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Lessons Unlearned on Rail Safety

By **THE EDITORIAL BOARD**

When a Metro-North train jumped the tracks in the Bronx on Sunday morning, killing four people and injuring more than 70, it was going 82 miles per hour, on a 30 m.p.h. curve. Why it hit that horrific speed — whether because the engineer was sleeping, distracted or incapacitated, or because of some catastrophic mechanical failure — is a question for the National Transportation Safety Board, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which runs Metro-North, and criminal investigators and prosecutors.

The question for the rest of us is why that train — and thousands of other trains in commuter and freight railroads across the country — had no automated system to slow or stop it when it ran out of control.

The idea is not new. Mechanical controls to keep trains from colliding or going too fast have been federally mandated since the 1920s. The national safety board has been pleading for the use of “positive train control,” a catchall term for sophisticated automated safety systems using radios and sensors inside trains and beside tracks, since 1969.

Congress ignored the agency for decades. Not until a deadly crash of a Metrolink commuter train in Chatsworth, Calif., in 2008 (the engineer was texting; 25 people died) did it pass a law requiring railroads that carry passengers and highly dangerous chemicals, like chlorine, to have positive train control by 2015. But the railroad lobby has been trying to push the date to 2020 or beyond, saying meeting the deadline is too expensive and complicated.

Last year, the Obama administration, bowing to industry pressure, **exempted** 10,000 miles of track across the country from the safety mandate. In the New York area, Metro-North and the Long Island Rail Road have been working to meet the mandate since 2009, and expect to spend \$900 million to do so, but they have pressed for an extension, too, citing difficulties ranging from negotiating labor contracts to buying radio bandwidth and software.

The Government Accountability Office **reported** in August that three of the four major freight railroads and four of the seven major commuter railroads expected to blow the deadline. It found that commuter railroads in particular are hampered by a lack of federal

financing and “limited sources of revenue” for big capital investments.

That’s the story of railroad infrastructure in America: creaky and underfinanced, shakily propped up by riders paying ever higher fares. Gov. Andrew Cuomo should heed the lesson of Sunday’s tragedy and help ensure that the transportation authority has the money to complete and maintain the safety systems that Congress has required it to have.

While positive train control is a complex and costly goal, it is achievable. Amtrak already has a form of positive train control between New York and Boston. Metrolink expects to have it by next spring. Elsewhere, the safety gap persists. The national safety board keeps a record of [fatal accidents](#) that it says could have been prevented by automation: Silver Spring, Md., in 1996, Chicago in 2003, Mississippi in 2005, Massachusetts in 2008, Iowa in 2011. The list is not comprehensive.

If Congress had done its job decades ago, human failure could have been taken out of the equation on Sunday. The engineer, William Rockefeller, could have been passed out or having a heart attack, and the train would not have derailed. Four passengers would be alive; the rest unhurt.

Wherever the investigation leads, the ultimate blame for this tragedy seems to be a deficit of money and political will, and years of wasted time.

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