

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-24-106172](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Since its inception in 1993, the National Guard Youth Challenge Program has produced over 200,000 graduates across dozens of sites located in the states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Currently, the program operates 39 sites.

House Report 117-88, accompanying the Department of Defense Appropriations Bill for Fiscal Year 2022, included a provision for GAO to review the National Guard Youth Challenge Program, including its implementation and oversight. This report describes (1) how selected sites implemented core program components, and examines the extent to which OSD and NGB have (2) conducted oversight of the Challenge Program and (3) assessed its performance, among other objectives.

GAO reviewed program policies, inspections, and audits; surveyed program officials at a non-generalizable sample of 13 sites; and interviewed OSD, NGB, and site officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes five recommendations for DOD to assess and address root causes of systemic inspection findings; establish a process to ensure completion of required cooperative agreement audits; and establish strategic goals, performance goals, and performance measures. DOD generally concurred with the recommendations and described actions that they believe implemented some of the recommendations.

View [GAO-24-106172](#). For more information, contact Brenda S. Farrell at (202) 512-3604 or farrellb@gao.gov.

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NATIONAL GUARD YOUTH CHALLENGE PROGRAM

Actions Needed to Enhance Oversight and Assess Performance

What GAO Found

The National Guard Youth Challenge Program is a voluntary, quasi-military program that aims to imbue at-risk youth aged 15.5 to 18 with the values, life skills, education and self-discipline needed to succeed as productive citizens. GAO found that selected program sites generally implemented non-academic core program components through activities prescribed by National Guard Bureau (NGB) guidance. For example, all 13 sites GAO surveyed reported implementing the life coping skills component by teaching participants (cadets) how to prepare a personal budget. In contrast, sites' implementation of the academic excellence component varied, with instruction and testing shaped by key differences in academic credentials, accreditations, and partnerships.

National Guard Youth Challenge Program: Idaho Youth Challenge Academy



Source: U.S. Air National Guard/Staff Sgt. Joseph Morgan. | GAO-24-106172

The Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) and NGB oversee program sites using several processes, including triennial program inspections and audits of cooperative agreements between NGB and the states. However, systemic issues identified by NGB—such as low staff-to-cadet ratios—persist across sites, and National Guard personnel have not consistently performed required cooperative agreement audits. By addressing the root causes of systemic issues, NGB can better ensure cadet health and safety and improve program performance. Further, by establishing a process to ensure completion of required audits of cooperative agreements, NGB can address longstanding delays and help ensure that sites adhere to agreements.

Although OSD and NGB collect some performance information, including site-level operational and financial data, they cannot fully assess program performance because they have not established program-wide strategic goals, performance goals, and performance measures. By establishing such goals and measures, OSD and NGB will be better positioned to determine program-wide performance and how to best allocate resources to achieve established goals.