SCHOOL BUS SAFETY

Crash Data Trends and Federal and State Requirements

What GAO Found

Based on GAO’s analysis of data for 2000 to 2014, 115 fatal crashes involved a school bus on average each year—which is 0.3 percent of the 34,835 total fatal motor-vehicle crashes on average each year. The school-bus driver and school-bus vehicle (e.g., a defect) were cited as contributing factors in 27 percent and less than 1 percent of fatal school-bus crashes, respectively. Seventy-two percent of fatal crashes occurred during home-to-school and school-to-home travel times. Limited national data on school bus crashes exist beyond data on fatal school-bus crashes, but some states have richer data—for example, on the type of bus or whether the operator was a school district or private contractor.

Federal laws and regulations set requirements for certain aspects of school bus safety, and state laws and regulations in many cases go beyond the federal requirements. Federal regulations for school-bus vehicle standards and driver licensing apply to both school districts and contractors. DOT has reported that new school buses must meet more Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards than any other type of new motor vehicle. Federal safety regulations for commercial motor-vehicle operations apply in certain cases, such as for contractors hired by schools to provide transportation for extracurricular activities across state lines. Based on a systematic search of state laws and regulations, GAO found that all 50 states require school bus inspections while most states—GAO found 44—require refresher training for school bus drivers. However, GAO found that less than a quarter of states set specific requirements for the maximum age and seating capacity of school buses. Overall, according to stakeholders GAO interviewed, states’ requirements vary by state for school bus inspections, driver training, and vehicles but tend not to differ based on the type of operator.

Examples of Federal and State Requirements for School Bus Safety

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