

Eleven dead in southern California train derailment

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The worst train accident in the US since 1999 occurred January 26 in southern California when a southbound three-car commuter train jumped the tracks and collided with two other trains. Eleven people, nine men and two women, were killed and 180 people were injured, nine critically. Two of the trains were part of the Metrolink suburban commuter system that links the city of Los Angeles with its suburbs. The third was a freight train.

The accident took place at 6:02 AM, shortly after the southbound passenger train left the Glendale station, northwest of Los Angeles. Juan Manuel Alvarez, a 25-year-old man evidently intent on committing suicide, drove his sport utility vehicle onto the tracks in the path of the commuter train. As the train approached, Alvarez abandoned his vehicle.

There are conflicting accounts as to what happened next, but the southbound train appears to have pushed Alvarez's Jeep Cherokee for about a quarter mile before jumping the tracks, veering to the left and hitting the second car of a northbound train. That train derailed and hit a signal tower. The derailed southbound train then jackknifed and hit a parked freight train.

Most of the victims were commuters on their way to work. Many were government workers and office workers headed downtown on the southbound train. Scores of "walking injured" were treated on the spot and released; some of the more seriously injured had to be cut out of the damaged cars.

The immediate cause of the tragedy was the collision with the SUV. Contributing factors, if any, have yet to be determined. Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board began to assess the train wreck on Thursday afternoon.

The existence of grade crossings, such as the one involved in Wednesday's tragedy, has long been a

matter of concern and controversy in the Los Angeles area. Glendale's mayor, Bob Yousefian, had previously called for the replacement of grade crossings with overpasses and underpasses, which would make it impossible for cars to be driven onto the tracks.

The Los Angeles metropolitan area is crisscrossed with hundreds of miles of track, belonging to freight lines, light rail lines and commuter systems. Collisions with cars and pedestrians take place each year. This was the second fatal accident involving a Metrolink train and a motor vehicle in three years. In January of 2003, a train hit a truck, killing the driver and injuring 32 people.

After the derailment, the Glendale police chief, Randy Adams, said that before driving his vehicle onto the tracks, Alvarez cut his wrists and stabbed himself in the chest, inflicting superficial wounds. Alvarez was taken into custody and treated for his injuries, Adams said.

"I think his intent at that time was to take his own life," the police chief said, "but he changed his mind prior to the train actually striking the vehicle. He exited the vehicle and stood by as the southbound Metrolink train struck his vehicle, causing the train to derail and strike the northbound train."

Adams said that Alvarez was cooperating with the police and had acknowledged causing the wreck. "He was very distraught and upset when he realized he caused a major disaster," the chief said, adding that Alvarez was in jail and under suicide watch.

Despite Adams' own description of Alvarez's suicidal frame of mind and obvious lack of homicidal intent, the police chief said the young man would be charged with at least ten counts of murder.

Less than 24 hours after the catastrophe, Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve Cooley announced that

he intended not only to file murder charges against Alvarez, but would allege “special circumstances,” making Alvarez subject to the death penalty. Cooley dismissed the fact that Alvarez was suicidal. “He is not going to engage my sympathy because he was despondent,” he said.

Thom Mrozek, a spokesman for the US attorney’s office, indicated there was potential federal jurisdiction with the possibility of federal prosecution for a capital offense.

Alvarez’s arraignment is being postponed while he heals from his self-inflicted wounds.

The DA’s statement is consistent with a policy of official vindictiveness that increasingly characterizes the criminal and penal system in the US. Normally, the death penalty applies only in cases of premeditated murder.

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, there are signs that Alvarez’ wheels got stuck between two tracks and that he was trying unsuccessfully to dislodge his SUV as the train approached.

There are strong indications, beyond his suicidal actions at the rail crossing, that Alvarez was severely mentally disturbed and irrational. His estranged wife, fearing for her safety, obtained a temporary restraining order against him on December 14. She claimed Alvarez had threatened her with violence and had become increasingly paranoid, accusing her of putting TV cameras in their house to make pornographic movies.

Hector Sanchez, a neighbor who lives across the street, recalled seeing Alvarez talking to himself on numerous occasions.

Alvarez’s sister-in-law told the *Telemundo* television network that Alvarez had problems with drugs and was violent. He had repeatedly threatened to commit suicide, even to kill himself in front of his son.

Alvarez, his wife and two children lived in a converted garage in North Compton, an impoverished city southeast of Los Angeles. Alvarez worked as a handyman and construction worker and was often unemployed.

He was arrested at the age of 15 in 1994 on suspicion of burglary and drug possession. In 1999, he was arrested and charged with using cocaine and agreed to enter a rehabilitation program. The charges were dismissed in 2003.

According to his wife, Alvarez had tried several times to overcome his drug habit through rehabilitation programs. Unfortunately for Alvarez and the victims of the train disaster, California’s mental health facilities and drug rehabilitation programs are woefully inadequate, having been targeted for repeated budget cuts.

The picture that emerges from neighbors and relatives is that Alvarez had in recent months become increasingly despondent—with no job and no permanent residence, battling drug addiction, barred from seeing his children, and lacking access to adequate mental health facilities.



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