

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-18-127](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The number of vehicles affected by safety defect recalls increased sharply in recent years—from nearly 13 million in 2011 to over 51 million in 2016. Once a defect is identified, auto manufacturers are required to send written notification to vehicle owners by mail. NHTSA also aims to enhance awareness of auto recalls by providing information on its website, [NHTSA.gov](#).

The Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act includes a provision requiring GAO to study the use of publicly available safety recall information. This report addresses: (1) how consumers and industry stakeholders use such information and (2) how easy to use do consumers find the auto recall areas of [NHTSA.gov](#), among other objectives. To understand consumers' use of auto recall information and to test website usability, GAO conducted 12 focus groups with 94 consumers who had a recall. Focus groups were held in six locations selected for population and geographic variation. GAO identified key website usability practices and requested an evaluation by website usability professionals. GAO reviewed statutes, regulations, and NHTSA documents, and interviewed industry stakeholders—including 10 manufacturers selected based on sales market share and other factors.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NHTSA determine a completion date for its website consolidation effort and take interim steps to improve the usability of [NHTSA.gov](#) by addressing the website usability difficulties GAO identified. The Department of Transportation concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-18-127](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov.

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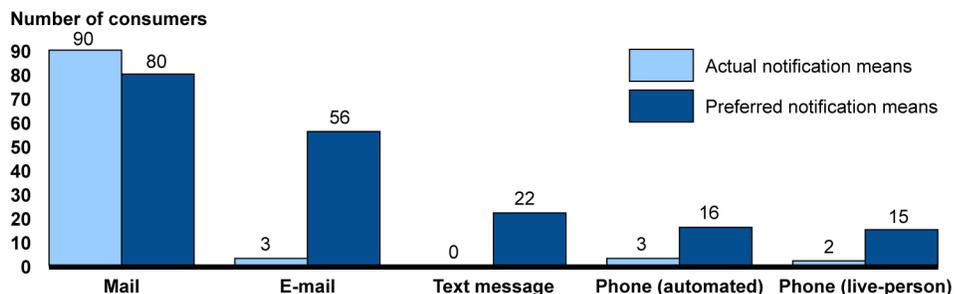
AUTO RECALLS

NHTSA Should Take Steps to Further Improve the Usability of Its Website

What GAO Found

Consumers, manufacturers, and auto dealers use publicly available auto recall information differently. For example, the 94 consumers in 12 focus groups that GAO conducted used this information to decide whether to repair their vehicles. These consumers overwhelmingly cited safety risk and convenience as the two most influential factors they considered. Most consumers reported a preference for receiving recall notification by at least one electronic means, such as by e-mail or text message, in addition to mail. However, only 7 of 94 consumers reported receiving electronic notifications, suggesting a gap between the industry's auto recall notification practices and consumers' preferences. (See fig.). In response to a mandate in law, in September 2016, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) issued a proposed rule that, if finalized, would require manufacturers to notify consumers about auto recalls by electronic means in addition to mail.

How Consumers Who Participated in GAO's Focus Groups Actually Received and Preferred to Receive Auto Recall Information



Source: GAO. | GAO-18-127

Most consumers in GAO's focus group website usability tests found the auto recall areas of NHTSA's website—[NHTSA.gov](#)—easy to use; however, some consumers experienced difficulties when asked to complete auto recall related tasks. For example, when consumers attempted to search for recalls affecting their specific vehicles, some found the search results confusing, leading them to question the accuracy of the results. Similarly, some consumers were hampered in searching for recalls by their vehicles' year, make, and model because the website did not always display model options using plain language. GAO found that the auto recall areas of [NHTSA.gov](#) do not always reflect federal and industry key website usability practices, and that an independent evaluation conducted by website usability professionals at GAO's request identified similar issues. NHTSA is in the process of consolidating its websites and plans to conduct a website usability study of [NHTSA.gov](#) with consumers after the consolidation is complete. However, the agency has not determined a completion date for the consolidation effort—an essential step for organizations to effectively guide their information technology efforts. Without establishing a completion date and taking interim steps to improve the usability of [NHTSA.gov](#), consumers will likely continue to experience difficulties, which may limit the effectiveness of the website's primary means of providing consumers with information about recalls affecting their vehicles.