



Highlights of [GAO-08-1043](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

The August 1, 2007, collapse of a Minnesota bridge raised nationwide questions about bridge safety and the U.S. Department of Transportation's (DOT) ability to prioritize resources for bridges. The Highway Bridge Program (HBP), the primary source of federal funding for bridges, provided over \$4 billion to states in fiscal year 2007. This requested study examines (1) how the HBP addresses bridge conditions, (2) how states use HBP funds and select bridge projects for funding, (3) what data indicate about bridge conditions and the HBP's impact, and (4) the extent to which the HBP aligns with principles GAO developed, based on prior work and federal laws and regulations, for re-examining surface transportation programs. GAO reviewed program documents; analyzed bridge data; and met with transportation officials in states that have high levels of HBP funding and large bridge inventories, including California, Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that DOT work with Congress to identify specific program goals in the national interest, develop and implement performance measures, incorporate best tools and practices, and review the program's funding mechanisms. DOT officials generally agreed with the findings and recommendations in this report, providing technical clarifications which we incorporated, as appropriate.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-1043](#). For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud at (202) 512-2834 or [siggerudk@gao.gov](mailto:siggerudk@gao.gov).

## HIGHWAY BRIDGE PROGRAM

### Clearer Goals and Performance Measures Needed for a More Focused and Sustainable Program

#### What GAO Found

Based on information gathered during bridge inspections that are generally conducted every 2 years, the HBP classifies bridge conditions as deficient or not; assigns each bridge a sufficiency rating reflecting its structural adequacy, safety, serviceability, and relative importance; and uses that information to distribute funding to states to improve bridges. Deficient bridges include those that are structurally deficient, with one or more components in poor condition, and those that are functionally obsolete, with a poor configuration or design that may no longer be adequate for the traffic they serve. While each state's HBP apportionment amount is largely determined by bridge conditions and bridges generally must be below a certain condition threshold to qualify for HBP funding, other bridges are also eligible for HBP funds because states may use the funds for a broad array of other purposes, such as bridge systematic preventive maintenance projects.

The HBP affords states discretion to use HBP funds and select bridge projects in a variety of ways. Some states are focused on reducing their number of deficient bridges, while other states are pursuing different bridge priorities. For example, California has focused on seismically retrofitting bridges, a safety concern for that state. Furthermore, some states have developed tools and approaches for selecting bridge projects that go beyond those required by the HBP, such as bridge management systems and state-specific bridge condition rating systems.

Bridge conditions, as measured by the number of deficient bridges and average sufficiency rating, improved from 1998 through 2007. However, the impact of the HBP on that improvement is difficult to determine, in part, because (1) the program provides only a share of what states spend on bridges and there are no comprehensive data for state and local spending on bridges and (2) HBP funds can, in some cases, be used for a variety of bridge projects without regard to a bridge's deficiency status or sufficiency rating.

The HBP does not fully align with GAO's principles, which are based on GAO's prior work and federal laws and regulations, in that the program lacks focus, performance measures, and sustainability. For example, the program's statutory goals are not focused on a clearly identified federal or national interest, but rather have expanded from improving deficient bridges to supporting seismic retrofitting, preventive maintenance, and many other projects, thus expanding the federal interest to potentially include almost any bridge in the country. In addition, the program lacks measures linking funding to performance and is not sustainable, given the anticipated deterioration of the nation's bridges and the declining purchasing power of funding currently available for bridge maintenance, rehabilitation, and replacement. Once the federal interest in bridges is clearly defined, policymakers can clarify the goals for federal involvement and align the program to achieve those goals. HBP sustainability may also be improved by identifying and developing performance measures and re-examining funding mechanisms.