HIGHWAY SAFETY

Further Opportunities Exist to Improve Data on Crashes Involving Commercial Motor Vehicles

Why GAO Did This Study

Large trucks make up 3 percent of the nation's registered vehicles, but they were involved in 11 percent of all fatal crashes in 2003. To reduce the fatality rate, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) sets national safety goals and works in partnership with states to reach them. Crash data collected by states and submitted to FMCSA is key to these efforts, and to be fully useful, this data must be complete, timely, accurate, and collected in a consistent manner. GAO addressed (1) what is known about the quality of commercial motor vehicle crash data, and what states are doing to improve it, and (2) the results of FMCSA's efforts to help states make improvements.

What GAO Recommends

To ensure uniformity in awarding data improvement funds to states, FMCSA should establish specific guidelines for assessing and awarding state funding requests.

Also, in order to address limitations in its data quality map, FMCSA should develop a plan for assessing and improving the map's methodology, and it should provide a crash specific data rating and limitations of the map on its Web site.

The Department of Transportation agreed with our findings and recommendations in this report.

What GAO Found

Overall, commercial motor vehicle crash data does not yet meet general data quality standards of completeness, timeliness, accuracy, and consistency. For example, FMCSA estimates that nearly one-third of commercial motor vehicle crashes that states are required to report to the federal government were not reported, and those that were reported were not always accurate, timely, or consistent. States are undertaking four types of activities to improve data quality, including analyzing existing data to identify problems and develop plans for addressing them, reducing backlogs of data that have not been entered into state-level databases, developing and implementing electronic data systems, and providing training. As a result of these efforts, states have recently improved both the timeliness and the number of reportable crashes submitted to FMCSA.

FMCSA has two main efforts to support states in improving their reporting of commercial motor vehicle crash information—a commercial vehicle crash data improvement program and a data quality rating system—and both appear to be beneficial. Through the data improvement program, FMCSA has provided nearly $21 million in discretionary grants to 34 states from 2002 through 2005. These grants have ranged from $2,000 to $2 million and have helped states conduct a variety of data improvement activities. GAO did not find problems with FMCSA's oversight of the program, but we did note that FMCSA does not have formal guidelines for awarding grants to states. As state participation in the program increases, formal guidelines and systems would likely assist FMCSA in prioritizing states' requests and ensuring consistency in grant awards.

FMCSA's second major effort, a tool for rating states' data quality, has proven to be an important tool for states to use in improving their crash data as well. These results are presented in a map that rates each state's data quality as "good," "fair," or "poor." According to both FMCSA and state officials, the map and the underlying rating system serve as an incentive for states to improve their crash data. While the map is useful, GAO identified problems in the methodology used for developing ratings. These problems may potentially lead to drawing erroneous conclusions about the extent of improvements that have been made, and discourage states from continuing to devote attention and resources to areas needing improvement.

FMCSA's June 2005 data quality map showing each state's overall data quality rating for crash and inspection data.

Sources: FMCSA and Map Art.