

Why GAO Did This Study

Natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, and terrorist attacks, such as the 2005 bombings in London, highlight the importance of protecting CIKR—assets and systems vital to the economy or health of the nation. DHS issued the NIPP in June 2006 (updated in 2009) to provide the approach for integrating the nation's CIKR. Because the private sector owns most of the nation's CIKR—for example, energy production facilities—DHS encourages asset owners and operators to voluntarily participate in surveys or vulnerability assessments of existing security measures at those assets. This includes nationally significant CIKR that DHS designates as high priority. In response to a request, this report assesses the extent to which DHS has (1) taken action to conduct surveys and assessments among high-priority CIKR, (2) shared the results of these surveys and assessments with asset owners or operators, and (3) assessed the effectiveness of surveys and assessments and identified actions taken, if any, to improve them. GAO, among other things, reviewed laws, analyzed data identifying high-priority assets and activities performed from fiscal years 2009 through 2011, and interviewed DHS officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that, among other things, DHS develop plans for its efforts to improve the collection and organization of data and the timeliness of survey and assessment results, and gather and act upon additional information from asset owners and operators about why improvements were or were not made. DHS concurred with the recommendations.

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CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE PROTECTION

DHS Could Better Manage Security Surveys and Vulnerability Assessments

What GAO Found

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has conducted about 2,800 security surveys and vulnerability assessments on critical infrastructure and key resources (CIKR). DHS directs its protective security advisors to contact owners and operators of high-priority CIKR to offer to conduct surveys and assessments. However, DHS is not positioned to track the extent to which these are performed at high-priority CIKR because of inconsistencies between the databases used to identify these assets and those used to identify surveys and assessments conducted. GAO compared the two databases and found that of the 2,195 security surveys and 655 vulnerability assessments conducted for fiscal years 2009 through 2011, 135 surveys and 44 assessments matched and another 106 surveys and 23 assessments were potential matches for high-priority facilities. GAO could not match additional high-priority facilities because of inconsistencies in the way data were recorded in the two databases, for example, assets with the same company name had different addresses or an asset at one address had different names. DHS officials acknowledged that the data did not match and have begun to take actions to improve the collection and organization of the data. However, DHS does not have milestones and timelines for completing these efforts consistent with standards for project management. By developing a plan with time frames and milestones consistent with these standards DHS would be better positioned to provide a more complete picture of its progress.

DHS shares the results of security surveys and vulnerability assessments with asset owners or operators but faces challenges doing so. A GAO analysis of DHS data from fiscal year 2011 showed that DHS was late meeting its (1) 30-day time frame—as required by DHS guidance—for delivering the results of its security surveys 60 percent of the time and (2) 60-day time frame—expected by DHS managers for delivering the results of its vulnerability assessments—in 84 percent of the instances. DHS officials acknowledged the late delivery of survey and assessment results and said they are working to improve processes and protocols. However, DHS has not established a plan with time frames and milestones for managing this effort consistent with the standards for project management. Also, the National Infrastructure Protection Plan (NIPP), which emphasizes partnering and voluntary information sharing, states that CIKR partners need to be provided with timely and relevant information that they can use to make decisions. Developing a plan with time frames and milestones for improving timeliness could help DHS provide asset owners and operators with the timely information they need to consider security enhancements.

DHS uses a follow-up tool to assess the results of security surveys and assessments performed at CIKR assets, and are considering upgrades to the tool. However, DHS could better measure results and improve program management by capturing additional information. For example, key information, such as why certain improvements were or were not made by asset owners and operators that have received security surveys, could help DHS improve its efforts. Further, information on barriers to making improvements—such as the cost of security enhancements—could help DHS better understand asset owners and operators' rationale in making decisions and thereby help improve its programs. Taking steps to gather additional information could help keep DHS better informed for making decisions in managing its programs.