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Railroad Accidents: Common Causes, Statistics and Prevention

Railroad Accidents: Common Causes, Statistics and Prevention

The causes of train wrecks and how to prevent them

[Train accidents](#) aren't as common as other transportation accidents, which perhaps is why they aren't viewed as a major threat. Although railroads aren't used as often as they were in centuries past, they still remain quite active. In fact, trains are still quite common in the US – particularly subways, commuter trains, trams, etc. In the United States



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alone, there are approximately 600 railroads, hundreds of thousands of miles of tracks, and over 209,000 railroad crossings.

Unfortunately, when train accidents happen, they often result in serious injuries and fatalities.

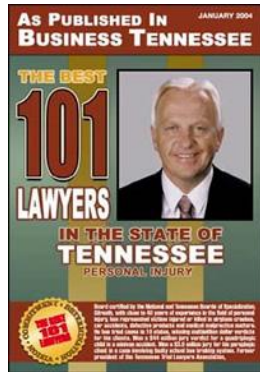
When this happens, obtaining compensation from the company or individual responsible can be more challenging than it should be. Nobody wants to be held liable for such a tragic accident, and their insurance company will fight tooth and nail to deny or reduce your benefits.

Whether you were injured while working for a railroad company or you're a train passenger hurt in a wreck, we encourage you to contact the experienced [Tennessee train accident lawyers](#) at Gilreath & Associates.

Train Accident Statistics

- According to the [Federal Railroad Administration](#), in 2014 there were 11,896 train accidents at railroad crossings, resulting in 804 fatalities and thousands of injuries over the course of that year.
- Trains are estimated to kill 1 person every 100 minutes. Each year nearly 1,000 people are killed in train related accidents.
- More than half of all railroad accidents occur at unprotected crossings.
- More than 80 percent of crossings lack adequate warning devices such as lights and gates.
- Occupants of vehicles that collide with a train are 40 times more likely to die than if they had collided with another vehicle of comparable size.
- Every two weeks a train carrying hazardous materials derails in the United States.

The Great Train Wreck of 1918



Tennessee has a particularly troubling history when it comes to train accidents. The Great Train Wreck of 1918, which happened near Nashville on July 9, 1918, is widely considered to be the worst rail accident disaster in US history to this day. Over 100 people died and at least another 170 were injured when two passenger trains, operated by the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railway ("NC&StL"), collided head-on at 50 to 60 miles per hour.

When the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) investigated the cause of the accident, they determined several factors were to blame such critical errors made by the crew and tower operators. The ICC also placed some of the blame for the high number of fatalities on the lack of a system for accurately determining train positions and the wooden construction of the cars.

Top 10 Causes of Train & Railroad Accidents

There are a variety of reasons why train accidents occur – most of which take place at crossings when cars try to "beat" the train. When these accidents occur, they often involve the passengers, driver, and some passersby.

While every case is unique, the most common causes of train accidents include:

- Negligence
- Defective tracks
- Human error
- Derailments

- Reckless pedestrians and drivers
- Mechanical failure
- Speedy trains
- Unprotected railroad crossings
- Stalled cars on the track
- Suicides

1. Negligence

Railroad accidents due to negligence can be blamed on different groups. Some may be the fault of the railway company itself, whereas others are because a conductor or railroad employee was negligent. Some accidents are even caused by the neglect of a government agency. Or perhaps an equipment manufacturer can be a reason why the accident happened.

One example of railway negligence is when a crossing arm is operated incorrectly. Another careless mistake is if the operator forgot or failed to turn on the signal light, which should have provided adequate warning.

A common factor that contributes to this problem is the decades old, outdated technology still frequently used for railways and trains today. Better technology is available to improve railway safety, but adopting these features is often put on hold because it involves a hefty investment.

For example, all Class I main lines that handle either hazardous materials or passenger trains (or both) were required by Congress to implement a system of train control technology called [Positive Train Control](#) (PTC) by the end of 2018. PTC aims to prevent many different types of train accidents such as collisions between trains, grade crossing accidents, and train derailments due to high speeds. However, an estimated two-thirds of U.S. commuter railroads failed to meet the deadline, and PTC is only in operation on 45% of tracks owned by freight railroads and 24% of tracks owned by passenger railways.

2. Human Error

If the conductor is inexperienced, train accidents can easily happen. Even those who have been working in the railroad industry for quite some time may make a mistake that harms other people, including passengers. Another growing problem with both experienced and new conductors is fatigue. They cannot operate the train safely if they're

exhausted, yet they do so anyway due to pressure they face from their supervisors and company.

Human error has always been one of the most common reasons for any accident. From poor judgment to vision issues to impaired reactions, these factors can (and do) contribute to train disasters.

3. Reckless Pedestrians & Drivers

Train accidents aren't always the fault of the train operator or company. Sometimes, a reckless or distracted pedestrian can cause a collision by standing on or crossing the tracks at the wrong time. In other scenarios, the driver of a car, truck, motorcycle or other motor vehicle can cause an accident by leaving their vehicle parked on a train track or trying to beat the train across a crossing.

