Issue

Current bus accident data research does not adequately reflect the unique characteristics of vehicle types and uses. This results from the fact that accident data collection systems do not consistently segregate accidents based on the service being provided by the bus at the time of accident and by the specific vehicle type. In order to maintain meaningful data to better understand the circumstances involving bus crashes, data collection and reporting must be modified.

Background

Section 224 of the Motor Carrier Safety Improvement Act of 1999 mandates the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) to conduct a study "to determine the causes of, and contributing factors to, crashes that involve commercial motor vehicles." To implement part of this mandate, FMCSA, together with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has recently concluded a truck crash causation study and is now conducting a commercial bus crash causation study.

The NHTSA study of 15 passenger vans illustrates the importance of vehicle characteristics (body type) when determining accident causation factors. The report showed that small vans loaded at, or over their rated capacity often overturned during traffic accidents. The report also illustrated that small vans are often used as school buses, in addition to the frame-on-chassis design more typical of "school buses." The recent addition of a "bus use" variable in the Fatal Accident Reporting System (FARS) is a welcome development that begins to address the problem, because it focuses on how the vehicle was being used at the time of the crash. Other specific data research needs include:

- Better data on nonfatal accidents. The NHTSA General Estimates System (GES) file is the major source of nonfatal accident data, but it distinguishes only school buses from other types of buses. All other buses are classified as "other." All bus body types, including over-the-road, transit, and small vans must be included.
- Better detail on the events of the crash should be a priority. GES accident type variables currently provide a lot of information on the relative position and motion of the vehicles prior to the first harmful event in the crash, but additional data, such as the vehicle classification information from the vehicle identification number (VIN), should be gathered at the time of the crash.

ABA Position

The FMCSA/NHTSA Commercial Bus Accident Causation Study should be conducted as an ongoing national research program due to the relative rarity of serious motorcoach crashes. At a minimum, data collected should specify the vehicle body type (school bus, motorcoach, transit bus, passenger van, etc.) and the type of service being provided at the time of the crash. Forms used by state or federal officials should be standardized across the nation so that all data collected and uploaded into federal databases will be consistent and reflect these baseline details. (November 2006)