

Highlights of [GAO-05-370](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2003, 42,643 people were killed and more than 2.8 million people were injured in motor vehicle crashes. Efforts to reduce fatalities on the nation's roadways include the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration's (NHTSA) New Car Assessment Program. Under this program, NHTSA conducts vehicle crash and rollover tests to encourage manufacturers to make safety improvements to new vehicles and provide the public with information on the relative safety of vehicles. GAO examined (1) how NHTSA's New Car Assessment Program crash tests vehicles, rates their safety, and reports the results to the public; (2) how NHTSA's program compares to other programs that crash test vehicles and report results to the public; and (3) the impact of the program and opportunities to enhance its effectiveness.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NHTSA examine the direction of the New Car Assessment Program to ensure that it maintains its relevance in improving vehicle safety, including identifying tests that best address the fatalities occurring on the nation's roads. GAO also recommends that NHTSA enhance the presentation and timeliness of the information provided to the public. NHTSA generally agreed with GAO's findings.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-05-370.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact JayEtta Hecker at (202) 512-2834 or heckerj@gao.gov.

VEHICLE SAFETY

Opportunities Exist to Enhance NHTSA's New Car Assessment Program

What GAO Found

NHTSA conducts three types of tests in the New Car Assessment Program—full frontal and angled side crash tests and a rollover test. Each year, NHTSA tests new vehicles that are expected to have high sales volume, have been redesigned with structural changes, or have improved safety equipment. Based on test results, vehicles receive ratings from one to five stars, with five stars being the best, to indicate the vehicles' relative crashworthiness and which are less likely to roll over. NHTSA makes ratings available to the public on the Internet and through a brochure. Other publications, such as *Consumer Reports*, use NHTSA's test results in their safety assessments.

Examples of NHTSA's New Car Assessment Program Tests



Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

GAO identified four other programs—the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's program and the New Car Assessment Programs in Australia, Europe, and Japan—that crash test vehicles and report the results to the public. They share the goals of encouraging manufacturers to improve vehicle safety and providing safety information to consumers. These programs conduct different types of frontal and side crash tests, and some perform other tests, such as pedestrian tests, that are not conducted under the U.S. program. Only the U.S. program conducts a rollover test. The other programs measure test results differently and include more potential injuries to occupants in ratings. They also reported their test results differently, with all summarizing at least some of the scores or combining them into an overall crashworthiness rating to make comparisons easier.

NHTSA's New Car Assessment Program has been successful in encouraging manufacturers to make safer vehicles and providing information to consumers. However, the program is at a crossroads where it will need to change to maintain its relevance. The usefulness of the current tests has been eroded by the growing number of larger pickups, minivans, and sport utility vehicles in the vehicle fleet since the program began. In addition, NCAP scores have increased to the point where there is little difference in vehicle ratings. As a result, the program provides little incentive for manufacturers to further improve safety, and consumers can see few differences among new vehicles. Opportunities to enhance the program include developing approaches to better measure the interaction of large and small vehicles and occupant protection in rollovers, rating technologies that help prevent crashes, and using different injury measures to rate the crash results. NHTSA also has opportunities to enhance the presentation and timeliness of the information provided to consumers.