GAO Highlights

Highlights of GAO-24-106255, a report to congressional committees

March 2024

DRIVER ASSISTANCE TECHNOLOGIES

NHTSA Should Take Action to Enhance Consumer Understanding of Capabilities and Limitations

Why GAO Did This Study

According to NHTSA, almost 42,800 people died in vehicle crashes in 2022. New vehicles are increasingly equipped with driver assistance technologies that could help reduce crashes and fatalities. NHTSA administers NCAP to educate consumers about vehicle safety, including driver assistance technologies, and to assist in consumers' purchasing decisions.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2022, included a provision for GAO to review consumer education about driver assistance technologies. Among the issues this report examines are (1) consumers' use and understanding of driver assistance technologies; and (2) the extent to which NHTSA contributes to consumers' understanding and using the technologies as intended.

GAO reviewed NHTSA's relevant rulemaking documents, website, and studies; analyzed a nongeneralizable sample of NHTSA consumer complaint data; and interviewed NHTSA and other relevant agency officials and a range of industry stakeholders, including automakers and safety organizations. GAO assessed NHTSA's efforts against key project schedule management practices.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making five recommendations, including that NHTSA finalize its NCAP roadmap, communicate progress on meeting time frames to update NCAP, and provide information to consumers on the limitations of partial driving automation systems on its website.

NHTSA agreed with our recommendations.

View GAO-24-106255. For more information, contact Andrew Von Ah at (202) 512-2834 or vonaha@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

New vehicles are increasingly equipped with driver assistance technologies designed to prevent or mitigate crashes (crash avoidance technologies) and support the driving task (driver support systems). According to interviewed stakeholders and research GAO reviewed, when drivers have a realistic understanding of their vehicles' driver assistance technologies, they are more likely to use them as intended. There is some evidence, however, that consumers do not always have an accurate understanding of technologies' capabilities and limitations. One study found that between 27 and 79 percent of consumers surveyed had misperceptions about the limitations of different crash avoidance technologies in their vehicles. In addition, misuse is a safety concern particular to partial driving automation systems, a type of driver support system, which can take over some of the driving tasks in a vehicle but still requires the full attention of the driver.

Vehicle Dashboard Displays Driver Assistance Technology Activation

Source: GAO (photo). | GAO-24-106255

Within the Department of Transportation, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) provides consumers with information on crash avoidance technologies through its New Car Assessment Program (NCAP), additional information on its website, and other means. NHTSA uses checkmarks to indicate whether vehicles come equipped with the four crash avoidance technologies that it recommends and that meet NHTSA's performance criteria. In 2022, NHTSA published a draft roadmap with plans to upgrade NCAP, including recommending four more crash avoidance technologies and developing a rating system for them. These upgrades would provide more comprehensive and comparative information to consumers. However, NHTSA has not finalized its roadmap and has missed time frames even though work on these upgrades started years ago. Developing realistic time frames and publicly communicating its progress could help NHTSA provide consumers with more meaningful information. Aside from NCAP, NHTSA provides consumers with a description on partial driving automation systems, but there is little information about their intended use and operational limitations. Providing this information could assist consumers in developing a more accurate understanding of these systems.