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United States General Accounting Office
Washington, DC 20548

November 3, 2003

The Honorable Peter G. Fitzgerald
Chairman
The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Financial Management,
the Budget, and International Security
Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

Subject: *Comparison of States' Highway Construction Costs*

In your recent letter to us concerning the impending reauthorization of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, you stated that the return on federal investment could be increased through effective cost competition for states' highway construction contracts. In this context, you asked that we report on how states compare in terms of the cost of highway construction. As agreed with your offices, we are reporting to you on whether Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) data can help transportation stakeholders understand how states' costs to build, reconstruct, and maintain federally financed highways, roads, and bridges (termed "constructing highways" for this report) compare. During our review, we became aware of significant issues regarding the quality of the data that FHWA collects and reports, a topic also discussed in this report. On September 11, 2003, we briefed the Chairman on the results of our work, and on September 22 we provided the Ranking Member's office with the briefing slides we prepared. This report summarizes the briefing. The slides that formed the basis for the briefing are enclosed.

Background

States, with support from localities, are primarily responsible for building and maintaining the nation's highways, roads, and bridges, with significant financial support from the federal government. From 1998 through 2001 (the latest years for which data are available), all levels of government spent more than \$80 billion each year for capital construction and maintenance of their highways, roads, and bridges. Of this amount, the federal government supplied about \$30 billion annually.

Highway project costs can differ for a number of reasons.¹ For example, highways are more expensive to build in mountainous areas than in flat areas. Projects in urban areas are more expensive than those in rural areas. Projects with bridges cost more than similar projects that do not require bridges. Compared with smaller projects, large projects may result in lower unit costs because of economies of scale. More complicated projects, such as those with a large number of interchanges or complicated engineering problems, can cost more than less complicated projects. Other factors that may affect cost are the degree of competition for contracts and different state design standards.

For each contract exceeding \$500,000, FHWA requires that each state, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico (collectively called “states”) provide the agency with data (called bid price data) on the quantity of materials used and the installed price of the materials (representing materials, labor, overhead, and profit) from contracts to construct and maintain roads on the National Highway System.² States are required to provide FHWA with this data for seven materials (common and unclassified roadway excavation, structural reinforcement and structural steels, bituminous and Portland cement concrete surfaces, and structural concrete), as well as provide the total contract costs for road and bridge aspects of the contract, and the location of the project. According to FHWA, the bid price data are limited to seven materials because the materials are common to all states; therefore, they act as good indicators for changes in principal work items. FHWA makes summaries of its bid price data, including a national composite index of all materials on which data are collected, available to the public in its quarterly *Price Trends for Federal-Aid Highway Construction* and in its annual *Highway Statistics*.³

According to FHWA officials, the bid price data are the only data they collect from states involving price and quantity, both of which are needed to compare state highway construction costs. FHWA collects bid price data so that it can use the national composite index to help (1) monitor changes in the purchasing power of the federal-aid highway construction dollar, and (2) develop, as one factor, projections of future highway funding needs.

¹Most federal funds that states receive to fund their highway projects are apportioned to the states based on formulas and procedures prescribed by law. With few exceptions, state decisions to undertake higher- or lower-cost projects do not affect the level of funding they receive. However, to the extent that states can avoid excessive costs on ongoing projects, they will be able to undertake additional projects.

²The National Highway System consists of completed interstate highways, urban and rural principal arterials, other strategic highways, and intermodal connectors. The system comprises about 161,000 miles of highway. Although the system represents about 4 percent of total highway miles, it carries about 43 percent of the traffic (as measured by vehicle miles traveled).

³In these publications, FHWA combines the two excavation items and reports on six materials.

Summary

FHWA's database allows for comparisons of an individual state's costs over time but does not allow for comparisons between states. In addition, FHWA has concerns, which have not been formally disclosed to users, about the quality of the data.

Comparing States' Construction Costs

FHWA's database containing its bid price data allows for comparisons of an individual state's costs over time but does not allow for comparisons between states.⁴ Costs are tracked by state, according to an index value that is assigned quarterly. Each state received an index value of 100 for the base year (1987). If one state's costs in the base year were twice those of another state, both would have an index value of 100 for that year, and the difference in those costs would not be shown, thus preventing a comparison.

