Commuter train derailment in New York City kills four

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Early on Sunday, December 1 a Metro North passenger train headed to Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan derailed, killing at least four and injuring 67, including 11 critically. The train's operator was among the injured.

The train was running along a heavily-used commuter route from the northern suburbs into New York City. The accident occurred at 7:20 am as the train rounded a sharp curve in an area known as Spuyten Duyvil (an old Dutch name), where the Hudson River meets the Harlem River. The latter separates the city's boroughs of Manhattan and the Bronx.

The locomotive, which was at the rear of the train, and all seven passenger cars left the track. Three cars rolled onto their sides, but luckily, none went into the river. Reports indicate that two or three of the fatalities were thrown from the train due to the force of the accident. Emergency workers arrived quickly at the scene, having been alerted by nearby residents who reported a loud crashing sound.

More than 100 people were on board. The toll of dead and injured could have been much worse if the accident had occurred on a weekday when the train would have been packed with workers headed to their jobs in the city. Service on Metro North's Hudson Line has been suspended indefinitely, potentially causing major difficulties for commuters on Monday.

The cause of the accident is not yet known. Some survivors reported that the train was traveling at greater speed that usual in that area. Preliminary reports indicate that the engineer attempted to apply the brakes, but without effect. Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board will send a team to investigate the derailment.

The location of Sunday's accident is the site of previous incidents. The most recent was last July, when ten cars of a 24-car freight train derailed in the same area due to track problems.

Metro North, which operates several commuter rail lines into New York City, including the Hudson Line, has had a series of recent, safety-related problems. Last September, the failure of an electrical feeder cable knocked out service for 12 days on the New Haven line, affecting 132,000 daily commuters. Earlier in the year, a track foreman was struck by a train and killed on a section of track that he had ordered out of service, but which had been prematurely reactivated. In another incident, two Metro North passenger trains collided in Connecticut, injuring 73 passengers, two engineers, and a conductor.

This series of incidents points to fundamental problems regarding capital investment and maintenance in a system that carries hundreds of thousands of commuters every day. Metro North's chief engineer recently reported to the National Transportation Safety Board that the railroad is "behind in several areas," including a five-year schedule of cyclical maintenance that had not been conducted in the area of the Connecticut accident since 2005.

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