

# Washington DC: Nine killed, scores injured in subway accident

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On Monday, just after 5 p.m., two subway trains violently collided just north of the Fort Totten metro station in Washington DC, killing nine and injuring dozens more. Rescuers struggled through the night to reach the injured and clear the wreckage of the worst accident in the 33-year history of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA).

Both trains were headed south toward the center of the city to fill up with more rush-hour commuters leaving work. The first was stopped before the station, waiting on a train ahead to leave. The second—likely traveling at significant speed—came around a curve and slammed into the stationary train.

The engineer of the moving train, Jeanice McMillan, 42, of Springfield, Virginia, was among those who perished. The impact was so great that the body of the moving train separated from its crumpled frame and lifted up and over the stationary train. Passengers described the floor vanishing from underneath their feet, and a chaos of mangled steel and confusion.

A head-on collision is perhaps the worst variety of rail accident, and one that is supposed to be impossible on a modern transit system. Washington Metro trains, like many subway systems worldwide, have a computer system to control speed and braking. If it is functioning correctly, it will not allow conflicting (illogical) movements of trains. According to news sources, during rush hour and with six-car train sets, trains operate automatically. An operator is present in the cab to oversee the automatic movement, provide station announcements and operate the doors. At other times, and with eight-car train sets, trains are operated manually.

The WMATA has not yet revealed whether the trains in question were being operated manually or automatically. In either case, such a collision raises troubling questions about the condition of the Metro system. Indeed, it is an

indication of the deteriorating state of transportation infrastructure that there are numerous possibilities: the age and worsening condition of the train cars, the failure of the signaling and communications system, and possible fatigue of the train operator.

## The capital's troubled transit system

The Washington Metro system is the second busiest in the US, after the New York subway system. It is also among the newest, having originally opened in 1976 with comparatively modern design and construction. On a daily basis it carries nearly a million passengers and many routes are considered overcrowded—the Orange Route is commonly referred to as the “Orange Crush.”

Despite its clear utility for the region, and its political location in the nation’s capital, the Metro system has a reputation of being ill-maintained and underfunded. In January, facing an estimated \$40.8 million budget shortfall, the WMATA board of directors proposed broad cuts in service frequency for both subways and trains, station service reductions and the elimination of numerous bus routes. These have been delayed by the reception of federal stimulus money, but cuts or fare hikes are considered inevitable as the recession deepens.

The struggle for adequate funding has led directly to problems with maintenance and safety. On Tuesday, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) revealed that it had recommended the model of railcars involved in the June 22 wreck were in need of serious improvement or should be phased out of service. There are 300 such 1000-series cars, nearly a third, in the DC fleet and they date from the original opening of the Metro in 1976. The recommendation came years ago after the NTSB

investigated another accident and determined the cars were not crash worthy.

According to the *Washington Post*, “Retrofitting would not only be expensive, but could create new problems with propulsion and other aspects of operation, transit officials said at the time. In addition, such retrofitting was deemed too expensive for the cash-strapped system, especially because the cars are due to be replaced as soon as possible, officials have said.”

The WMATA ignored the report’s recommendation entirely, and the cars continue to operate on a daily basis, carrying hundreds of thousands of passengers. New models are still in the bidding process and are not expected to arrive until at least 2012—seven years after the “recommendation.”

On Tuesday it was also reported that the leading railcar of the moving train was overdue on maintenance. Specifically, it was two months late having brakes replaced and assessed. A Metro source told the *Washington Post*, “These components are supposed to be changed out to prevent failures.”

Other failures are not unknown. In 2005, the signal system failed in the tunnel between the stations of Rosslyn and Foggy Bottom, rendering automatic operation useless. The signal system told an operator to proceed, but seeing a train ahead, he manually applied braking and avoided a collision.

A “rollback” collision happened in 2004 when a train that had left a station rolled back and into a stationary train, injuring 20 people. Among the causes were a lack of a device on the railcar to prevent rollback, and the likelihood that the driver failed to brake because he was asleep. The NTSB noted the operator frequently had to work from early morning to late at night, leaving him less than eight hours between shifts.

In 1999 the Metro removed and replaced 20,000 trackside communications relays after it was discovered that some were sending erroneous instructions. The manufacturer, Alstom, claimed they would last 70 years, but the failures were occurring after just 25 years.

None of these issues of safety, maintenance and working conditions are unique to the Washington Metro. In fact, because of its location in the capital and exposure to tourism, WMATA has been able to receive more political backing and funding than many other transit organizations.

The two other largest metro systems in the US, in New York and Chicago, are both archaic and in perpetual

danger of funding cuts. The Chicago Transit Authority’s famous “L” elevated metro has seen fare hikes and threats of service cuts. In 2008, the board of directors threatened to lay off over 2,400 workers and eliminate 81 of 154 bus routes.

While these cuts were postponed, desperately needed maintenance programs are instead compromised. According to *Railway Track and Structures*, in late 2007, “Nearly 25 percent of the Chicago Transit Authority’s 242 miles of track—some of it elevated, some of it underground—is so shoddy that in some stretches, trains designed to travel more than 50 mph must plod along at 5 mph—about the pace of a horse at trot. The average rail car is 23 years old, and nearly one-third exceed the 25-year maximum recommended by federal authorities.”

New York, too, almost saw drastic cuts—layoffs of over 2,000 employees, cuts to bus and subway service and an immediate fare increase of up to 29 percent. In May, the state legislature shelved these, instead enacting a fare increase of 12.5 percent, along with a host of taxes and fees for taxi and auto drivers. Like Chicago, the ancient subway is in need of massive upgrade and improvement.

Across the country, nearly every transit system—whether bus or rail—is facing difficulties, as states seek to cut back in response to massive budget shortfalls. Universally, the cost is placed on the millions working people who rely on mass transit, whether through taxes, fare increases or cuts in service. A number of US cities with populations near or above a million do not even have a subway system: Houston, Phoenix, San Antonio, San Diego, Dallas, San Jose, Detroit.



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