

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105219](#), a report to the Honorable Charles E. Schumer, Majority Leader, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

National Guard helicopter units perform a range of federal and state missions, including combat search and rescue, medical evacuations, and disaster relief. The Army and Air National Guard experienced helicopter accidents that resulted in the deaths of 28 National Guard personnel during fiscal years 2012 through 2021, based on reported data.

GAO was asked to review issues related to National Guard helicopter accidents. This report examines (1) the trends from fiscal years 2012 through 2021 in reported Army and Air National Guard helicopter accidents in non-combat scenarios and reported causes; and evaluates the extent to which (2) the Army and Air National Guard used existing processes to promote safety and reduce risks during helicopter training; and (3) the Army and Air Force have addressed challenges, if any, that hindered National Guard helicopter pilot training.

GAO analyzed accident data from fiscal years 2012 through 2021; reviewed documents; and interviewed officials from a non-generalizable sample of units selected based on factors such as locations where accidents occurred.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making 8 recommendations to the Army and Air Force, including that they take steps to ensure that their National Guard helicopter units continuously evaluate and update risk management worksheets and develop comprehensive strategies to address challenges that have hindered National Guard helicopter pilot training. The department generally agreed with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105219](#). For more information, contact Cary Russell at (202) 512-5431 or russellc@gao.gov.

March 2023

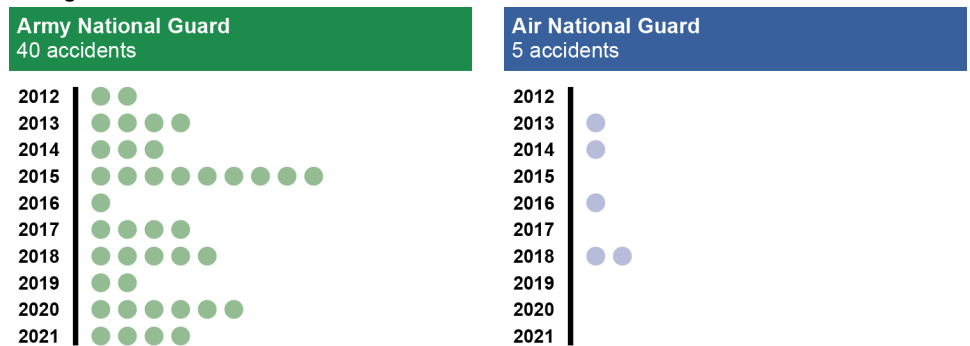
NATIONAL GUARD HELICOPTERS

Additional Actions Needed to Prevent Accidents and Improve Safety

What GAO Found

Army and Air National Guard reported 298 helicopter accidents during non-combat flight operations from fiscal years 2012 through 2021. Approximately 45 of those were considered serious helicopter accidents in that they involved death, permanent disability, extensive hospitalization, property damages of \$500,000 or more, or a destroyed helicopter (see figure). These non-combat helicopter accidents fluctuated over time and were mainly due to human errors such as not following training standards, overconfidence, poor communication, and lack of awareness, according to GAO's analysis of Department of Defense data.

Reported Army and Air National Guard Serious Helicopter Accidents, Fiscal Years 2012 through 2021



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense data. | GAO-23-105219

Note: Serious helicopter accidents include those that involved death, permanent disability, extensive hospitalization, property damages of \$500,000 or more, or a destroyed helicopter. GAO analyzed non-combat helicopter accidents for four Army National Guard and one Air National Guard helicopter types, which were the primary helicopters used by the National Guard in fiscal years 2012 through 2021.

The Army and Air National Guard use a variety of processes to promote safety and reduce risks during helicopter training, but the effectiveness of their respective flight safety training programs can be improved. National Guard helicopter units use risk management processes during aviation operations, but GAO found each component did not continuously evaluate and update unit level risk management worksheets to incorporate relevant safety information such as accident data and unit culture surveys. By evaluating these worksheets on a routine and recurring basis, Army and Air National Guard helicopter units will ensure those units have cyclical feedback and evaluation of this key risk management process to help ensure risk management procedures are effective.

The Army and Air National Guard established flying hour goals, but pilots did not fly enough on average to meet them due to lack of aircrew availability, maintenance issues, and simulator access. For example, having too few maintenance personnel limited the number of helicopters available for training. The Army and Air Force, including their National Guard components, have taken steps to mitigate these challenges, such as conducting formal studies, but these steps have not fully addressed the identified challenges. By developing comprehensive strategies, the Army and Air Force would be better positioned to fully address the identified challenges that have hindered National Guard helicopter pilot training.