



Highlights of [GAO-09-495](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

To reduce the number of crashes involving commercial motor carriers, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) within the Department of Transportation orders unsafe carriers out of service. To help keep these carriers off the road, FMCSA's voluntary Performance and Registration Information Systems Management (PRISM) grant program, a small program funded at \$5 million per year, helps states establish information systems connections between state vehicle registration and FMCSA's safety databases. These connections provide states with up-to-date information on carriers' safety status when carriers try to register or renew registrations with the state. For states to deny, suspend, or revoke registrations to out-of-service carriers, states must pass legislation enabling them to do so.

As directed by a congressional committee, GAO examined (1) PRISM's effectiveness and (2) the potential to fully implement the program nationally. GAO reviewed FMCSA data and discussed PRISM with a wide variety of federal, state, industry, and safety stakeholders.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FMCSA measure PRISM effectiveness when a sufficient number of states have the ability to deny, suspend, or revoke registrations to out-of-service carriers. In commenting on a draft of this report, the department generally agreed with the recommendation.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-495](#). For more information, contact Susan A. Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or [flemings@gao.gov](mailto:flemings@gao.gov).

## MOTOR CARRIER SAFETY

### Commercial Vehicle Registration Program Has Kept Unsafe Carriers from Operating, but Effectiveness Is Difficult to Measure

#### What GAO Found

Twenty-five states have implemented PRISM to the point where they are able to keep carriers that FMCSA has ordered out of service from obtaining or maintaining vehicle registrations. However, PRISM's safety impact is hard to measure. FMCSA data show that vehicles associated with 972 out-of-service carriers in 2008 had registrations denied, suspended, or revoked—about 15 percent of carriers placed out of service that year. However, this is likely an underestimate because the data can be difficult to track. Officials from the 13 states GAO contacted that are denying, suspending, or revoking vehicle registrations of out-of-service carriers and representatives from safety and industry associations said PRISM is worth the effort, but its impact on safety is hard to measure. An evaluation of the program sponsored by FMCSA in 2007 concluded that PRISM states show some improved safety over time compared with other states, indicating PRISM could have contributed to lower crash rates. However, because all FMCSA programs are aimed at reducing crash rates, isolating PRISM's effect is difficult. Nonetheless, the evaluation recommended that FMCSA adopt program measures to assess PRISM's effectiveness. FMCSA has not adopted all of these measures for various reasons, including a lack of resources. In GAO's view, applying such measures, while ultimately useful, may be premature since PRISM's success is undercut by the 25 states—including states with the greatest numbers of registered commercial motor vehicles—and the District of Columbia that do not yet have the ability to deny, suspend, or revoke vehicle registrations of out-of-service carriers.

National implementation may not occur for years if PRISM continues as a voluntary program. FMCSA data show that, on average, it took states about 3 years and 4 months to get to the point where they could deny, suspend, or revoke registrations once they decided to implement PRISM—a process that took as little as 10 months to more than 7 years. Officials in states GAO contacted said that PRISM implementation was facilitated by such things as hiring a contractor to help with the program's technical components, and was hindered by such things as difficulty in passing state legislation needed to implement the program. According to officials in states GAO met with, FMCSA has been helpful in encouraging states to adopt and implement the program, but can do little in other areas, such as when state legislation is needed. Officials in some states and representatives from safety associations told GAO that Congress should require PRISM implementation so that no state becomes a refuge for registering out-of-service carriers. Other officials said that such a requirement is unnecessary, since only three states have not committed to implementing PRISM. While there are benefits to a congressional requirement that could lead to speedier national implementation, there are several significant potential drawbacks to doing so (for example, some states may require substantial money to adapt their information systems to make PRISM work) that lead GAO not to recommend such a requirement.