



Highlights of [GAO-08-788](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Traffic crashes kill thousands of Americans every year—in 2005, it was the leading cause of death among young Americans. To try to improve highway safety, Congress authorized a grant program overseen by the Department of Transportation's (DOT) National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). In 2003, GAO recommended that NHTSA improve the consistency of its management reviews, a key aspect of NHTSA's oversight. In response to a legislative mandate, GAO assessed (1) how states have used grant funding to address safety goals, (2) NHTSA's progress in improving consistency in its management reviews, (3) the usefulness of its management review recommendations, and (4) approaches to further improve safety. In performing this work, GAO reviewed traffic safety data, analyzed state spending patterns, conducted site visits with eight states, and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NHTSA, among other things, increase the usefulness of management review results to identify and address common state challenges and identify options to target safety expertise to states having a high number of fatalities.

DOT generally agreed with the analysis and conclusions of this report but disagreed with one recommendation, which was revised to address NHTSA's concerns.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-788](#). For more information, contact Katherine A. Siggerud at (202) 512-2834 or siggerudk@gao.gov.

TRAFFIC SAFETY

NHTSA's Improved Oversight Could Identify Opportunities to Strengthen Management and Safety in Some States

What GAO Found

From fiscal year 1999 through 2007, states directed about 54 percent of NHTSA's State and Community Highway Safety formula grant funding toward programs, including traffic enforcement, that address the leading causes of traffic fatalities—alcohol-impaired driving and driving without a safety belt, both of which are national safety goals. States directed the rest of this grant funding to a variety of safety programs, many of which address national goals but some of which target state-specific safety challenges such as driving safely in winter weather. To address safety goals, state highway safety offices disperse federal funding to “subgrantees,” such as local law enforcement or nonprofit agencies that carry out the safety programs.

NHTSA implemented both Congress' requirement that it conduct management reviews of states and territories on a 3-year schedule as well as GAO's prior recommendation to improve the consistency with which it uses these reviews. GAO analyzed NHTSA's management reviews and identified some variation in how information was documented. However, in 2007 NHTSA took several steps, such as instituting a team to review the quality of management review reports, which should further improve the consistency of information contained in these reports—information NHTSA could use to assess the impact of its recommendations on state safety programs.

GAO found NHTSA's management review recommendations useful because they are designed to address fundamental management principles such as improving program planning and ensuring states' compliance with statutes governing safety grants. Also, state officials said NHTSA's recommendations serve as a useful management tool. However, NHTSA does not analyze the recommendations on a national level to target its technical assistance to common state challenges. GAO conducted such an analysis and found that the recommendations revealed common state challenges such as the need to improve monitoring of subgrantee activities and expenditures, which helps ensure that funds are used for the intended purpose. NHTSA also frequently recommended that states spend grant funding more quickly, which NHTSA officials believed would expand safety programs and, in turn, improve safety.

From 1997 through 2006, the national traffic fatality rate—the number of traffic fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled—declined 14 percent, but traffic fatalities remained at about 43,000 per year as factors such as increases in the number of miles driven offset the decrease in the rate. NHTSA uses several approaches to help states reduce fatalities, including requiring program reviews in states that are not making adequate progress in reducing alcohol-impaired driving and increasing safety belt use. Yet some states with low or average fatality rates but a high number of fatalities may not be eligible for a required review under NHTSA's current criteria. States with high total numbers of fatalities offer an opportunity to save the greatest number of lives, but for these states to receive an in-depth program review, the states must request and pay for such safety expertise.