



Highlights of [GAO-04-600T](#), testimony before the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives

PEACE CORPS

Status of Initiatives to Improve Volunteer Safety and Security

Why GAO Did This Study

About 7,500 Peace Corps volunteers currently serve in 70 countries. The administration intends to increase this number to about 14,000. Volunteers often live in areas with limited access to reliable communications, police, or medical services. As Americans, they may be viewed as relatively wealthy and, hence, good targets for crime. In this testimony, GAO summarizes findings from its 2002 report *Peace Corps: Initiatives for Addressing Safety and Security Challenges Hold Promise, but Progress Should be Assessed*, GAO-02-818, on (1) trends in crime against volunteers and Peace Corps' system for generating information, (2) the agency's field implementation of its safety and security framework, and (3) the underlying factors contributing to the quality of these practices.

What GAO Recommends

In 2002, to ensure that Peace Corps initiatives to improve safety and security performance would have their intended effect, GAO recommended that the agency (1) develop indicators to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives and (2) develop a strategy to address staff turnover.

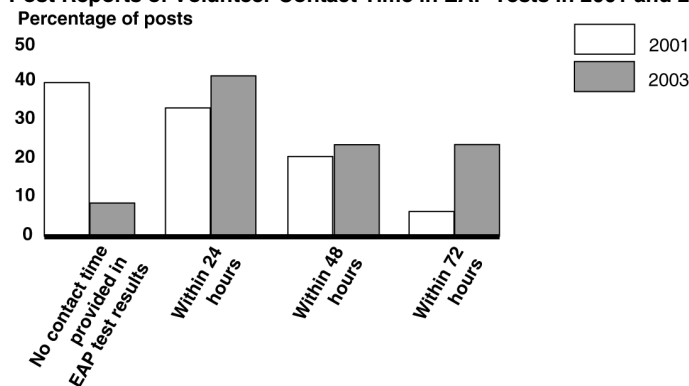
What GAO Found

The full extent of crime against Peace Corps volunteers is unclear due to significant under-reporting. However, Peace Corps' reported rates for most types of assaults have increased since the agency began collecting data in 1990. The agency's data analysis has produced useful insights, but additional analyses could help improve anti-crime strategies. Peace Corps has hired an analyst to enhance data collection and analysis to help the agency develop better-informed intervention and prevention strategies.

In 2002, we reported that Peace Corps had developed safety and security policies but that efforts to implement these policies in the field had produced varying results. Some posts complied, but others fell short. Volunteers were generally satisfied with training. However, some housing did not meet standards and, while all posts had prepared and tested emergency action plans, many plans had shortcomings. Evidence suggests that agency initiatives have not yet eliminated this unevenness. The inspector general continues to find shortcomings at some posts. However, recent emergency action plan tests show an improved ability to contact volunteers in a timely manner (see figure).

In 2002, we found that uneven supervision and oversight, staff turnover, and unclear guidance hindered efforts to ensure quality practices. The agency has taken action to address these problems. To strengthen supervision and oversight, it established an office of safety and security, supported by three senior staff at headquarters, nine field-based safety and security officers, and a compliance officer. In response to our recommendations, Peace Corps was granted authority to exempt 23 safety and security positions from the "5-year rule"—a statutory restriction on tenure. It also adopted a framework for monitoring post compliance and quantifiable performance indicators. However, the agency is still clarifying guidance, revising indicators, and establishing a performance baseline.

Post Reports of Volunteer Contact Time in EAP Tests in 2001 and 2003



Time it took the post to contact at least 90 percent of its volunteers

Source: GAO analysis of Peace Corps Data.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-600T.

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