In addition, FHWA officials told us that the bid price data do not contain details to determine why costs appear to differ either between states or within a state. They told us that the installed cost of materials could vary significantly, for example, because the quality of the materials or the installation specification (e.g., smoothness of the surface) could be very different. FHWA's bid price data do not contain this information.

FHWA is considering whether to discontinue collecting bid price data because of the (1) apparent limited use of the data, and (2) level of effort to collect data that apparently is not extensively used. In commenting on a draft of this report, FHWA noted that it hired a consultant to evaluate the usefulness of the data to stakeholders and to explore potential alternative approaches to gathering information that could be used within FHWA. FHWA also commented that it recently partnered with the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials to survey all state departments of transportation on the extent of use of the published price trend data and alternative ways that FHWA could gather these data (such as using data that are being collected by states for their internal use).

We contacted 12 states, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, and several industry associations about the usefulness of the bid price data. Generally, they told us they do not use the data. For example, a few states told us that they maintain more complete data, and FHWA's data are not compatible with their own. FHWA estimated that it takes states, in total, about 975 hours annually to report the bid price

⁴In 2002, the Washington State Department of Transportation surveyed states on the costs to build a 1.02-mile interchange whose design the department believed was universal to all states. Reported costs ranged from \$4 million to \$26.7 million, based on 25 states reporting. See the enclosure to this report.

data (based on reporting by 37 states), or an average of about 6.5 hours per state per quarterly report.

Quality of FHWA's Bid Price Data

FHWA's quality control procedures on its bid price data are limited. It receives the bid price data either electronically or on paper from the states, and FHWA officials then input the data into their database. FHWA officials told us that they intermittently review submitted data for obvious errors and completeness and follow up with states for correction. However, they said they do not follow standard error-checking procedures, such as those contained in departmental guidelines, for reviewing state submitted reports.⁵ They also told us that they have no procedures for verifying the keypunching of data made by their data entry staff. An FHWA official told us that FHWA is reluctant to invest time and money into improving the quality of its data until it decides whether it will continue to collect the data. While we agree that any substantial investments in time and money may not be warranted if FHWA ultimately decides to discontinue collecting bid price data, following standard error-checking routines would increase FHWA's knowledge about the quality of its data and the extent to which its concerns should be communicated to data users.

FHWA recognizes that it has problems with the quality of its bid price data. According to FHWA officials, underreporting and, to a lesser degree, inconsistent reporting are the biggest problems affecting data quality. Regarding underreporting, we examined data in the database for 3 years, 2000 through 2002. We found that the database did not contain data for seven states for 1, 2, or all 3 years.⁶ In addition, we found instances in which states that received relatively more highway funds from FHWA reported far fewer contracts (and contract amounts) than states that received significantly fewer funds from FHWA, suggesting that states that received more funds may be underreporting.

We also found data inconsistencies. For example, about 19 percent of the data for 2000 through 2002 were for a year other than the one being reported on. Most often these incorrect data were for the previous year. FHWA officials told us that, for the most part, states submitted these data late.⁷ Instead of omitting the data, FHWA officials told us they included the previous year's data to add robustness to the data reported for the reporting year and because the information for the prior years had already been disseminated. Among other problems, we found a \$7 million contract erroneously included in the database as a \$7 billion contract, thus potentially skewing some information (but not the unit costs for the six materials reported) for that state.

⁵Guidelines for processing statistical data are available in *The Department of Transportation's Information Dissemination of Quality Guidelines* and the Bureau of Transportation Statistics' *Guide to Good Statistical Practices in the Transportation Field*.

⁶The one state that did not report data for all 3 years told us that it was too much trouble. Three other states we contacted told us that they made data available to FHWA's field office, which compiled it for reporting purposes. We did not attempt to verify whether the states reported the data or how FHWA processed submitted data.

⁷We did not attempt to determine when these data were submitted.

With the exception of the erroneous \$7 billion contract amount, we did not attempt to trace the data back to the states. Therefore, we cannot say whether the state incorrectly reported the data for the problems we found or whether the data were entered incorrectly at FHWA.⁸

FHWA has not formally disclosed its concerns with the quality of the bid price data when it reported these data in its *Price Trends for Federal-Aid Highway Construction* or *Highway Statistics*. An FHWA official told us that he believes that most state departments of transportation and other users are aware of the bid price data flaws because this information has been provided informally to many stakeholders over the years and state departments of transportation use the published summaries primarily to cross-check other state highway construction cost data. After we raised this concern, an FHWA official said that FHWA is considering how to advise states and other users about the quality of the data that it is reporting.

