

Highlights of [GAO-10-454](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

Traffic crashes kill or injure millions of people each year. High-quality traffic safety data is vital to allocate resources and target programs as the Department of Transportation's (DOT) National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and states work to improve traffic safety through data-driven approaches. To qualify for federal funding, states must submit plans which include fatality and crash data analyses to identify areas for improvement. This requested report provides information on (1) the extent to which state traffic safety data systems meet NHTSA performance measures for assessing the quality of data systems, and (2) progress states have made in improving traffic safety data systems, and related challenges. To conduct this work, GAO analyzed state traffic records assessments, visited eight states, and interviewed federal officials and other traffic safety experts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NHTSA take steps to ensure state traffic records assessments are complete and consistent to provide an in-depth evaluation of all state traffic safety data systems across all performance measures. NHTSA should also study and communicate to Congress on the value of requiring an executive-level traffic records coordinating committee for states to qualify for traffic safety grant funding. DOT agreed with those recommendations.

[View GAO-10-454 or key components.](#)
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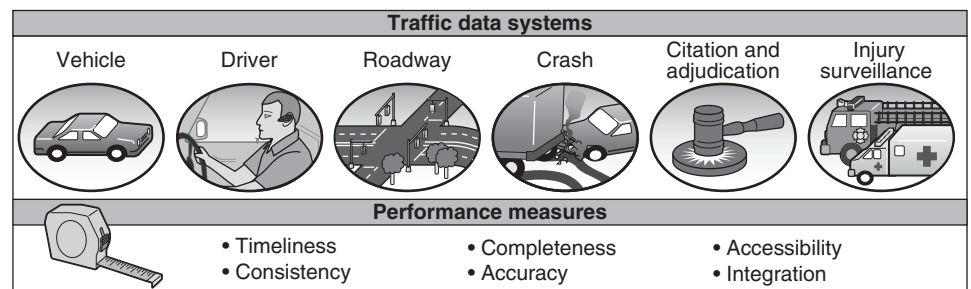
TRAFFIC SAFETY DATA

State Data System Quality Varies and Limited Resources and Coordination Can Inhibit Further Progress

What GAO Found

GAO's analysis of traffic records assessments—conducted for states by NHTSA technical teams or contractors at least every 5 years—indicates that the quality of state traffic safety data systems varies across the six data systems maintained by states. Assessments include an evaluation of system quality based on six performance measures.

Traffic Safety Data Systems and Performance Measures



Source: GAO.

Across all states, GAO found that vehicle and driver data systems met performance measures 71 percent and 60 percent of the time, respectively, while roadway, crash, citation and adjudication, and injury surveillance data systems met performance measures less than 50 percent of the time. Also, data system quality varies by performance measure. For example, across all data systems, states met the performance measure for consistency 72 percent of the time, but states met the integration performance measure 13 percent of the time. According to NHTSA, assessments should be in-depth reviews of state traffic safety data systems; however, in some cases, incomplete or inconsistent information limits assessment usefulness. Of the 51 assessments we reviewed, 49 had insufficient information to fully determine the quality of at least one data system. Furthermore, an updated assessment format has resulted in more frequent instances of insufficient information.

Despite varying state traffic safety data system performance, data collected by NHTSA show that states are making some progress toward improving system quality. All states GAO visited have implemented projects to improve data systems, such as switching to electronic data reporting and adopting forms consistent with national guidelines. However, states face resource and coordination challenges in improving traffic safety data systems. For example, custodians of data systems are often located in different state agencies, which may make coordination difficult. In addition, rural and urban areas may face different challenges in improving data systems, such as limited technology options for rural areas or timely processing of large volumes of data in urban areas. States GAO visited have used strategies to overcome these challenges, including establishing an executive-level traffic records coordinating committee, in addition to the technical-level committee that states are required to establish to qualify for traffic safety grant funding. An executive-level committee could help states address challenges by targeting limited resources and facilitating data sharing.