TRAFFIC INJURY PREVENTION
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EDITORIAL

Budget cuts at NHTSA: programs to cease and areas to cut

NHTSA's initiatives lag other countries

Figure 1 shows the trend in road accident fatalities for 15 countries from 2002 to 2021 relative to each countries' fatalities in 1979 (normalized to 1.0). The US rate was 0.840 in 2021 after lows of 0.644 in 2010 and 0.641 in 2014. Traffic safety has lagged in the US compared to other developed countries. The 14 other countries had significant drops to an average of 0.226 ± 0.059 in 2021. The US rate in 2021 is 10.4 standard deviations above the average of the 14 other countries. The US rate is 372% higher than the average of the other countries. This type of comparison has been studied by others pointing to systemic failures of NHTSA to focus on effective safety priorities (Evans 2014a, 2014b; Leonhardt 2023; Wang et al. 2023). For example, Evans (2004) criticized the cost-effectiveness of airbags without a considered reply from NHTSA. NHTSA lacks self-critical analysis of its programs and practices. What analysis they do reaches self-serving conclusions that justifying their programs.

Other countries set 10-year targets, prioritized and implemented countermeasures in the infra-structure, driver behavior and vehicle technologies (Leonhardt 2023). The US fleet has similar, if not higher levels of technology, but NHTSA is lagging in driver behavior modification programs that have taken place in other countries, particularly in belt wearing rates, drunk and distracted driving, improper child restraint and pedestrian/cyclist safety. NHTSA has failed the US in comparison to other countries.

In the US, more than 50% of fatalities are in vehicles 10 or more years old and the seatbelt wearing rate is less than 50% (Parenteau et al. 2022; Viano 2023). Race, gender and SES (socioeconomic status) are important factors for seatbelt nonuse, risk taking, impaired driving and improper child restraint. NHTSA stopped in-depth investigation of vehicles 10 or more years old in the late 2000s, thereby avoiding information on a key socio-demographic strata of fatal crashes in the US. They restarted in 2017, but at too low a frequency (Viano 2024, 2025a, 2025b).

NHTSA's budget

Figure 2 shows NHTSA's (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) budget was $367 mil in the 2000 FY (Fiscal Year). By 2024 FY, the budget bloated to $1,685 mil. The increase is 459% over 25 years, which is a staggering 14.4% increase each year. Inflation increased by only 88% over the same period with an average of 2.6 ± 1.6% increase per year. NHTSA has not effectively managed resources or made highway safety improvements. NHTSA's budget should be reduced 60% to $690 mil in 2026 FY. This is an inflation adjusted amount that is consistent with its 2000 FY budget.

One aspect of NHTSA's growth relates to headcount (permanent positions) and contractors. Figure 2 shows NHTSA's headcount has increased 44% since 2017 FY from 626 to 902 in 2024 FY. It needs to be reduced 30% to 630, which is consistent with past operations. NHTSA requested an additional 49 permanent employee hires (FTE) in the 2025 FY budget. The request is a 5.4% increase in headcount in one year. It should be denied. With a 630 headcount, NHTSA should focus on the most important automotive safety issues and cease activities of lower priority.

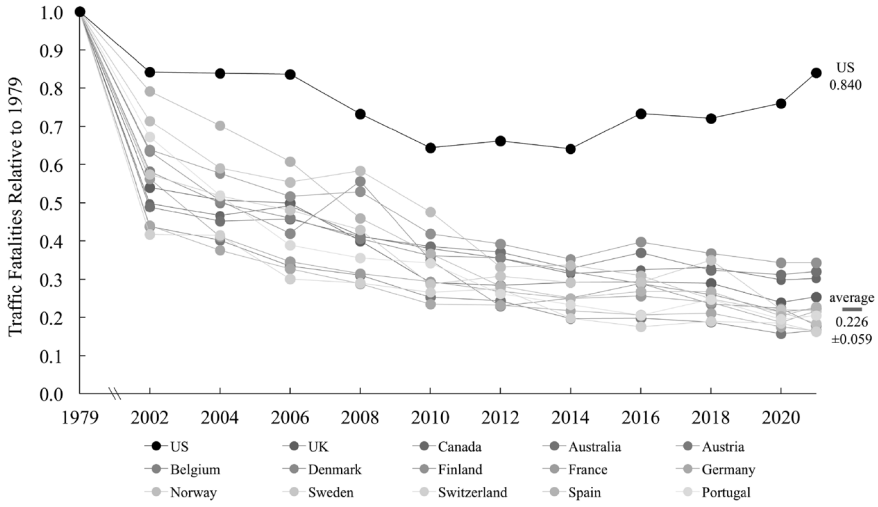

Figure 1. Traffic fatalities relative to 1979 levels in 15 countries (data from OECD 2025).

