

The lure of the rails: Trespassing has become top railroad safety issue



Safety experts are working on finding ways to cut trespassing on railroad tracks. (Phil Velasquez / Chicago Tribune)



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It's the biggest cliché in album covers — musicians posing moodily on railroad tracks.

It's also dangerous and a symbol of the biggest problem in rail safety — trespassing, according to railroad safety experts.

Due to investments in education, enforcement and better engineering, deaths at road-rail crossings have plummeted by more than 70 percent nationwide, from 816 in 1980 to 237 in 2015, according to Federal Railroad Administration statistics.

But similar progress has not been seen for trespassing, which can mean walking along the rails, shooting train track selfies and taking shortcuts away from a marked gate. Trespassing numbers have remained fairly steady over the years and now account for about 72 percent of all railroad-related deaths, with 761 fatalities in 2015, including 296 suicides.

Safety experts are now focused on finding ways to cut trespassing through education, intervention and barriers such as fencing at popular trespassing spots. But advocates concede it won't be easy — there are 140,000 miles of railroad track in the United States, and it is impossible to contain it all.

"Trespassing has been more of a stubborn problem for us," said Bonnie Murphy, president and CEO of Operation Lifesaver, a national train safety organization, who spoke along with other safety experts at the biennial DuPage Railroad Safety Council conference last week. "There's a disturbing, ongoing trend of people walking along the tracks."

One issue has been the lure of photography and film on the rails, Murphy said. She said some photographers pose graduation, band and wedding pictures on railroad tracks, though it's illegal and hazardous if a photographer does not secure the railroad's permission ahead of time.

Amplifying this problem is the cellphone — which provides a camera in every pocket. Murphy cited some horrific cases — including the deaths of three teenage girls in Utah in 2011 who took a track selfie just as a train came up behind them.

In a prominent case in Georgia in 2014, a young camerawoman was killed and seven other crew members were injured trying to film a scene on a train trestle for a movie about rock star Gregg Allman. The director, Randall Miller, was sentenced to prison last year for involuntary manslaughter and criminal trespassing.

Murphy said that people walking on or near railroad tracks think they can hear a train coming and get out of the way on time. But trains can be surprisingly quiet, and it can be "on top of you in a matter of seconds," Murphy said. Even if the engineer sees you and puts on the brakes, it can take a mile to stop a train. Also, trains overhang tracks by about 3 feet, so someone can die or be seriously injured walking along tracks as well as on them.

"They're just so attracted to the railroad," Murphy said of trespassers, noting that there's a certain romance about trains. "It's a very difficult thing to get people to stop taking pictures on the tracks."

A new trespassing hazard is the popularity of Pokemon Go, a game that has users hunt small cartoon characters who appear on smartphone screens as though in the real world, said Chris Barkan, rail engineering expert at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Barkan suggested that the game makers should have players lose a cartoon "buddy" if they trespass near tracks.

Another trespassing issue is suicide, which the FRA started counting in 2011 but does not include in overall railroad-related fatalities, according to DuPage Railroad Safety Council board member Deborah Hare.

Train suicides can come in clusters, with victims copying each other, and the news media needs to be careful not to sensationalize the deaths, said Shashank Joshi, an associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University.

To help prevent suicides, Metra started a training program last year to help engineers, conductors, managers and station agents identify people who are suicidal or in distress.

Safety council members also want the FRA to start counting suicides in its numbers for railroad fatalities so appropriate resources can be used to fix the problem, Hare said. The safety council has a goal of cutting trespasser and suicide deaths by 50 percent over the next 10 years.

Despite the perception that teens and people in their 20s are the most likely to engage in risky behavior along the tracks, the median age for railroad-related deaths is 39, said Steve Laffey, railroad safety specialist with the Illinois Commerce Commission. About 73.9 percent of the incidents involve a male, and October is the biggest month for fatalities.

Northwestern University transportation expert Ian Savage noted that safety education campaigns cannot only focus on kids in school because many of those dying are middle-aged.

"The popular image of kids playing on the tracks is in some ways a bit of a red herring," Savage said. "This can lead to an educational response being employed incorrectly."

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