HIGHWAY SAFETY

Federal and State Efforts Related to Accidents That Involve Non-Commercial Vehicles Carrying Unsecured Loads

Why GAO Did This Study

Vehicles carrying objects that are not properly secured pose a safety risk on our nation's roadways. Debris that falls from a vehicle can collide with other vehicles or pedestrians, causing serious injuries or fatalities. According to data collected by NHTSA, there were about 440 fatalities caused by roadway debris in 2010. However, the exact number of incidents resulting from vehicles carrying unsecured loads is unknown.

Congress, through the Conference Report for the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act, (2012), directed NHTSA to improve its data on unsecured-load incidents and directed GAO to report on state laws and related exemptions, and punitive measures regarding unsecured loads on non-commercial vehicles, such as cars and light trucks used for non-commercial purposes. This report examines NHTSA's data collection efforts as well as states' laws related to unsecured loads. GAO reviewed NHTSA documents and interviewed officials from NHTSA, as well as representatives of highway safety associations and state police agencies. GAO also conducted a survey of all 50 states and the District of Columbia, with a response rate of 100 percent, and researched the laws, punitive measures, and education efforts in each state.

GAO provided a draft of this report to NHTSA for review and comment. NHTSA provided technical comments that were incorporated, as appropriate.

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What GAO Found

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) collects limited information on crashes involving vehicles carrying unsecured loads but plans to make changes to collect better information. Currently, NHTSA collects some data in the Fatality Analysis Reporting System and the National Automotive Sampling System General Estimates System. However, the systems do not currently have a data category to distinguish between debris resulting from natural sources (such as a tree branch) and debris resulting from human error (such as an unsecured load). As a result, NHTSA cannot currently identify how many crashes involve vehicles carrying unsecured loads. NHTSA intends to make changes to both its systems to better identify crashes involving unsecured loads. These changes will go into effect in 2013. However, NHTSA may still face challenges collecting this data because 1) law enforcement officials face difficulties in determining whether a crash involved an unsecured load and 2) states do not collect uniform data on unsecured loads in their police crash reports. NHTSA officials stated that they would likely recommend changes to the Model Minimum Uniform Crash Criteria (MMUCC)—voluntary guidelines intended to create uniform data in police crash reports; however, the revised guidelines will not be released until 2017 because of MMUCC's 5-year cycle of updates. NHTSA officials acknowledged that even with the changes in its data systems, data improvements will take time to implement and data on unsecured-load crashes will likely continue to be imprecise.

Example of an Unsecured Load on a Non-Commercial Vehicle

Source: GAO.

All 50 states and the District of Columbia have statutes regarding unsecured loads that pertain to non-commercial and commercial vehicles. A majority of states and the District of Columbia reported exempting vehicles from unsecured load statutes for primarily commercial activities such as roadway maintenance or agriculture activities, while 9 states have statutes that apply to all vehicles. All 50 states and the District of Columbia reported having fines or penalties for violating unsecured load statutes ranging from $10 to $5,000; fifteen states add the possibility of imprisonment. Ten states also reported having a safety or education program related to unsecured loads.

_____ **United States Government Accountability Office**