



Highlights of [GAO-08-990T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Highways and Transit, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Although the number of traffic crashes and the associated fatality rates have decreased over the last 10 years, the number of traffic fatalities has unfortunately remained at about 42,000 to 43,000 annually. To help states reduce traffic fatalities, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) authorized funding for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to award traffic safety grants to states and implement a high-visibility enforcement (HVE) program that combines intensive state and local enforcement of safety belt and impaired driving laws with extensive media communication provided by NHTSA. SAFETEA-LU also added requirements for NHTSA to review all states' management of traffic safety grants at least once every 3 years.

This statement is based on recent GAO reports and ongoing work that address (1) NHTSA's progress in administering and overseeing the traffic safety grant and HVE programs, (2) the programs' effectiveness in addressing traffic safety issues, and (3) issues for Congress to consider in reauthorizing funding for the programs when SAFETEA-LU expires in 2009. This statement also discusses older driver safety. GAO's work, which included recommendations, was based on analyses of traffic fatality data; information from selected states; and reviews of legislation, NHTSA guidelines and procedures, and management reports.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-990T](#). For more information, contact Katherine A. Siggerud, (202) 512-2834, siggerudk@gao.gov.

TRAFFIC SAFETY PROGRAMS

Progress, States' Challenges, and Issues for Reauthorization

What GAO Found

In general, NHTSA has made substantial progress in administering and overseeing the traffic safety grant and HVE programs. For example, in fiscal years 2006 and 2007, NHTSA awarded about \$576 million through five safety incentive grant programs focused on national priorities, such as safety belt use, impaired driving, and motorcyclist safety. In addition, NHTSA has fully implemented the HVE program and evaluated campaign effectiveness. However, NHTSA's campaign evaluations are based on inconsistent and incomplete data and limited performance measures—GAO made recommendations in our recent report to overcome these limitations. Finally, NHTSA has improved the consistency of its management review process and implemented the requirement to conduct a management review of each state at least once every 3 years. However, NHTSA does not systematically analyze the recommendations that result from the reviews and has not nationally tracked the extent to which states have implemented its recommendations.

NHTSA has not yet assessed the effectiveness of the grant programs, but selected state officials told GAO the programs are helping to address key traffic safety issues such as unrestrained driving and alcohol-impaired driving. These officials also identified challenges that limit program effectiveness, such as difficulties in meeting eligibility requirements, separate application processes, and limited flexibility. Additionally, a key indicator of effectiveness at the national level—the number of traffic fatalities annually—has remained essentially constant over the last 10 years, although traffic fatalities per vehicle mile traveled have declined by about 14 percent. During this time, some causes of fatalities have changed. For example, motorcycle fatalities increased 127 percent while child passenger fatalities decreased 31 percent.

The challenges associated with the safety incentive grants, the lack of performance accountability mechanisms to tie state performance to the receipt of grants, and the persistence of substantial numbers of traffic fatalities nationwide raise issues that Congress may want to consider in reauthorizing funding for traffic safety programs when SAFETEA-LU expires in 2009. According to NHTSA officials, the challenges related to the safety incentive grants stem from the structure of the grant programs established under SAFETEA-LU. In addition, state performance in improving traffic safety is not always tied to the receipt of the grants. Furthermore, the plateau in the number of annual traffic fatalities nationwide and the changes in causes of fatalities may indicate that the traffic safety programs, as currently structured, have limited ability to effectively reduce fatalities. Consequently, in 2009, Congress will be faced with deciding whether to redesign the programs to simplify the grant application process, allow states more flexibility in using grant funds, provide different or additional incentives, or focus more specifically on accountability for performance. However, such changes would require improved safety data to enhance states' ability to identify safety issues and a robust accountability system to ensure that states use federal funds appropriately.