
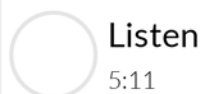


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Veteran Reporter And Mental Health Expert Discuss Train Derailment

By ALLISON DUNNE • DEC 2, 2013


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Federal investigators have recovered a second data recorder at the crash site of Sunday's Metro-North commuter train derailment in the Bronx. While the public awaits answers about what caused the fatal derailment, a few experts are weighing in about other aspects of the disaster.

A member of the National Transportation Safety Board says investigators plan to conduct interviews Monday or Tuesday with the engineer and conductor of the train involved in the derailment that occurred just before 7:30 Sunday morning. It happened on a southbound Metro-North Hudson Line train that was headed from Poughkeepsie to Grand Central Terminal. All seven cars plus the locomotive pushing the cars derailed just north of the Spuyten Duyvil station

in the Bronx, killing four passengers and injuring 63. The train derailed while hugging a riverside curve. The speed limit on the curve is 30 miles per hour. Before and after the curve, it's 70 miles per hour. Here's New York Governor Andrew Cuomo during a press briefing Sunday on whether speed was a factor.



(http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/wamc/files/styles/x_large/public/201312/trainbarrysolow.jpg)

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"That is the question, the curve has been here for many, many and trains take the curve everyday 365 days a year, so it's not the fact there's a curve here. There's a curve here, the Hudson River hits the

Harlem River and goes down into the East River so we've always had this configuration," Governor Cuomo says. "We didn't have accidents, so there has to be another factor and that's what we want to learn from the NTSB if there's a change the MTA can make, great."

Robert Hager is a retired NBC news correspondent who covered transportation, including aviation accidents. He speaks to the speed/curve issue.

"Well that's a radical difference from 70mph down to 30mph, but as Governor Cuomo said they've dealt with that for many years without an accident, so there has to be some extra reason why the system failed this time. That again can be either human error or mechanical error and that's what investigators have got to pin down." Hager adds, "Train crashes are rare but it's disturbing they do continue and after each accident supposedly there are improvements made but in spite of that we still get them. A lot of these systems are automated now; there's been a huge effort to try and take human error out of it and still these accidents happen and that's really unfortunate."

In another accident this year, two Metro-North trains collided head-on in Bridgeport, Connecticut during evening rush-hour. Several passengers were hurt. However, Sunday's derailment in the Bronx was the first fatal passenger accident for the railroad.

Dr. Karla Vermeulen is acting director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at the State University of New York at New Paltz and assistant professor of psychology at the school. She says passengers are usually not thinking about the possibility of an accident when they board commuter trains.

"We don't think about it, we have to hand over that control and we are not good at that," Dr. Vermeulen says. "So I think we have a sense of denial, of course everything's going to be perfectly safe and secure, and the vast majority of the time of course it is. But that's when something like this happens it's so disturbing and so hard to accept."

She says the derailment is more akin to a natural disaster, with less anger and blaming likely to result, as opposed to with an intentional tragedy.

"We definitely know that acts of intentional violence and malevolence are by far the hardest for people to come to terms with. And that's clearly not the case here, it was not an act of terrorism, no one wanted this to happen. And that certainly takes away some level of anger and blaming that people would naturally have in response of an intentional incident," Dr. Vermeulen says. "However whether this proves to be an accident or an act of negligence or some combination thereof; again that's also difficult just because we want to have someone to blame, we want to have someone to punish."

The NTSB's Earl Weener said Monday at the crash site that a second data recorder was found in the train's front car and has been sent to Washington for analysis. Weener said investigators are looking for information on the speed of the train, how the brakes were applied and the throttle setting. He says the other recorder was found earlier in the rear locomotive. Weener says they've already had some success in retrieving data. But the information has to be validated before it is made public. Hager says the tragedy could have been much worse.

"Unlike an airplane which is flimsy, which is built of a very light material so it'll fly, a train is built of heavy materials so people are not thrown out of the train but thrown around inside the cars," Weener says. "So that's why typically in a train crash like this one you don't get as many deaths as you do in for instance in a plane crash but you get many many injuries from people thrown around inside in the car. Now if those cars had go in the water and filled up with water then everyone would've died."

In fact, three of the four passengers who died reportedly were thrown from the rail cars through windows. Hager wonders if a certain safety issue will be up for discussion.

"Seatbelts might help you from getting thrown around in the car if the car leaves the tracks and goes over on its side, it's happened in this case." Weener says. "So I wonder if this will revive any talk if there ought to be seatbelts on trains."

A Metro-North spokesperson did not respond in time for this broadcast.

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