Conclusions

As we were examining the use of FHWA's bid price data to determine whether it could be used to compare states' highway construction costs, FHWA officials alerted us to their concerns about the quality and usefulness of its bid price data. We agree with FHWA that it is wasteful to collect and disseminate data that is not used. However, there may be other state construction data that FHWA could collect that would be useful to stakeholders. Until FHWA decides whether it will discontinue, supplement, or supplant bid price data collection, the quality of the bid price data that FHWA reports to the public could be improved through use of more systematic quality control procedures, such as through standard error-checking routines and keypunching verification required by departmental guidelines.

Recommendations for Executive Action

In order to determine whether continued federal and state efforts to provide and analyze state construction cost data are warranted, we recommend that the Secretary of Transportation direct the Federal Highway Administrator to determine whether the bid price data collected by FHWA is useful to transportation stakeholders and, if not, to discontinue collecting the data. Further, we recommend that the Secretary direct the Federal Highway Administrator to determine whether it would be useful and feasible to collect and disseminate other state construction cost data that could supplement or supplant FHWA's bid price data.

While FHWA continues to collect and disseminate bid price data, we recommend that the Secretary direct the Federal Highway Administrator follow departmental guidelines for systematic quality control procedures, such as standard error-checking routines and keypunching verification, to improve the accuracy of the data reported.

⁸In commenting on a draft of this report, FHWA told us that the state reported the \$7 million contract amount as \$7 billion. The state did not respond to our requests for information.

Finally, until the quality of the bid price data is improved, we recommend that the Secretary of Transportation direct the Federal Highway Administrator to disclose its limitations in any published distribution of the data.

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We obtained oral comments on a draft of this report from the Department of Transportation. The department did not provide an overall opinion about our draft report or directly comment on our proposed recommendations. The department commented that in situations where data is provided by nondepartmental sources such as states, the department's options for ensuring the accuracy of the original source data are limited. In these situations, departmental guidelines emphasize disseminating information to users about data quality, the department's processing methods, and analysis methods. Exploring ways to ensure the accuracy of data submitted by others, such as states, was beyond the scope of our effort. Therefore, we cannot comment on whether the department's options are limited or whether cost-effective means and incentives exist to better ensure data accuracy and completeness. However, the department's comment that its guidelines emphasize communicating to users about data quality suggests that it agrees with the proposed recommendation in our draft report (and included in this final report) that it disclose the limitations of its bid price data in any published distribution of the data.

The department also suggested that the report recognize FHWA's recent efforts to determine if collecting bid price data should continue. We added this information to this final report. The department also provided a number of technical and clarifying comments, which we incorporated where appropriate.

Scope and Methodology

To identify whether FHWA collects information on states' highway construction costs that could help it and other stakeholders in overseeing federal-aid highway programs, we contacted officials in FHWA and the Bureau of Transportation Statistics in the Department of Transportation. They identified FHWA's bid price data as the only data set that included both quantity and cost information.⁹ To understand the nature of the bid price data and their uses, we interviewed officials in FHWA's Office of Program Administration; reviewed data collection forms and instructions; reviewed FHWA documentation on how bid price data are compiled into reports; and reviewed the primary public summary of the data in *Price Trends for Federal-Aid Highway Construction*.

As part of our work to determine how FHWA's bid price data help it and other stakeholders understand how states' costs to build federally financed highways compare, we (1) examined how FHWA ensures the quality of its bid price data, (2) tested the quality and reliability of the data, and (3) asked selected stakeholders

⁹FHWA also requires that contractors provide it with certain labor cost information. However, an FHWA official believes that few contractors submit this information.

about their perceptions of the data's usefulness. Regarding how FHWA ensures the quality of its bid price data, we discussed with FHWA officials in its Office of Program Administration how the data are submitted to FHWA and how the data are entered and maintained in the database. We also discussed quality control procedures, such as ensuring accuracy and completeness of data submissions and ensuring accuracy of data entered into the database. We also contacted four states for which FHWA's database did not contain any contract information for 2000, 2001, or 2002, to ask if they had submitted data. These states were the District of Columbia, Kentucky, Minnesota, and New Hampshire. Finally, we reviewed departmental guidelines for processing statistical data: *The Department of Transportation's Information Dissemination of Quality Guidelines* and *Guide to Good Statistical Practices in the Transportation Field*.

