

Railroad Grade Crossing & Pedestrian Safety

With operations across 49 states, motorists and pedestrians have the potential to encounter railroad operations during daily life. To help keep the public safe near tracks, railroads work with state, local and federal officials, safety organizations, technology companies and the public to eliminate these preventable tragedies.

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 U.S.

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 cannot deviate from their course. That is 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. Once installed, the maintenance of grade crossings and their warning devices is generally the responsibility of railroads.

Railroads continually improve grade crossing and pedestrian safety.

Significant progress has been made in improving grade crossing safety: grade crossing collisions in 2019 were down 32% from 2000. Despite this progress, railroads remain deeply concerned about driver and pedestrian safety. Every three hours, on average, someone is hit by a train in the United States. The vast majority of these accidents are preventable and are due to human error such as driving around gates and illegally using tracks as a shortcut. America's freight railroads spend hundreds of millions of dollars each year to improve grade crossing safety. They also:

- Cooperate with state agencies to install and upgrade warning devices and signals, and usually 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.
- Help pay to close unneeded crossings.
- Work with law enforcement and others to keep grade crossings safe as well as install signs at grade crossings with telephone numbers the public can use to alert railroads to unsafe conditions.
- Work with private companies and government partners to develop new technology, such as navigation apps that alert drivers to carefully approach railroad crossings and autonomous vehicle technology that recognizes and reacts properly to warning devices at grade crossings.

Key Takeaways

- Approximately 95% of all rail-related deaths involve drivers at grade crossings, or individuals trespassing on railroad tracks.
- America's freight railroads work closely with state agencies to enhance grade crossing safety and spend hundreds of millions of their private dollars each year to maintain and improve grade crossings.
- Freight railroads work with Operation Lifesaver, a non-profit rail safety education organization dedicated to reducing collisions, fatalities and injuries at highway-rail crossings and trespassing on or near railroad tracks.
- Railroads support robust, dedicated funding for the "Section 130" program that helps states install new active warning devices, upgrade existing devices and improve grade crossing surfaces.

Dedicated funding for grade crossing and pedestrian safety helps prevent accidents.

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.