updating the location of suspect vessels, recommending areas to search for suspect vessels, and recommending interdictions. The following case illustrates NNBIS' participation in an interdiction that we believe would not have occurred without NNBIS' involvement.

--The New Orleans NNBIS center received information that a suspected "mothership" was moving northward in the Caribbean Sea toward the Yucatan Channel. Relying on this information, NNBIS recommended that

⁸The total exceeds 77 because three of the drug interdiction cases involved a combination of vessels and other conveyances.

⁹In one of the cases, both marijuana and hashish oil were seized. Some cases involved marijuana residue.

¹⁰Aircraft were seized in the two cases. We are counting these seizures as interdictions for our analysis even though they do not meet the definition of a drug interdiction.

the Coast Guard deploy a cutter in the western area of the Yucatan Channel to make an interdiction. The Coast Guard complied but did not detect the vessel. NNBIS later learned that the suspect vessel was in an area north of the Yucatan Peninsula. NNBIS recommended that the Air Force conduct overflights of the area to identify the vessel during a routine military mission. An Air Force WC-130 subsequently identified several suspect vessels. NNBIS advised the Coast Guard of this information. The Coast Guard deployed a cutter to the area, seized a vessel and over 8,500 pounds of marijuana, and arrested six persons. NNBIS then recommended that military and law enforcement agencies continue conducting overflights of the area based on intelligence indicating continued activities by the "mothership." During these overflights, a Coast Guard aircraft observed over 200 bales of marijuana floating in the water and one other vessel being scuttled by its crew.

We could not determine whether some of the drug interdictions we analyzed would have occurred in the absence of NNBIS' participation. In one case, for example, EPIC contacted the New Orleans NNBIS Center to advise that a suspected drug smuggling vessel was operating near the Yucatan Channel. NNBIS confirmed the accuracy of this information by obtaining corroborating information from another source of intelligence and notified the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard located the vessel, seized 20 tons of marijuana, and arrested nine people. NNBIS' activities in this case may or may not have affected the outcome of this case because information already existed that could have led to the interdiction even if NNBIS had not participated.

We concluded that some of the interdictions we analyzed would have occurred even if NNBIS had not participated. For example, we noted several cases where the interdiction took place before the NNBIS center was notified. In one of these cases, the Coast Guard notified the New Orleans NNBIS center of an aircraft crash where a small amount of marijuana was found. NNBIS then assisted the follow-up investigative efforts. In other cases, the NNBIS center conducted activities such as advising law enforcement agencies of the seizures and coordinating the movement of the seized drugs.

NNBIS ACTIVITIES GENERALLY
RELATE TO MARIJUANA SMUGGLING
BETWEEN PORTS-OF-ENTRY

The regional centers concentrate on drug smuggling between ports-of-entry. NNBIS officials believe this is where NNBIS can make the greatest contribution to drug interdiction efforts.

Focusing on this type of smuggling has generally resulted in interdictions involving marijuana.

The Miami center concentrates on maritime smuggling. NNBIS' records show that the majority of Miami's TAGs were vessels.¹¹ The Miami Operations Center Director said 90 percent of the Miami operations center's efforts center around sea interdictions, most of which are located in the South Florida, Bahamian, and Caribbean areas. He said the operations center does not give priority to marijuana interdiction but that marijuana is what is usually seized on interdicted vessels. According to the Miami Intelligence Center Director, 70 percent of the intelligence handled by his staff applies to sea traffic. The Miami NNBIS Staff Coordinator said that the Miami center is best equipped to handle open sea interdictions involving marijuana. NNBIS officials told us, however, that the Miami center planned to increase its efforts involving air smuggling.

The Operations Center Director at New Orleans told us that New Orleans focuses on vessels suspected of smuggling illegal drugs from Colombia through the Yucatan Channel. The New Orleans center believes this is where it can make the greatest contribution to the drug interdiction effort because the best available tactical intelligence involves such smuggling. The Director said the center had done little regarding other drug smuggling threats primarily because it lacks the tactical intelligence necessary to meaningfully assist law enforcement agencies responsible for addressing these threats.

At El Paso, NNBIS decided to first attack the air smuggling threat along the U.S.-Mexico border. According to the El Paso Staff Coordinator, the available military assistance (principally aircraft and radar) in the region is better suited to air interdictions than overland interdictions. The El Paso center's strategy was to coordinate special operations involving the military and law enforcement agencies, primarily Customs.

The Long Beach center has not established priorities for its efforts, but most activities involve maritime smuggling. A drug smuggling threat assessment prepared by Long Beach focused on vessels smuggling marijuana into the Pacific region. We also noted that of 97 TAGs established over a 1-year period, 88 were vessels.

¹¹NNBIS records showed that of 1,505 TAGs established by the Miami operations center from June 1983 through June 1984, 1,319 were vessels, 25 were aircraft, and 161 were either vessels or aircraft.

SECURING MILITARY RESOURCES
TO ASSIST INTERDICTION EFFORTS

NNBIS headquarters coordinates quarterly requests by the regional centers for military assistance. The centers determine what military resources are needed and submit requests to NNBIS headquarters each quarter. Using knowledge of the resources that may be available, headquarters consolidates these requests and sends one quarterly request to the Department of Defense Task Force on Drug Enforcement. Regional centers also obtain the use of military resources through case-by-case requests directly to military bases.

