

GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-200](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Helicopter noise can potentially expose members of the public to a variety of negative effects, ranging from annoyance to more serious medical issues. FAA is responsible for managing navigable U.S. airspace and regulating noise from civil helicopter operations. Residents of the D.C. area have raised concerns about the number of helicopter flights and the resulting noise.

GAO was asked to review issues related to helicopter flights and noise within the D.C. area. Among its objectives, this report examines: (1) what is known about helicopter flights and noise from flights in the D.C. area, and (2) the extent to which FAA and helicopter operators have taken action to address helicopter noise in the D.C. area. GAO reviewed statutes, regulations, policies, and documents on helicopter noise. GAO analyzed (1) available data on helicopter operations and noise in the D.C. area for 2017 through 2019, and (2) FAA's approach to responding to helicopter complaints. GAO also interviewed FAA officials; representatives from 18 D.C. area helicopter operators, selected based on operator type and number of flights; and 10 local communities, selected based on factors including geography and stakeholder recommendations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FAA develop a mechanism to exchange helicopter noise information with operators in the D.C. area. FAA agreed with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-21-200](#). For more information, contact Heather Krause at (202) 512-2834 or KrauseH@gao.gov.

January 2021

AIRCRAFT NOISE

Better Information Sharing Could Improve Responses to Washington, D.C. Area Helicopter Noise Concerns

What GAO Found

According to Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) data for 2017 through 2019, over 50 helicopter operators conducted approximately 88,000 helicopter flights within 30 miles of Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (D.C. area), though limited data on noise from these flights exist. According to operators, these flights supported various missions (see table below). While the number of flights has decreased slightly over the 3 years reviewed, it is unknown whether there has been a change in helicopter noise in the area. For example, most stakeholders do not collect noise data, and existing studies of helicopter noise in the area are limited. D.C. area airspace constraints—such as lower maximum altitudes near urban areas—combined with proximity to frequently traveled helicopter routes and operational factors may affect the noise heard by residents.

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)-Reported Helicopter Flights Conducted in the Washington, D.C. Area by Operator Mission, 2017–2019

Operator mission	Number of flights
Military	32,890 (37.4 percent)
Air medical	18,322 (20.9 percent)
Other aviation activity	13,977 (15.9 percent) ^a
State and local law enforcement	12,861 (14.6 percent)
Federal law enforcement and emergency support	5,497 (6.3 percent)
News	4,298 (4.9 percent)

Source: GAO analysis of FAA data. | GAO-21-200

Note: In this table, we refer to the Washington, D.C. area as including the area within 30 miles of Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.

^aIncludes 666 flights for which FAA could not identify an operator or mission based on available historical records.

FAA and operators reported taking steps to address public concerns about helicopter noise in the D.C. area. FAA receives and responds to complaints on helicopter noise from the public through its Noise Ombudsman and has recently developed online forms that improve FAA's ability to identify and respond to helicopter noise issues. Operators reported using FAA-recommended practices, such as flying at maximum altitudes and limiting night flights, to address helicopter noise in the D.C. area, but such practices are likely not feasible for operators with military, law enforcement, or air medical evacuation missions.

FAA's and operators' approach to addressing these issues in the D.C. area is impeded because they do not consistently or fully share the information needed to do so. According to nearly all the operators we interviewed, FAA has not communicated with operators about helicopter noise or forwarded complaints to them. Similarly, operators often receive noise complaints from the public—some complaints are not directed to the correct operator—but do not typically share these complaints with FAA. As a result, operators have not consistently responded to residents' inquiries about helicopter noise and activity. By developing a mechanism for FAA and operators to share information, FAA could help improve responses to individual helicopter noise concerns and determine what additional strategies, if any, are needed to further address helicopter noise.