



Highlights of [GAO-08-477](#), a report to the Chairman, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

Two primary risk behaviors related to fatal traffic crashes are failure to use safety belts and driving while impaired by alcohol. High-visibility enforcement (HVE) campaigns that combine enforcement of a traffic safety law with media to inform the public about the campaign are effective in reducing these behaviors. In 2005, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users authorized funding of an HVE program, including safety belt and impaired-driving campaigns. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) within the Department of Transportation (DOT) provides media and coordinates with states to provide enforcement activities for the campaigns. This report addresses (1) the extent to which NHTSA has implemented the HVE program and (2) for selected states, the impact of the campaigns and challenges that exist in conducting the campaigns. To conduct this work, GAO analyzed fatality data, plans, and evaluations and interviewed officials from DOT and seven selected states.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Transportation direct NHTSA to establish a minimum set of reporting requirements for states to report HVE activities that are federally funded and include additional performance measures in campaign evaluations. DOT officials generally agreed with the findings and recommendations of the report.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-477](#). For more information, contact Katherine A. Siggerud at (202) 512-2834 or [siggerudk@gao.gov](mailto:siggerudk@gao.gov).

## TRAFFIC SAFETY

### Improved Reporting and Performance Measures Would Enhance Evaluation of High-Visibility Campaigns

#### What GAO Found

NHTSA has fully implemented the high-visibility enforcement program by (1) developing and disseminating advertising, (2) coordinating with states on media and enforcement activities, and (3) annually evaluating the effectiveness of the two HVE campaigns; however, NHTSA's evaluations have shortcomings that limit the agency's ability to determine the effectiveness of the campaigns. Regarding advertising, NHTSA introduced an annual plan in 2005 that sets forth a strategy for the campaign advertisements, developed advertisements, and purchased national media time for the advertisements. To coordinate with states, NHTSA provides an overall strategy and guidance to assist states in conducting the campaigns, as well as technical assistance and collateral materials, such as posters and model press releases. Officials in selected states reported that NHTSA's coordination efforts provided the support and interaction needed to conduct HVE campaigns. Although NHTSA's annual evaluations of campaign effectiveness indicate that the campaigns are helping to improve safety belt use and reduce impaired driving, the evaluations have shortcomings that limit NHTSA's ability to assess the level of state and local activity—a key component of the campaigns—and the overall effectiveness of the campaigns. For example, the information that NHTSA has on states' activities is inconsistent and incomplete because reporting of such data is generally voluntary for local law enforcement agencies. As a result, NHTSA has reported that it cannot provide meaningful analyses and comparisons of state activities. NHTSA's ability to measure the campaigns' overall effectiveness is also hindered because the performance measures used to evaluate the campaigns are not comprehensive. For example, while NHTSA measures daytime safety belt use, it does not directly measure nighttime safety belt use, despite recent efforts to increase safety belt use at night. In addition, NHTSA's evaluations do not include measures of the effectiveness of the campaigns at reaching all target audiences. NHTSA is working to develop more comprehensive performance measures.

According to officials in selected states GAO visited, the campaigns are contributing to increased safety belt use and reduced alcohol-involved fatalities, but these states face challenges in conducting the campaigns and achieving desired results. From 1997 to 2006, safety belt use increased in all seven of the selected states, and each state experienced a decrease in the alcohol fatality rate. Officials in the selected states said that the campaigns provide additional benefits, such as apprehending suspects involved in other crimes. However, officials in those selected states identified several challenges, such as increasing safety belt use and reducing impaired driving among resistant populations; insufficient staff to conduct the campaigns; and weak prosecution of impaired-driving arrests. NHTSA has initiatives under way to help states address some of these challenges. For example, NHTSA has sponsored a campaign to increase safety belt use in rural areas. In addition, NHTSA provides funds that can be used by states to purchase equipment for local law enforcement agencies, such as breath-testing units, to encourage the agencies to participate in campaigns.