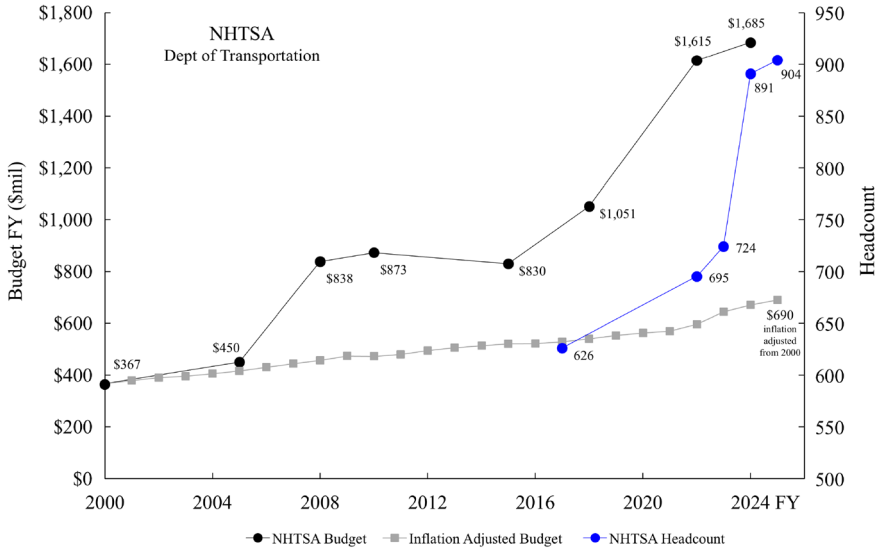

Figure 2. NHTSA's Budget and headcount increases.

Research is fundamental to improving automotive safety, but it must be effective. NHTSA has become the largest employer of doctoral level researchers in engineering, biomechanics and statistics related to automotive safety in the past 5 years. There has been an increase in funded programs at several Universities that has made NHTSA and its contractor network the dominant source of research and development (R&D) in automotive safety, surpassing the work at vehicle manufacturers and suppliers. NHTSA's research budget should be reduced 75% because it has been ineffective. NHTSA's research agenda has poor aims and goals. Its research receives insufficient review and evaluation of the value to highway safety. NHTSA routinely ignores legitimate criticism about the mis-directions of its research.

The growth in NHTSA's budget and headcount has not added value to highway safety or the competitiveness of US vehicle and associated industries. Many of NHTSA's activities have little or no safety value, particularly THOR dummy and BrIC criterion (Prasad et al. 2024; Viano 2024). The Hybrid III used today costs about $300k while THOR is more than $2,000k with instrumentation. THOR has more than 250 channels of data, most of the channels are not analyzed by NHTSA and others. Much of NHTSA's program direction sidetracks the core products and programs of manufacturers and suppliers on automotive safety.

The closest rival for safety research in the US is the IIHS (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety). The IIHS research program dwarfs in comparison to the size of NHTSA's programs. In 2000; the IIHS budget was $12.1 mil. The IIHS budget was 3.3% of NHTSA's budget. The IIHS budget grew to $28.3 mil in 2018 by building of a crash test facility and staffing. By 2023; the IIHS budget was $33.3 mil, only 2.1% of NHTSA's budget. The administration expenses at NHTSA are $269.7 mil in the 2025 FY budget, including state grants. NHTSA administration expenses are 8-times the IIHS budget, yet their expenditures have been ineffective in comparison to the safety advances of other countries.

Areas to stop activities, slash funding and cut headcount

NHTSA efforts in the 1970s-1990s resulted in significant improvements in vehicle safety with standardized regulations, NCAP testing and field crash investigations. However, most of those efforts have reached an asymptote in safety benefit. In the past 20 years, NCAP testing has manufacturers merely chasing "star ratings" that have no practical safety benefit to the public (Viano 2024). NHTSA is adding complexity that leads to no real safety improvement. The following are areas that the Administration and Congress should stop activities, slash funding and cut headcount at NHTSA. The elimination of these activities and personnel will have no negative effects on vehicle safety:

- Cease the 35 mph frontal NCAP test, it has not resulted in meaningful changes in vehicle safety the past 20 years.
- Cease research and development (R&D) on THOR dummies and curtail use in NCAP or FMVSS.
- Cease R&D on the 50th female dummy, the current range of dummy sizes covers what is needed, the concept of equity in dummies is flawed.
- Cease implementation of BrIC injury criteria for head injury assessment, NHTSA's research is flawed and there is no engineering rational for the criteria.
- Cease further revisions to roof strength (FMVSS 216), the recent upgrades are sufficient.
- Cease rulemaking on BioRID dummy in standards.
- Cease research and rulemaking on alternative dummies.
- Cease CIREN crash investigations and revise CISS crash selection and weighting methods.
- Return FMVSS 208 to the 30 mph belted test and eliminate the unbelted standard.
- Harmonize side standards with the EuroSID dummy, cease use of the EuroSID-re.
- Require manufacturers supply certification crash tests for public research and analysis.

