



HIGHWAY SAFETY

Better Guidance Could Improve Oversight of State Highway Safety Programs

Highlights of [GAO-03-474](#), a report to Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Competition, Foreign Commerce, and Infrastructure, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

In 1998, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century funded a series of highway safety programs. These safety programs, administered by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), increased funding to the states to improve highway safety through activities designed to encourage, among other things, the use of seat belts and child passenger seats and to prevent drinking and driving. The states implement these activities through a “performance-based” approach under which they establish highway safety goals and initiate projects to help reach those goals. NHTSA reviews the goals and provides oversight to the state highway safety programs. GAO was asked to provide trend data on highway safety, determine how much highway safety funding was provided and how the states used the funds, and review NHTSA’s oversight of highway safety programs.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NHTSA provide more specific written guidance to its regional offices on when it is appropriate to use management reviews and improvement plans to assist states with their highway safety programs.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-474.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Peter Guerrero (202) 512-2834.

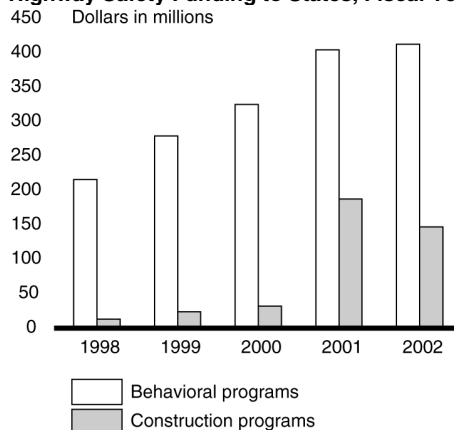
What GAO Found

While the annual number of traffic fatalities has declined since the 1970s, it has stayed fairly level since 1995, at about 41,900 per year. Fatality rates per miles traveled have also continued to decline, but the bulk of this decline occurred between 1982 and 1992. In addition, the number of alcohol-related fatalities declined from about 26,000 in 1982 to about 17,400 in 2001. However, alcohol-related fatalities rose in 2000 and 2001.

About \$2 billion has been provided over the last 5 years for highway safety programs under the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century. About \$729 million went to the core highway safety program, Section 402, to carry out traffic safety programs designed to influence drivers’ behavior in such areas as seat belt use, alcohol-impaired driving, and speeding. About \$936 million went to seven incentive programs designed to encourage state efforts to improve seat-belt use, reduce drunk driving, and improve highway safety data. About \$361 million was transferred from highway construction to highway safety programs under provisions that penalized states that had not passed repeat offender or open container laws to reduce drunk driving. Of the incentive and transfer funds, most were used for behavioral programs, but about \$395 million was used for highway construction programs.

Under the performance-based approach, NHTSA provides advice, training and technical assistance to the states, which are responsible for setting and achieving highway safety goals. NHTSA also provides oversight through management reviews and improvement plans intended to help ensure that the states are operating within guidelines and achieving the desired results. However NHTSA’s regional offices have made inconsistent use of management reviews and limited and inconsistent use of improvement plans because NHTSA’s guidance to the regional offices does not specify when to use them. As a result, NHTSA’s efforts to work with the states may not be fully realized.

Highway Safety Funding to States, Fiscal Years 1998 through 2002



Source: GAO presentation of NHTSA data.