Regarding testing the quality and reliability of FHWA's bid price data, we obtained electronic files from FHWA for 2000, 2001, and 2002. Our tests focused primarily on checking

- contract award dates, to make sure they fell within the year in which they were being reported (e.g., that all contracts in the 2000 database had a start date within 2000);
- contract award amounts for apparent extreme (high or low) amounts; and
- the number of contracts reported by each state in each year, to see if they were relatively consistent from year to year and to see if some states had not reported any contracts for at least 1 year.

We then discussed the results of our tests with FHWA officials. When we found examples of incomplete data or inaccurate data, we did not attempt to determine whether states submitted incorrect data or whether FHWA incorrectly entered the data into its database.

Regarding understanding the usefulness of FHWA bid price data to transportation stakeholders, we contacted private associations, state highway officials, and federal agencies. We discussed the practical applications, if any, of the FHWA bid price data. The private associations we contacted were the Association for the Advancement of Cost Engineering International, American Road and Transportation Builders Association, and American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials. We contacted the state departments of transportation in California, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Ohio, and Wyoming. We selected these states because (1) they represented states with either a large, medium, or small number of contracts in the database, or (2) we were contacting them anyway about whether they had submitted bid price data from 2000 through 2002. The federal agencies were the Bureau of Transportation Statistics and the Congressional Research Service.

Finally, we reviewed recent reports by the Department of Transportation's Office of Inspector General and by us on FHWA cost oversight issues.¹⁰ We conducted our work from July through October 2003 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

As arranged with your offices, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days after the date of this letter. At that time, we will send copies of this report to congressional committees with responsibilities for highway issues; the Secretary of Transportation; the Federal Highway Administrator; and the Director, Office of Management and Budget. We will also make copies available to others upon request. This report will be available at no charge on GAO's Web site at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact either James Ratzenberger at ratzenbergerj@gao.gov or me at guerrerop@gao.gov. Alternatively, we may be reached at (202) 512-2834. Key contributors to this report were Jay Cherlow, Hiroshi Ishikawa, Jennifer Popovic, Robert Parker, and James Ratzenberger.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. Guerrero', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Peter Guerrero
Director, Physical Infrastructure Issues

Enclosure

¹⁰See, for example, our recent reports: *Transportation Programs: Opportunities for Oversight and Improved Use of Taxpayer Funds*, GAO-03-1040T (Washington, D.C.: July 22, 2003); *Federal-Aid Highways: Cost and Oversight of Major Highway and Bridge Projects—Issues and Options*, GAO-03-764T (Washington, D.C.: May 8, 2003); and *Transportation Infrastructure: Cost and Oversight Issues on Major Highway and Bridge Projects*, GAO-02-702T (Washington, D.C.: May 1, 2002).



States' Highway Construction Costs

Briefing for the Chairman
Subcommittee on Financial Management,
the Budget, and International Security
Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs
September 11, 2003



Objective

Our objective was to determine whether Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) data can help transportation stakeholders understand how states' highway construction costs compare.

During our review, we became aware of significant issues regarding the quality of the data that FHWA collects and reports. This topic is also covered in this briefing.



Background

- States, with support from localities, are primarily responsible for building, reconstructing, and maintaining the nation's highways, roads, and bridges (termed "constructing highways" for this briefing).
- From fiscal year 1998 through 2001, the nation spent more than \$80 billion each year for capital construction and maintenance on its highways.
- Of this amount, the federal government provides nearly \$30 billion each year to states and local governments to help build and maintain highways.



Background

- FHWA officials identified one database that FHWA maintains--bid price data--that contains both materials quantity and price data, both of which are needed to compare construction costs across states.
 - FHWA requires that states provide it with quantity and price information (bid price data) for contracts on all federally financed highway projects costing more than \$500,000 on the National Highway System. FHWA collects this information under its general oversight authority.
 - FHWA collects this information on the (1) installed costs (materials, labor, overhead, and profit) of seven materials (common and unclassified roadway excavation, structural reinforcement and structural steels, bituminous and Portland cement concrete surfaces, and structural concrete), (2) total roadway and bridge contract amounts, and (3) location of the project.
 - According to FHWA, the bid price data are limited to seven materials because the materials are common to all states; therefore, they can act as good indicators for changes in prices of principal work items.



