



Highlights of [GAO-08-12](#), a report to the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

To help secure the nation’s ports against a terrorist attack, federal regulations have required cargo and other maritime facilities to have security plans in place since July 2004. U.S Coast Guard (USCG) guidance calls for an annual inspection to ensure that plans are being followed. Federal law enacted in October 2006 required such facilities to be inspected two times a year—one of which is to be conducted unannounced. The USCG plans to conduct one announced inspection and the other as a less comprehensive unannounced “spot check.” GAO examined the extent to which the USCG (1) has met inspection requirements and found facilities to be complying with their plans, (2) has determined the availability of trained personnel to meet current and future facility inspection requirements, and (3) has assessed the effectiveness of its facility inspection program and ensured that program compliance data collected and reported are reliable. GAO analyzed USCG compliance data, interviewed inspectors and other stakeholders in 7 of 35 USCG sectors of varying size, geographic location, and type of waterway.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends the USCG reassess the number of inspection staff needed, compare varying approaches taken by local units in conducting inspections, and improve its facility compliance data. The Department of Homeland Security agreed with GAO’s recommendations.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-12](#). For more information, contact Stephen Caldwell at (202) 512-8777, caldwells@gao.gov.

MARITIME SECURITY

Coast Guard Inspections Identify and Correct Facility Deficiencies, but More Analysis Needed of Program’s Staffing, Practices, and Data

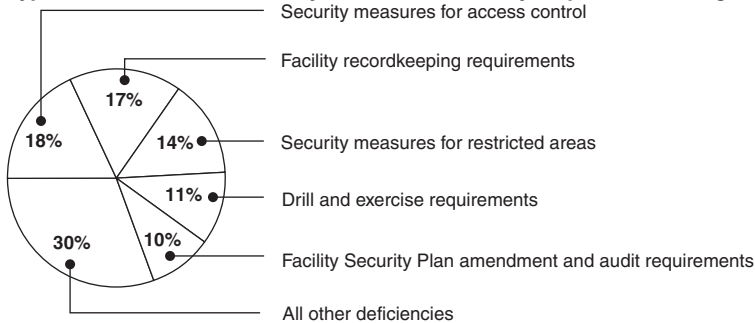
What GAO Found

We could not determine the extent to which the USCG has met inspection requirements because its compliance database does not identify all regulated facilities to establish how many should have been inspected. While the USCG estimates there are about 3,200 facilities requiring inspection, their records indicate 2,126 annual inspections were conducted in 2006. Headquarters officials said field units reported that all required facility inspections were conducted. However, officials also said some inspections may not have been recorded, or were delayed by staff being diverted for natural disasters. The USCG identified deficiencies in about one-third of inspections, mainly for problems with access controls or missing documentation. Over 80 percent of deficiencies identified by the USCG were resolved by facility operators without the USCG applying formal enforcement actions.

Although USCG officials believe they have enough trained inspectors to conduct current and future inspections, two additional factors could affect the USCG’s estimates of the number of inspectors needed. First, facility inspectors balance security inspections with other competing duties, such as safety or pollution checks, and giving priority to security inspections could affect these other duties, inspectors said. Second, new guidance for spot checks calls for these checks to be more detailed—and perhaps more time-consuming—than some USCG units conducted in the past. For example, the guidance now requires an on-site visit, whereas some units had allowed the check to be a drive-by observation. The effect of the new guidance on resource requirements in these units is unknown.

The USCG has not assessed the effectiveness of its facility inspection program. Headquarters guidance gives considerable discretion to local USCG units in deciding how to conduct facility inspections—for example, deciding whether a fine is warranted. The USCG has little or no information, however, on which approaches work better than others and is therefore limited in being able to make informed decisions in guiding the program. Flaws in USCG’s database, including missing, duplicate, and inconsistent information, complicate the USCG’s ability to conduct such analyses or provide other information for making management decisions.

Types of Deficiencies Noted by the USCG in Facility Inspections during 2006



Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard compliance data.