4. Mechanical Failure

The train operator, railway employees and the company itself can do everything within their ability to follow all the required safety procedures, but a train accident can still happen. Mechanical failure and defective parts are more rare than other common causes of train collisions, but they do occasionally happen.

Trains are large machines with complex systems and many moving parts. All of the different systems must work together perfectly to provide locomotive and electric power. If some piece of guidance equipment (such as a rail switch) or safety equipment (such as a rail signal) fails, it can cause a deadly accident.

5. Speedy Trains

Time and again, car accident data proves that driving recklessly fast can lead to serious injuries and deaths. Trains are no exception. Many train accidents in recent years showed that the faster the train, the worse the consequences become in the event of a crash and the higher likelihood of derailment.

6. Defective Tracks

Obstruction is a common issue with the tracks and can cause train derailment. Foreign objects left inadvertently at the site where the train will pass can be deadly. Conductors should be aware of their surroundings at all times to manage a potentially dangerous situation quickly and safely. However, in some cases, a conductor fails to see these obstacles at all or in time to stop a collision.

7. Derailments

A derailment is when a train runs off its rail, either because of a collision with another object, a conductor error, mechanical track failure, broken rails, or defective wheels. A derailment doesn't necessarily mean the train leaves the tracks – some may be minor. However, a serious derailment can be catastrophic if it occurs while the train is moving at a high rate of speed.

8. Unprotected railroad crossings

More than 80 percent of crossings lack adequate warning devices such as lights and gates, and more than half of all railroad accidents occur at unprotected crossings. Tennessee residents know well that there are many unprotected railroad crossings across the state. Accidents at unprotected railroad crossings are most often caused by:

- Poor visibility
- Driver distraction
- Driver inebriation/intoxication
- Driver trying to race the train
- Malfunctioning signals
- Obstacles that block a driver's view
- Conductor failing to sound an alarm

9. Stalled cars on the track

Cars rarely get stuck on railroad grade crossings. More common is when drivers stall out when slowing down to cross bumpy grades due to a poorly tuned engine. If this happens to you, first you try to start it again immediately. If it won't start, put your vehicle in neutral and ask for help to push your vehicle off the tracks. But if a train is rapidly approaching and there's no time to save your car, remember that your life and safety are first priority. Get as far from your vehicle as possible.

10. Suicides

Sadly, some people choose to take their own lives by standing on the tracks or jumping in front of a train. Federal statistics show that 266 people killed themselves by stepping in front of trains in 2017. Unfortunately, this tragic and desperate act also endangers other lives such as train crews, emergency responders, passengers and bystanders.

Train Accident Liability

The details of a train accident must be analyzed thoroughly in order to determine fault and proper compensation. In the [Department of Transportation Act of 1966](#), the Federal Railroad Administration is bestowed with the authority (and responsibility) to oversee and promote railway safety regulations.

Railroad companies and commuter rail lines have a legal obligation to maintain the highest level of safety for all passengers. Also, they are required to install a black box on all locomotives – a device that records information that may be very necessary to review in the event of an accident.

While the railway is responsible for safety, they may not always live up to what they're supposed to do. However, it's not always the fault of the railway or conductor. There can be many factors involved in personal injury cases arising from a serious or deadly train accident, which is why it is vital to hire an attorney that is highly knowledgeable in railroad accident litigation.

Train Accident Prevention & Railway Safety

To achieve safety for railroads and railways, companies are obliged to perform everything they can to ensure the protection of the passengers, operators, pedestrians, and the public.

When a train wreck happens, the black box should be recovered right away as it will give details of what led to the accident, such as the speed and direction of the train. The black box is essential in proving whether or not there was negligence on the part of the railway.

Fortunately, everyone's safety is more important than ever for the railroad industry. Operators go through rigorous training and only those who meet strict requirements can be accepted. State inspectors also work with the FRA to make sure all the railroad tracks and facilities across the country are safe and updated according to safety regulations.

While our experienced railroad accident lawyers can help guide you through the legal process of obtaining compensation for serious personal injury or the death of a loved one, it's obviously best to avoid the need for an attorney in the first place.

Here are tips on how to prevent a train accidents from occurring:

- Always assume a track is in use.
- Never stop on a railroad track.
- Never enter a train tunnel or cross a trestle where you can get trapped without escape if a train enters.
- Never drive around lowered gates. (If it appears the gate is stuck, find another route or call the 1-800 number that's located at the crossing.)
- Never walk down or play on a train track.
- Never try to race or beat a train.
- Always look both ways before crossing a track.
- Understand that trains are wider than the track they're on.
- (For truck drivers) Lift your trailer jacks in the up position so that your truck doesn't get stuck on track.
- Realize it can take a train traveling 55 mph up to a mile to come to a complete stop.

If you or a loved one were involved in a railroad accident at a crossing, in a train collision or were injured as a railway employee, contact **Tennessee personal injury law firm** [Gilreath & Associates](#) to speak with a knowledgeable railroad accident attorney.

Continue reading:

- [Mistakes That Can Derail Your FELA Railroad Injury Case](#)
- [5 Things Railroad Workers Need to Know Before Filing a FELA Lawsuit](#)

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Our attorneys are dedicated to helping you recover financially from an injury stemming from someone else's negligence.

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