The operations centers identify and maintain lists of military resources that are potentially available for assisting interdiction efforts. Operations center military staff are responsible for accomplishing this as part of their overall duties as liaison between NNBIS and the military branches. We noted that the Miami and Long Beach operations centers did not have lists of Navy ships considered available for assistance on a case-by-case basis. Most of the coordination that takes place with the Navy for this type of drug interdiction assistance is handled by the Coast Guard.

We noted that the regional centers had secured the assistance of many different types of military resources. However, we were not able to determine the total amount of military resources obtained by NNBIS for drug interdiction efforts. NNBIS' records regarding military assistance were incomplete.

VIEWS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT
OFFICIALS ON NNBIS

In NNBIS' role as an informal coordinating body, it relies heavily on participating agencies for cooperation. The manner in which agencies perceive NNBIS is important because their views may affect their cooperation with NNBIS. In addition, agency perceptions provide indications of NNBIS' effectiveness. We obtained information from various federal, state, and local law enforcement officials concerning their views of NNBIS and any coordination of their activities with or by NNBIS.

We sent a standardized questionnaire to 58 federal, state, and local law enforcement officials in the regions covered by the

four NNBIS centers we visited.¹² NNBIS officials told us the 58 law enforcement officials should be familiar with NNBIS activities. Forty-eight officials responded, or 83 percent of those sent questionnaires. We also talked with Customs, Coast Guard, and DEA officials during our fieldwork.

Eighty-one percent of the law enforcement officials responding to our questionnaire said NNBIS' role had been set forth clearly to them. At the same time, 56 percent of the questionnaire respondents said there were important aspects of NNBIS' role needing clarification. Respondents cited several specific areas including NNBIS' relationship with the national intelligence community, NNBIS' relationship with EPIC, whether NNBIS' activities duplicate those of other federal agencies, and what legal authority NNBIS possesses. Similar views were expressed by various law enforcement officials that we met with.

The views of the officials responding to the questionnaires were mixed on how NNBIS had affected drug interdiction efforts in their areas. Thirty-five percent said NNBIS had improved the efforts to some extent, 48 percent said NNBIS had no effect, and 2 percent said NNBIS had somewhat worsened the efforts. Fifteen percent of the respondents indicated that they had no basis to judge NNBIS' effect on drug interdiction efforts.

Both the questionnaire respondents and the officials we talked with gave credit to NNBIS for facilitating access to military resources. While some officials we talked with said the Posse Comitatus Amendment of 1981 is responsible for increased DOD cooperation, they were pleased with NNBIS' efforts in acquiring military resources. They also said that getting military assistance through NNBIS is quicker, easier, and less costly to them than before.

We also asked the officials responding to our questionnaire whether they foresee NNBIS as a valuable resource for improving their office's drug interdiction activities in the future. Twenty-seven percent answered either definitely or probably yes,

¹²The law enforcement officials were on the "steering committee," or "boards of directors" for three of the four NNBIS regional centers we reviewed. Although the El Paso center did not have such a committee or board, we sent a questionnaire to each law enforcement official that the El Paso Staff Director said should be on such a committee if one existed. The 58 officials headed law enforcement field offices that included DEA; FBI; INS; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; U.S. Marshals Service; U.S. Secret Service; Customs Air Support Branch; DEA/Customs Joint Task Group in Florida; and various state and local law enforcement agencies.

38 percent were uncertain, and 35 percent said probably or definitely no. Some of those who believe NNBIS will be a benefit in the future mentioned NNBIS' access to DOD resources. Others viewed NNBIS as having great potential for improving drug interdiction results after more agencies become aware of what NNBIS can do. Some respondents with negative perceptions of NNBIS' value in the future said that NNBIS is an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy. Other respondents with negative views said that information provided by NNBIS is already available elsewhere.

OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of our review was to obtain information on NNBIS' operations and on issues facing the future coordination of federal drug interdiction activities. We obtained information on NNBIS' activities and development since inception; NNBIS' involvement in drug interdiction cases; and the perceptions of federal, state, and local law enforcement officials who interact with NNBIS. We focused our review on the four NNBIS regions along the southern border of the United States--Miami, New Orleans, El Paso, and Long Beach--because of the Subcommittee's interest in smuggling from Latin America.

To accomplish our objective, we performed work at NNBIS headquarters in Washington, D.C., and at the four southern NNBIS regional centers. We also visited the New York and Chicago NNBIS centers. In addition, we performed work at the headquarters and several field offices of Customs, Coast Guard, and DEA; the headquarters of the Department of Defense; and the El Paso Intelligence Center. Our work included

- discussions and interviews with NNBIS and agency officials;
- a review of NNBIS' plans, procedures, and practices;
- an examination of NNBIS' and agencies' reports, files, correspondence, and statistical data;
- an analysis of drug interdiction cases that NNBIS said it was involved in; and
- a review of reports and estimates concerning the importation and availability of illegal drugs in the United States.

In addition to our field work, we sent a standardized questionnaire to 58 law enforcement officials identified by NNBIS as knowledgeable about NNBIS' mission and operations. The questionnaire requested information concerning each official's views of NNBIS and any coordination of activities with or by NNBIS. Forty-eight officials responded and answered all or parts of our questionnaires. The response rate was 83 percent.

We supplemented our work with information in related GAO reports, congressional reports, congressional hearings, and legislation. Our review was performed in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Our field work was conducted from May 1984 through November 1984.

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