

Chicago Passenger Train Wrecks: A Retrospective

Each year thousands of people depend on railroads to get them from place to place – some use the train for business, others use the train for pleasure.

The law refers to railroads that transport passengers as common carriers. As a common carrier, the railroad has a legal obligation to exercise the highest degree of care to assure the safety of its passengers. This heightened legal standard is quite different from the ordinary legal standard, which simply requires that one person act with ordinary care for the safety of others. The reason that railroads are held to a heightened legal standard is because the passengers pay the railroad to be transported safely, essentially the passengers place themselves and their control in the hands of the railroad until they reach their destination.

When a train derailment, train crash or other train accident happens, it usually happens because the railroad did not act with the highest degree of care for the safety of their passengers. In its capacity as a common carrier, a railroad is considered negligent and therefore held liable for any injuries from a train accident if the railroad failed to exercise the highest degree of care for the safety of its passengers.

Over the last several years, the Chicago area has seen at least its fair share of serious train accidents. These train wrecks include: collisions between trains, collisions with motor vehicles on the tracks, and train derailments. When a train wreck happens, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigates and determines the cause of the train accident. The following are summaries of train accidents and their causes:

June 12, 2002 – Metra commuter trains collide in Aurora, Illinois:

An eastbound Metra commuter train collided head on with a westbound Metra commuter train. Several cars of both trains and the locomotive of the westbound train derailed. Several crew members and more than 40 passengers were injured.

The NTSB determined that the probable cause of the collision was the engineer and the conductor of the eastbound train's failure to comply with the stop signal at the Aurora Transportation Center Station.

October 12, 2003 – Metra commuter train derailment in Chicago, Illinois:

A westbound Metra commuter train derailed its two locomotives and five passenger cars while traversing a crossover near 48th Street at a recorded speed of about 68 mph. The maximum authorized speed through the crossover was 10 mph. Forty-seven passengers were transported to local hospitals. Most were treated and released, but several were admitted for observation.

The NTSB found that the probable cause of the derailment was the locomotive engineer's loss of situational awareness minutes before the derailment because of his preoccupation with certain train operations leading to his failure to observe and comply with signal

indications. The lack of a positive train control system at the accident location contributed to the accident.

February 3, 2004 – Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) el trains collide near Merchandise Mart passenger platform:

A northbound CTA Purple Line collided with the rear car of a standing CTA Brown Line train. No cars derailed as a result of the collision, but 42 passengers sustained minor injuries.

The NTSB determined that the probable cause was the Purple Line operator's failure to comply with operating rules. Contributing to the accident was inadequate operational safety oversight by the CTA.

September 17, 2005 – Metra derailment in Chicago, Illinois, near West 47th and South Federal Street:

An eastbound (inbound) Metra train derailed one locomotive and five cars as it traversed a crossover. The train was en route from Joliet to the downtown LaSalle Street station. It was traveling 69 mph where there was a prescribed maximum operating speed of 10 mph. Several of the cars struck a steel girder that was part of a bridge that carried the tracks over 47th Street. One hundred and nine passengers, four crewmembers and four others were injured. Two passengers were killed.

The NTSB determined that the probable cause of the derailment was the engineer's inattentiveness to signal indications and his failure to operate the train in accordance with the signal indications and the speed restriction for the crossover at 48th Street. The NTSB also determined that contributing to the accident was a lack of recognition by Metra of the risk posed by the significant difference between track speed and crossover speed at the accident location and its inaction to reduce the risk through additional operational safety procedures or other means. It also determined that the lack of a positive train control system was contributed to the accident.

November 23, 2005 – Metra Railroad Crossing Collision in Elmwood Park, Illinois:

On the day before Thanksgiving, a traffic queue formed within the 366-foot-wide signaled Metra highway-railroad grade crossing on eastbound West Grand Avenue, which is the widest grade crossing in Illinois. At the same time, a Metra train was approaching the crossing on the westbound tracks at a speed of 70 mph. The crossing lights activated and the crossing gates lowered 54 seconds before the train arrived. Some stopped vehicles were trapped within the grade crossing. Recognizing the hazard, the engineer put the train into emergency braking, but the train was unable to stop before colliding with approximately 6 of the stopped vehicles pushing them into secondary impacts with 12 other vehicles. Seven automobile occupants received minor-to-serious injuries, and 3 of the approximately 400 train passengers reported minor injuries.

The NTSB determined that the probable cause of the accident was a combination of factors that led to the development of a traffic queue at the highway-rail grade crossing and prevented queued vehicles from exiting the crossing prior to the arrival of a train.

These factors include the exceptionally wide grade crossing; the unusually heavy holiday traffic; and complex street and rail pattern and related signal interactions between Harlem Avenue and the West Grand Avenue grade crossing, which frequently desynchronized the traffic signals along West Grand Avenue during peak travel times.

July 11, 2006 – CTA Blue Line derailment in downtown Chicago, Illinois:

The last car of northbound a CTA Blue Line train derailed in the subway between the Clark/Lake and Grand/Milwaukee stations. Electrical arcing between the last car and the 600-volt direct current third rail generated smoke. The Chicago Fire Department reported that 152 persons were treated and transported from the scene. There were no fatalities.

The NTSB determined that the probable cause of the derailment was the CTA's ineffective management and oversight of its track inspection and maintenance program and its system safety program, which resulted in unsafe track conditions. Contributing to the accident were the Regional Transportation Authority's (RTA) failure to require that action be taken by the CTA to correct unsafe track conditions and the Federal Transit Administration's ineffective oversight of the RTA. Smoke in the tunnel and the delay in removing that smoke contributed to the seriousness of the accident.

March 7, 2007 – Metra/Canadian National Collision in Chicago

On March 7, 2007, CN Railway crew left two locomotives with only air brakes applied on a grade at CN's interchange point at Lumbar Street. The two uncontrolled locomotives rolled and collided with the lead locomotive of a standing Metra train that about 55 passengers were aboard. Seven passengers and the Metra engineer and assistant conductor were transported to area hospitals with minor injuries; they were treated and released.

The NTSB determined that the probable cause of the collision was the CN Railway engineer and conductor's failure to secure the CN Railway locomotives before leaving them unattended.

Conclusion

It is pretty clear that most train wreck accidents are preventable, especially if the railroad exercises the highest degree of care for the safety of its passengers. Unfortunately, these accidents still happen, and when they do, they frequently result in serious injuries to passengers. Review of the train accidents studied in this article show that most accidents are due to operator inattention, poor track or signal maintenance, and/or unsafe crossings. These are all features that should be corrected if the railroad exercises the highest degree of care for the safety of its passengers. Making matters even worse, sometimes passengers, who rightfully so expect to receive a smooth, safe ride, do not secure themselves by wearing seatbelts; some might even be standing at the time of the accident.

Further, handling the investigation of train accidents is a complex and comprehensive undertaking. It calls for a thorough understanding of train operations procedures and the roles of the many investigative agencies. Anyone involved in a train accident should be advised not to try to deal themselves with the railroad's claims agents. Instead, someone involved in a train accident should consult with and hire an experienced personal injury lawyer to represent his or her interests.