



Highlights of [GAO-04-663](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Traffic crashes are a major cause of death and injury in the United States. In 2002, there were 42,815 fatalities and over 2.9 million injuries on the nation's highways. Crashes on rural roads (roads in areas with populations of less than 5,000) account for over 60 percent of the deaths nationwide, or about 70 deaths each day. Further, the rate of fatalities per vehicle mile traveled on rural roads was over twice the urban fatality rate.

GAO identified (1) the factors contributing to rural road fatalities, (2) federal and state efforts to improve safety on the nation's rural roads, and (3) the challenges that may hinder making improvements in rural road safety. GAO obtained information from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), and other organizations with knowledge of these issues. In addition, GAO analyzed fatal crash data on rural roads from Department of Transportation databases and visited five states that account for about 20 percent of the nation's rural road mileage. GAO also contacted academic experts and examined legislative proposals for improving rural road safety. We provided copies of a draft of this report to the Department of Transportation for its review and comment. In discussing this report, agency officials noted that safety should be part of every project designed and built with federal-aid highway funds.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-663.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud, (202) 512-2834 or siggerudk@gao.gov.

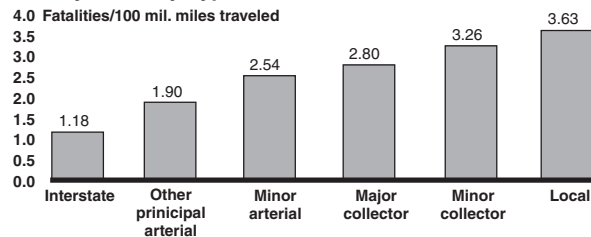
HIGHWAY SAFETY

Federal and State Efforts to Address Rural Road Safety Challenges

What GAO Found

Four primary factors contribute to rural road fatalities—human behavior, roadway environment, vehicles, and the care victims receive after a crash. Human behavior involves the actions taken by or the condition of the driver and passengers. Human behaviors are important because almost 70 percent of the unrestrained (unbelted) fatalities between 2000 and 2002 occurred in rural crashes. Additionally, the majority of alcohol- and speeding-related fatalities occurred on rural roads. Roadway characteristics that contribute to rural crashes include narrow lanes, sharp curves, trees, and animals. Vehicle factors include problems that arise due to the design of vehicles and are important for both urban and rural roads. Care of crash victims also contributes to rural fatalities because of the additional time needed to provide medical attention and the quality of rural trauma care.

Fatality Rates by Type of Rural Road, 2002



Source: GAO presentation of NHTSA and FHWA data.

In fiscal year 2003, FHWA provided about \$27.4 billion in federal-aid highway funds to states. While many projects using these funds have safety features, the amount used for safety is not tracked. However, about \$648 million of these funds went to the Hazard Elimination and Rail-Highway Crossings Programs and were specifically provided for safety purposes—about \$330 million of which went to improve rural road safety. NHTSA provided about \$671 million to states for activities that influence both rural and urban drivers' behavior in such areas as safety belt use, drunk driving, or speeding. States are ultimately responsible for selecting the projects to support with federal funding. The five states we visited used a portion of the funding received for rural road safety.

Many challenges hinder efforts to improve rural road safety—for example, not all states have adopted safety belt and drunk driving laws that might curb behavior contributing to rural road fatalities. In addition, states are limited in using federal-aid highway funds for certain rural roads, and most rural roads are the responsibility of local governments that may lack the resources to undertake costly projects to improve road safety. Further, some states lack adequate crash data to support planning and evaluation of safety projects. Lastly, the nature of rural areas makes it difficult to provide adequate emergency medical care.