

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-705](#), a report to the Honorable Claire McCaskill, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2013, an estimated 5.7-million vehicle crashes resulted in approximately 32,700 fatalities and over 2.3-million injuries. One of NHTSA's guidelines to help states optimize the effectiveness of highway safety programs recommends that each state have a program to periodically inspect all registered vehicles to reduce the number of vehicles with conditions that may contribute to crashes or increase the severity of crashes.

GAO was asked to review these state programs and NHTSA's assistance to states. This report assesses: 1) what is known about the safety benefits and costs of operating state vehicle safety inspection programs, 2) challenges that states have faced in operating these programs, and 3) actions NHTSA could take to assist states with these programs. GAO analyzed NHTSA 2009—2013 data and state data for crash trends related to vehicle component failure; reviewed studies that analyzed relationships between safety inspections and outcomes; and interviewed officials in 15 states that have inspection programs. GAO also interviewed officials in 5 states that eliminated their programs since 1990, NHTSA officials, and representatives from safety groups and automotive industry groups.

What GAO Recommends

DOT should establish a communication channel with states to convey relevant information to state safety inspection officials and respond to their questions. DOT officials reviewed this report and agreed with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-15-705](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov.

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VEHICLE SAFETY INSPECTIONS

Improved DOT Communication Could Better Inform State Programs

What GAO Found

According to officials GAO interviewed from 15 state vehicle safety inspection programs, these programs enhance vehicle safety; however, the benefits and costs of such programs are difficult to quantify. State officials told GAO that inspections help identify vehicles with safety problems and result in repair or removal of unsafe vehicles from the roads. For example, Pennsylvania state data show that in 2014, more than 529,000 vehicles (about 20 percent of vehicles in the state) failed inspection and then underwent repairs to pass. Nationwide, however, estimates derived from data collected by the Department of Transportation's (DOT) National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) show that vehicle component failure is a factor in about 2 to 7 percent of crashes. Given this relatively small percentage as well as other factors—such as implementation or increased enforcement of state traffic safety laws—that could influence crash rates, it is difficult to determine the effect of inspection programs based on crash data. Studies GAO reviewed and GAO's analysis of state data examined the effect of inspection programs on crash rates related to vehicle component failure, but showed no clear influence. Finally, many states do not directly track the costs of operating safety inspection programs because costs may be comingled with other inspection programs, such as emissions.

State safety inspection program officials GAO interviewed primarily cited the oversight of inspection activities and paper-based data systems as challenges they have faced in operating vehicle safety inspection programs. For example, officials in 11 of the 15 states with programs GAO interviewed cited oversight efforts as a challenge, including ensuring that private inspection stations were conducting inspections consistent with program requirements, and officials in 4 of the 15 states also said that paper-based data systems can hinder oversight efforts. To address challenges, some states have taken actions such as implementing more stringent program rules and exploring the development of electronic data systems. Other states have eliminated their inspection programs altogether.

Program officials in all 15 states said that additional information from NHTSA—for example, information related to new vehicle safety technologies—would help in operating their programs. However, there is no designated channel for communication between NHTSA and program officials. Several state officials noted that they would like more information on new technologies such as light-emitting diode (LED) brake lights. State officials also said that it is not clear whether or how to inspect new safety technologies, such as tire pressure monitoring systems, required by NHTSA for new vehicles. Without information, states have implemented different inspection pass-fail criteria or chosen not to include new technologies in their inspections, potentially reducing the safety benefit of their programs. NHTSA officials told GAO they have adopted a hands-off approach to state vehicle inspection programs because the agency devotes its resources primarily to areas that contribute more heavily to crashes, such as driver behavior. However, consistent with NHTSA's mission to assist states in implementing traffic safety programs, improving communication with state officials on vehicle safety issues could help these officials in operating their inspection programs.