



New Report: Amtrak could better identify, manage train strike risks

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WASHINGTON – Amtrak trains were involved in approximately 800 train strikes from fiscal year 2020 through 2023, resulting in 594 deaths and 279 injuries, and approximately one in five of the company’s passenger engineers may have been involved in such a strike in FY 2023, an Amtrak Office of Inspector General Report released today found.

Reducing train strikes—incidents where trains hit people or vehicles—is an inherent challenge for all railroads because of factors that are difficult to control, such as suicide attempts, homeless individuals living near active tracks, and motorists who ignore crossing signals. According to the report, the significant size of Amtrak’s network and limited ownership of the tracks it uses amplifies these challenges.

While Amtrak has implemented measures to reduce risks across its network, the OIG found the company could better identify and manage its risk of train strikes and more broadly adopt key practices to improve risk management. Additionally, OIG auditors found that the company could improve the accuracy of the train strike data it is required to report to the Federal Railroad Administration.

For example, the OIG highlighted several targeted actions Amtrak has taken to reduce train strike risks such as public outreach through collaboration with Operation Lifesaver; regular coordination with key Amtrak staff and host railroads; educating commercial drivers, rail shipping groups, and farm bureaus about grade crossing risks with large industrial vehicles; and working with state and local partners to assist with federal grant funding requests on projects that could reduce train strike risks.

During the OIG’s audit, Amtrak also introduced additional initiatives such as a grade crossing “hazard index,” which considers various factors like past incidents, traffic volume, train frequency and speeds, and crossing types, which could allow it to proactively rank all grade crossings based on the likelihood of train strikes. It also finalized a grade crossing safety manual, which it plans to incorporate in its federally required System Safety Program Plan, and it is exploring artificial intelligence tools and a near-miss reporting system that could help it better identify trespassers.

While these are positive steps, the OIG found they remain incomplete primarily because they are not embedded in a more comprehensive process for proactively identifying and managing the risk of train strikes as common risk management practices suggest. Such a process, the OIG report said, typically involves systematically documenting, assessing, and prioritizing risks through a risk register and using this register to make trade-off decisions about how to make the most effective use of limited resources.

The OIG also found discrepancies in the data Amtrak reported to the FRA from FY 2020-2023, which Amtrak corrected during the audit. The discrepancies included variations in the data collected by Amtrak’s Police Department and its Central Reporting group. Specifically, the two

departments' data varied in the number of train strikes, fatalities, and injuries during that timeframe.

The OIG recommended that Amtrak develop a comprehensive process for proactively identifying and managing the risk of train strikes. Additionally, after the OIG spoke with relevant industry specialists and conducted an analysis of academic and industry literature, it developed a list of key practices for identifying, prioritizing, and managing train strike risks. The OIG recommended the company consider expanding implementation of the key practices it identified in its report. Finally, the OIG recommended that Amtrak regularly review and reconcile its train strike data to ensure their accuracy.

The company agreed with the recommendations and described actions and plans it will take to address them. More information is included in the full report which can be downloaded on the OIG's website:

Reports of fraud, waste, or abuse; criminal or unethical acts affecting Amtrak's property or operations; or mismanagement in Amtrak programs or operations can be made 24 hours a day via the Amtrak OIG Hotline at 1-800-468-5469 or online at <https://direc.to/hPAu>.

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