- Slash the NHTSA budget to $690 mil, which is consistent with an inflation adjusted 2000 FY budget.
- Slash the Agencies headcount to 630 FTE, most of the new hires are involved in meaningless work.
- Slash NHTSA administration removing multiple layers of management, each employee should work on automotive safety.
- Slash University R&D expenditures by 75%, they are focusing on meaningless, self-serving work.
- Slash crash test facilities and testing by 75%, including research, new car assessment and certification tests.
- Slash the statistics/math division by 75%, their data collection is inaccurate and unreliable, NHTSA lied to Congress about the representativeness of their in-depth crash investigations.
- Slash state grants by 75% and focus on effective programs for highway safety.
- Eliminate all contract employees and refocus permanent staff on meaningful safety programs.
- Cease remote work and require NHTSA employees to be at their assigned office full time.

NHTSA had unprecedented growth in budget and headcount without evidence of safety benefits in highway safety compared to other countries. The increases should be reversed by drastic cuts of 60% in budget to $690 mil, which is an inflation adjusted increase from the 2000 FY budget, 30% reduction in headcount to 630, elimination of contract employees and 75% reduction in research, grants and contracts. NHTSA should work cooperatively with industry, IIHS and other stakeholders to eliminate unnecessary regulations, research and programs. Cuts at NHTSA will not have a negative effect on traffic safety. NHTSA should focus the remaining staff on the most important safety issues and curtail old programs and initiatives.

Conclusions

Traffic safety has lagged in the US compared to other developed countries. The fatality rate was 0.840 in 2021 in the US compared to fatalities in 1979 (1.00). This is a 16% reduction. The rate for 14 other countries was significantly lower at 0.226 ± 0.059. They achieved a 77% reduction. The US rate is 372% higher than the average of 14 other countries relative to 1979. NHTSA's (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) budget was $367 mil in the 2000 FY (Fiscal Year). By 2024 FY, the budget was $1,685 mil, a 459% increase over 25 years. This is a staggering 14.4% increase each year. Inflation increased by only 88% over the same period.

NHTSA has not effectively managed resources or made highway safety improvements comparable to other countries. It has failed its highway safety mission. NHTSA's budget should be reduced 60% to $690 mil in 2026 FY, an inflation adjusted amount consistent with its 2000 FY budget. NHTSA's headcount has increased 44% since 2017 FY from 626 to 902 in 2024 FY. It needs to be reduced 30% to 630 consistent with past levels. Research is fundamental to improving automotive safety, but it must be effective. NHTSA's research and contractor network have not produced highway safety improvements. They have been ineffective. NHTSA's research budget, contracts and grants should be reduced 75%.

Areas where safety programs can be stopped include carry-over efforts that have reached an asymptote in safety benefit, such as NCAP, but continue with increasingly complex requirements that have no benefit to the driving public. The frontal NCAP is a good example (Viano 2024). NHTSA has failed to determine the validity of methods and procedures for crash data collection. Their in-depth crash investigations are not representative of US crashes, particularly where race, gender and SES are important factors (Viano 2025a, 2025b).

Acknowledgments

The author's experiences span over 30 years of safety research, where he has tracked the decline in meaningful activities and programs at NHTSA. He evaluated NHTSA's programs, R&D and administration to reach proposals for deep cuts in NHTSA's budget and headcount. Ceasing to fund these areas will have no detrimental effect on the safety of the motoring public. Farmer (2006) found ESC (electronic stability control) reduced single-vehicle fatal crashes by 56%, making ESC the most effective safety feature added to vehicles the past two decades. It was developed and voluntarily phased into vehicles by manufacturers before NHTSA enacted FMVSS 126 regulation. The US fatality rate of 0.84 in 2021 would be higher without ESC.

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David C. Viano
Editor-in-Chief, Traffic Injury Prevention
Retired General Motors
ProBiomechanics LLC, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
dviano@comcast.net