

Highway-Rail Grade Crossing Safety

ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN RAILROADS

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Summary

The **grade crossing collision rate has fallen most years since 1980**, but too many collisions still occur. Virtually all of them are preventable, so the focus should be on **educating** the public regarding safety at crossings, on **engineering** solutions (such as closing unneeded crossings and upgrading warning devices) that prevent collisions, and on **enforcement** of applicable traffic laws. The federal “Section 130” program, which provides federal funds to states for grade crossing safety enhancements, has helped prevent tens of thousands of injuries and fatalities. Continued dedicated funding of this important program will mean more injuries averted and more lives saved at grade crossings. Decisions on what types of traffic warning devices to put at particular grade crossings are made by state highway authorities, not by railroads.

What Are Highway-Rail Grade Crossings?

A highway-rail grade crossing is where a railway and roadway at the same level intersect. There are more than 200,000 grade crossings in the United States.

- Grade crossings are equipped either with train-activated “**active warning devices**” (such as gates and flashing lights) or with “**passive warning devices**” (such as crossbucks, stop signs, and yield signs). Trains often require a mile or more to stop and they can’t deviate from their course. That’s why safety at grade crossings, by its nature, is primarily a motorist’s responsibility. The warning devices are there to protect motorists, not trains.
- States, not railroads, are responsible for evaluating grade crossing risks and prioritizing grade crossings for improvement. The decision to install a specific type of warning device at a particular public grade crossing is made by the state highway authority, not by a railroad, and approved by the Federal Highway Administration.

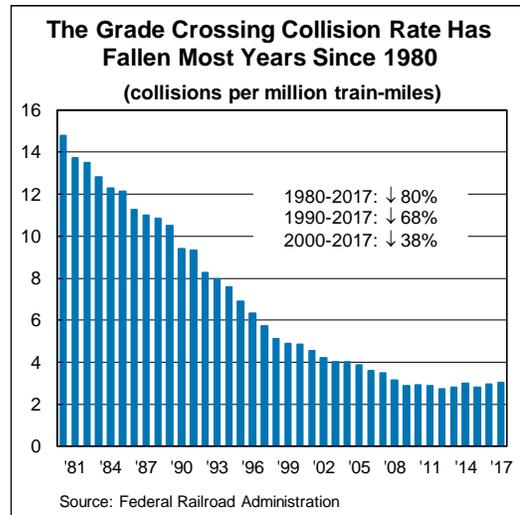
Continually Working to Improve Grade Crossing Safety

Grade crossing collisions in 2017 were down 80 percent from 1980 and down 40 percent from 2000; grade crossing injuries in 2017 were down 79 percent from 1980 and down 33 percent from 2000; and grade crossing fatalities in 2017 were down 67 percent from 1980 and down 36 percent from 2000. **The grade crossing collision rate has fallen nearly every year since 1980**; from 1980 through 2017, it fell 80 percent, including 38 percent since 2000.

America’s freight railroads **spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year** to maintain and improve grade crossings. They also:

- Help pay to close unneeded crossings.

- Cooperate with state agencies to install and upgrade warning devices and signals, and bear the cost of maintaining them in perpetuity.
- Support Operation Lifesaver, a nationwide non-profit organization that educates the public about the need for proper behavior at grade crossings and on railroad property.
- Work with law enforcement and others to keep grade crossings safe.
- Install signs at grade crossings with telephone numbers the public can use to alert railroads to unsafe conditions.



Dedicated Funding for Grade Crossing Safety

- Under the federal “Section 130” program, more than \$230 million in federal funds are allocated each year to states for installing new active warning devices, upgrading existing devices, and improving grade crossing surfaces. The program has helped prevent tens of thousands of fatalities and injuries associated with grade crossing accidents.
- Without a budgetary set-aside like the Section 130 program, grade crossing needs would fare poorly in competition with more traditional highway needs such as highway construction and maintenance. One of the primary reasons the Section 130 program was created in the first place was that highway safety — and especially grade crossing safety — traditionally received low funding priority. The FAST Act — the surface transportation bill signed into law on December 4, 2015 — included continued dedicated funding for this important program for five more years and has meant more injuries averted and more lives saved.



Safety Must Be the Top Priority

The vast majority of grade crossing collisions are the result of motorists’ actions; only a very small number result from the failure of crossing gates or signals. Consequently, grade crossing accidents can best be reduced through a mix of **engineering, education, and enforcement**, including:

- Generously fund Operation Lifesaver, as well as a research and development program to design effective low-cost active warning systems for grade crossings.
- Examine the effectiveness of other types of warning devices such as four quadrant gates.
- Require that grade crossing safety be part of commercial driver’s license educational curricula and administer tough penalties for grade crossing traffic violations.