Background

- FHWA collects bid price data to
 - monitor changes in the purchasing power of the federal-aid highway construction dollar and
 - use as one factor in developing projections of future highway funding needs.
- FHWA makes a summary of this information available to the public in its quarterly *Price Trends for Federal-Aid Highway Construction* and in its annual *Highway Statistics* publications.
- FHWA's report shows how much an individual state's costs have changed over time (for the materials reported) and shows national price trends for the reported materials.



Scope and Methodology

- We examined the availability of data collected by FHWA to make state-by-state comparisons of highway construction costs.
- We discussed FHWA's bid price data with transportation stakeholders regarding the usefulness of the data for understanding highway construction costs.
- We discussed the quality of the bid price data with FHWA and with state departments of transportation and performed reliability tests.
- We reviewed recent products by the Department of Transportation's Office of Inspector General and by GAO on oversight of cost issues related to federally financed highway projects.



Comparing States' Construction Costs Using Bid Price Data

- FHWA's database that contains its bid price data allows for comparisons of an individual state's costs over time but does not allow comparisons between states.
 - The database assigns each state's costs an index value of 100 for the base year, 1987. The index value of 100 may represent different levels of costs for different states, thus preventing any comparison.
 - In addition, FHWA officials told us that the installed cost of materials can vary significantly, for example, due to the quality of the material or the installation specification (e.g., smoothness of the surface). FHWA's bid price data do not contain this information.



Comparing States' Construction Costs Using Bid Price Data

- In order to collect data that would allow meaningful insights, FHWA would have to be able to identify the factors that have the greatest ability to explain cost differences (e.g., understanding differences due to labor costs, different specifications for materials, and topographic conditions).
- In addition, the benefits from collecting information on factors that influence highway construction costs would have to be weighed against the costs and feasibility of collecting it.



Usefulness of Data

- We contacted 12 states, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, and several industry associations about the usefulness of FHWA's bid price data. They told us they generally do not use these data. For example, a few states told us that they compile more extensive and complete cost data for their own use, and the information requested by FHWA is not compatible with their own systems.
- FHWA has estimated that, annually, it takes a total of about 975 hours for states to report bid price data, based on 37 states reporting on a total of about 1,300 contracts each year.
- FHWA is considering whether to discontinue collecting bid price data because of the (1) apparent lack of use of the data and (2) level of effort to collect the data. FHWA has not set a date for making this decision.



Quality of FHWA's Bid Price Data

- Regarding data quality, FHWA officials are concerned about the reliability of the bid price data primarily as a result of underreporting and, to a lesser degree, inconsistent information contained in its database.
- Regarding underreporting, FHWA officials believe that states do not report all contracts over \$500,000 for projects on the National Highway System, but they have not attempted to determine the extent of underreporting.
 - We found that 7 states did not report any contracts for 1 or more years during the 3-year period we reviewed, 2000-2002.
 - We contacted 4 of these states. One told us that submitting bid price data was too much work. The other three states told us that they supplied cost information to FHWA state offices, who compiled it for inclusion in the database. (We did not attempt to verify if information was provided to FHWA or how FHWA compiled it.)



Quality of FHWA's Bid Price Data

- We also contacted 8 states that reported information to FHWA for each of the 3 years, 2000 through 2002. Six of the states told us that they believe that the information in FHWA's database includes all information required to be reported. The other two states told us that FHWA state offices compiled information from the states and they did not check on the information included in the database. (We did not attempt to verify the information submitted by states or how FHWA state offices acted on it.)
- Finally, we found instances in which states that received relatively more highway funds from FHWA reported far fewer contracts (and contract amounts) than states that received significantly less funds from FHWA, suggesting that states that received more funds may be underreporting.



Quality of FHWA's Bid Price Data

- FHWA officials are also concerned about the accuracy of its bid price data.
 - They told us that they review the submitted data for obvious errors and return the data to states for correction.
 - They told us that they do not follow standard error-checking procedures, such as those contained in departmental guidelines, for reviewing submitted reports. An FHWA official told us that FHWA is reluctant to invest time and money into improving the quality of its data until it decides whether it will continue to collect the data.



