

Why GAO Did This Study

According to NHTSA, per vehicle mile traveled in 2010, motorcyclists were about 30 times more likely to die in a traffic crash than passenger car occupants. States have implemented various strategies to address the factors contributing to motorcycle crashes and fatalities, and NHTSA has assisted these efforts through guidance, grants, and research. GAO reviewed: (1) what is known about the cost of motorcycle crashes; (2) the factors that contribute to motorcycle crashes and fatalities, and strategies states are pursuing to address these factors; and (3) the extent to which NHTSA assists states in pursuing strategies that address these factors. GAO reviewed studies, analyzed documents and data from NHTSA and other sources, and interviewed officials in the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) and 16 states as well as representatives of various stakeholder organizations. GAO selected states that were geographically diverse and that had varying fatality rates, laws and policies, and ridership levels.

What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider expanding the strategies for which NHTSA's motorcyclist safety grants can be used to give states more flexibility in how to use these funds. In addition, GAO recommends that NHTSA identify research priorities for motorcycle safety that address gaps in knowledge about the effectiveness of state strategies, particularly those strategies it has identified as high priority or promising. DOT officials agreed to consider this recommendation and provided technical comments, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

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MOTORCYCLE SAFETY

Increasing Federal Funding Flexibility and Identifying Research Priorities Would Help Support States' Safety Efforts

What GAO Found

GAO estimated that the total direct measurable costs of motorcycle crashes—costs that directly result from a crash and that can and have been measured—were approximately \$16 billion in 2010. However, the full costs of motorcycle crashes are likely higher because some difficult-to-measure costs—such as longer-term medical costs—are not included. Victims and their families, as well as society—including employers, private insurers, healthcare providers, government, and others—bear these costs. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimated that society bears about three-quarters of the measurable costs of *all* motor vehicle crashes. Society's share of the costs of motorcycle crashes may be similar or higher, in part because injuries from these crashes are generally more severe than those from other motor vehicle crashes.

Various factors contribute to motorcycle crashes and states pursue a range of strategies to address them. These factors include alcohol impairment; speeding; lack of a license, training, or riding skills; and lack of motorist awareness of motorcycles. Another factor, lack of helmet use, does not affect the likelihood of a crash but increases the risk of a fatality when a crash occurs. State strategies include: licensing approaches, training programs, enforcement of alcohol impairment and speed limit laws, efforts to improve motorcyclist safety awareness and motorist awareness, and helmet-use laws. Laws requiring all motorcyclists to wear helmets are the only strategy proved to be effective in reducing motorcyclist fatalities, but some opposition to such laws exists, and only 19 states currently have them. According to NHTSA, proven approaches used in some other highway safety efforts, such as combining strong enforcement with public education, may hold promise for improving motorcycle safety.

NHTSA helps states develop and implement motorcycle safety strategies through various efforts. It has provided states with guidance, outreach, and training which according to state officials, has improved their ability to address motorcycle safety. From fiscal years 2006 to 2012, NHTSA awarded \$45.9 million in motorcyclist safety grants to states; Congress has allowed these funds to be used for motorcyclist training and motorist awareness efforts only. However, major studies on motorcycle safety issues have recommended a range of additional strategies for reducing crashes and fatalities, some of which NHTSA has identified as a high priority for states to pursue. These strategies include increasing helmet use and motorcyclist safety awareness, and educating police about motorcycle safety in order to strengthen enforcement. NHTSA and state officials noted that expanding the allowable uses for the grants would better enable states to use such strategies. NHTSA has conducted research—totaling \$7.3 million in the last 5 fiscal years—to identify new and evaluate existing state strategies. For example, one new study will identify factors and programs that may be related to higher rates of helmet use in states that do not require all motorcyclists to wear helmets. NHTSA does not have a current plan to guide its motorcycle safety research efforts but intends to develop one by spring 2013. Given its limited funding for research, such a plan provides an opportunity for NHTSA to identify research priorities, based on gaps in knowledge about the effectiveness of motorcycle safety strategies and the types of strategies it has identified as a high priority or promising for states to pursue.