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Are Texas' auto safety inspections worth the hassle?

After five years of inspecting vehicles, Dallas mechanic [Robert Garcia](#) has seen cars with everything from whisper-thin tire treads to brakes ready to fall off.

Garcia – like many insurers, legislators and safety advocates – can't imagine how bad the disrepair would be without Texas' yearly required safety inspections.

"It would cause a big dilemma on the road," said Garcia, who works at Adkison Tire and Service on Irving Boulevard.

But some states have dropped the basic safety review after driver complaints that they were annoying and unnecessary. And some automobile experts in Texas and across the country say more reliable cars and other safety improvements have rendered the inspections obsolete.

Texas is one of 19 states left that require a periodic safety review – down from a peak of 31 states in the 1970s. The District of Columbia recently disbanded its inspection program because of high costs and a lack of evidence that the inspections saved lives.

There is no serious discussion about eliminating Texas' program, which includes an emissions test in Dallas and some other locations.

But state officials and insurers acknowledge that more could be done to determine what the inspections are accomplishing.

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"The state needs to start collecting data and establish a baseline," said Jerry Johns, president of Southwest Insurance Information Service, an Austin-based industry trade group. "If it is not working, then abolish it. But we don't think that would be the case."

Texas was ahead of the curve in requiring vehicle inspections. In 1966, [Congress](#) passed the Highway Safety Act, which required states to do safety inspections, but Texas' program began in 1952.

At that time, defective equipment accounted for 13 percent of fatal car accidents in Texas, and state officials thought a bulked-up inspection of everything from brakes to windshields would curtail preventable accidents.

Last year, defective equipment was a contributing factor in less than 1 percent of fatal car crashes in Texas, although those figures may be skewed since investigators are not required to report defects as possible causes.

"It is clear that there are safety advantages to making sure this equipment is in proper working order," said Tom Vinger, spokesman for the state Department of Public Safety, which oversees inspections. "Problems with this vital equipment can undoubtedly lead to crashes, so the program probably does prevent crashes and save lives."

Little guidance

But proving – or disproving – the specific success of safety inspections isn't that simple, and that ambiguity has resulted in little guidance from federal agencies over the years.

In 1976, Congress eliminated the Transportation Department's ability to withhold funds from states that did not have inspection programs, and several states dropped their inspections then.

The [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) determined in 1989 that safety inspections reduced the number of poorly maintained cars but that there wasn't enough evidence to show vehicle checks prevented accidents.

The agency has decided that states should determine whether inspection programs are worthwhile, a spokeswoman said.

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Independent and state-level research offers similar conflicting reports about the effectiveness of state safety inspections in preventing accidents and saving lives.

Dan Sutter, an economics professor at the University of Texas-Pan American, co-authored a 2002 study that found car inspections have little to no effect on decreasing accidents, which he attributes partly to cars' improved reliability.

"It seems reasonable that vehicle safety inspections would be a good thing," he said. "But the data just doesn't support that."

Texas has performed no evaluations of its safety program, but state legislators flirted with disbanding the vehicle inspections in the late 1980s after an uproar about inspection stations charging excessive amounts to fix headlights' aim. But before any action was taken, the state removed headlight aim from the inspections.

Criticisms

More recently, the Texas Sunset Advisory Commission charged that the vehicle inspection program was not properly supervised and that the DPS was not doing a good job of tracking data on citations and technician performance. Vinger, the DPS spokesman, said the agency has taken steps to respond to the commission's recommendations.

Supporters of Texas' inspection program, which costs \$14.50 for a basic safety review, say it won't be stopped anytime soon. It is big business for both the state and repair shops. The program costs about \$36.3 million to run each year, and safety and emissions inspection fees brought in \$162.5 million to the state last year.

"This program maintains a safeguard against people who might defer safety maintenance. It keeps that driver safe, in addition to other motorists on the road," said Anne O'Ryan, spokeswoman for AAA Texas.

That's even more important these days, given that more car owners might be tempted to let repairs slide to save cash, said Glenn Young, a board member of the Texas Automotive Service Association. His group represents service stations, including some that profit from inspections.

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But Young, a Houston mechanic who does not perform safety inspections, said the issue was first and foremost safety. "Without the program, I would be extremely nervous about the vehicles on the road," he said.

So Texans like Mohan Kumar will keep rolling into repair shops each year.

Kumar said Friday he sometimes worries that inspections might result in expensive repairs, but as he got his 2001 [Nissan Sentra](#) inspected at a Midas auto service shop in Plano, he offered lukewarm support for the state's decades-long tradition.

"I'm OK with it," he said.

Down the street at Pro Quick Lube, customer Valerie Gottschalt said the annual inspection "doesn't take long" and at least offers a basic check on brakes and other essential parts.

"And it's one way of making sure [drivers] have insurance," she said.

Required annual safety inspections cost \$14.50 and are available at thousands of licensed repair shops. The inspections include checks from brakes to windshields to tire treads.

Annual emissions inspections are federally required for Texas areas with poor air quality. Many places do both safety and emissions inspections. Emissions checks can cost up to \$39.75.

A legislative report this year said the Department of Public Safety was not properly supervising the safety inspection program and not sufficiently tracking data about citations and technician performance. A DPS spokesman said the agency has worked to remedy those issues.

SOURCES: American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators Fast Track to Vehicle Services Facts, [USA Today](#), *Dallas Morning News* research

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