Quality of FHWA's Bid Price Data

- We found a number of inconsistencies in FHWA's database for the years we examined (2000-2002). Among other things:
 - About 19 percent of the data included for any one year was for a year other than the one being reported on.
 - Most often, these incorrect data were for the previous year and were submitted late, according to FHWA. FHWA officials told us that they included the previous year's data (1) to add robustness to the data reported for the reporting year and (2) because the information for the previous years had already been published, rather than adjusting previous years' results.
 - We found other obvious inconsistencies, such as data reported for 1900, 1906, and 1921 in the 2000-2002 period.
 - We found one instance where a \$7 million contract was entered into the database as a \$7 billion contract, potentially seriously skewing some of the results for that state.

- We did not attempt to determine whether the states submitted incorrect information or whether FHWA incorrectly entered it into its database.



Quality of FHWA's Bid Price Data

- FHWA's *Price Trends for Federal-Aid Highway Construction and Highway Statistics* do not disclose FHWA's concern about its data.
- An FHWA official told us that most state departments of transportation are aware of the flaws with its bid price data and use it primarily as a comparison with other data they maintain.



State Study of Highway Construction Costs

- Although FHWA's bid price data cannot presently be used to compare states' construction costs, a 2002 Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) study sheds some light on this issue.
 - WSDOT asked other state departments of transportation to provide cost information for constructing a highway interchange that it deemed would be universal for all states.
 - Some costs, such as right of way acquisition, were not included because they vary depending on project location.
 - WSDOT provided the design specifications and quantities to be used for each material.
 - WSDOT received responses from 24 other states.



State Study of Highway Construction Costs

- WSDOT found:
 - Reported costs ranged from about \$1 million to \$8.5 million per lane mile.
 - The median reported cost was about \$1.6 million per lane mile.
 - Five states reported costs significantly higher than other states—ranging between about \$3.1 million and \$8.5 million per lane mile. (See fig. 1.)

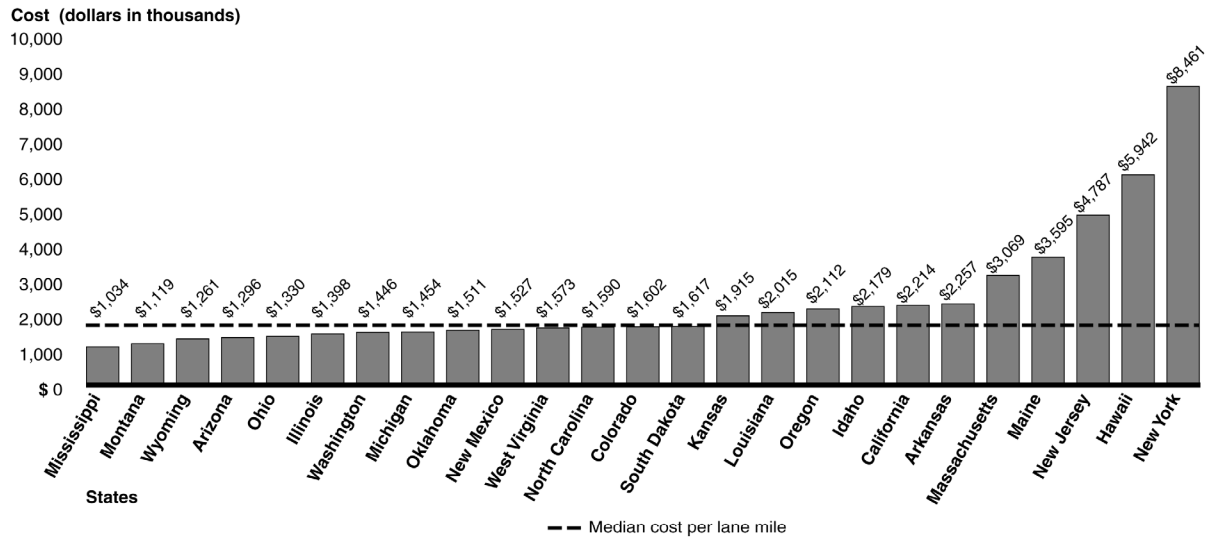
- We did not assess the reliability of the data reported in the WSDOT study.



State Study of Highway Construction Costs

Figure 1: Cost to Build a Lane Mile of a Specified Type of Highway Interchange in 25 States

Lane Mile Cost Comparison



Source: Washington State Department of Transportation, Highway Construction Cost Comparison Survey, April 2002 Final Report.

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