

## Runaway Trailers Cause Damage

Runaway trailers can cause devastating crashes, resulting in serious injuries and/or deaths. Trailers detach from their guidance sources more often than most people realize, despite the catastrophic damage they cause.

The government does not organize or supply national runaway trailer statistics for public access. However, the Los Angeles Times identified 540 runaway trailer accidents from news reports and court files between 2000 and 2007. These runaway trailer accidents resulted in hundreds of injuries and at least 164 deaths. It is likely that there were many more runaway trailer accidents, injuries, and deaths that were not reported by news sources.

The Los Angeles Times found many types of runaway trailer accidents in their investigation. However, the research showed that the large majority of runaway trailer accidents involved light- and medium-trailers, as opposed to large truck-trailers (i.e. big rigs, 18-wheelers, semi-tractors, etc.).

Individuals and businesses other than commercial-transportation owned most of the trailers. For example, gardening companies often use trailers to transport tools from one location to another. The report showed trailer-rental companies, such as U-Haul International Inc, owned a small proportion of the runaway trailers.

The majority of runaway trailer victims are motorists, however passengers, bicyclists, and pedestrians have been seriously injured and killed as well. The following includes some examples of the runaway trailer accidents researched by the Los Angeles Times.

On April 13, 2006, Spencer Morrison and his 4-year-old-triplets, Ethan, Garret and Alaina, were stuck by a 3-ton wood-chipper, while driving in the family's minivan. The wood-chipper broke loose from its "hitch and ball" attachment to a tow truck and glided straight into oncoming traffic. It smashed into the family's minivan with incredible force. The father, Spencer, and two of the triplets, Garret and Alaina, died instantly upon impact. The last of the triplets, Ethan, received multiple injuries, including a fractured skull. He was the only survivor of the minivan.

In August 2003, Robin Teller and a friend, Brook Webb, were walking home when a trailer, which detached from an Ford pickup truck, struck them. The two women were passing a railroad crossing when the Ford pickup began to cross over the tracks. The trailer rattled as it went over the track and broke loose of its attachment to the Ford pickup. It plowed straight over the two women and crashed through a fence and into a field. Robin Teller was 41 years old and died at the scene. Brook Webb, 20 years old, suffered serious injuries to her legs. Although she endured numerous surgeries following the accident, her left leg had to be amputated below the knee and her right leg and ankle had to be supported with a rod and numerous pins.

On December 15, 2004, Earl J. Buetow was the victim of a runaway trailer accident. Buetow was driving northbound on Sierra Highway in his 1990 Dodge pickup truck, behind a Chevy Tahoe that was towing a trailer. At a bump in the pavement, the trailer broke loose from its attachment to the Chevy Tahoe and careened right into oncoming traffic. A southbound driver of a Ford Expedition swerved to avoid the runaway trailer. The Expedition collided, head on, with Buetow's Dodge pickup, killing Earl J. Buetow instantly upon impact.

Failure to properly secure a trailer to its guidance source, usually a "ball and hitch" design, appears to be the major cause of runaway trailer accidents. The use of old or outdated trailer towing equipment accounts for a smaller proportion of runaway trailer accidents.

The 3-ton runaway wood-chipper trailer that smashed into a minivan, killing 3 of the 4 passengers in April 2006, broke loose due to the negligence of the truck driver to check to make sure the chipper-trailer was securely hitched to his vehicle. The truck driver also failed to connect the safety chains, which are a backup precaution that is supposed to keep the trailer attached in the event of a hookup failure. Had the truck driver checked the trailer's hook up, he would have realized that the locking device wasn't engaged and that the safety chains were not secured.

The trailer that plowed over Robin Teller and Brook Webb as they were walking home in August 2003 broke loose due to a combination of events. First, the truck driver failed to connect the safety chains as a backup precaution, and second, the driver used old, outdated, and unsafe equipment. A police report, included in the Los Angeles Times' article, described the trailer as "a homemade-style car hauler, which was very rusty."

Many runaway trailer accidents may have been prevented if, with every trailer purchase and/or rental, there was basic instruction of proper trailer hookup. There is very little regulation of non-commercial trailers. There is no rule, in any of the 50 states, that requires a person towing a small-to-medium trailer to have any special training or instruction.

According to the Los Angeles Times Article, the National Highway Transportation Safety Association (NHTSA) proposed federal safety standards requiring trailer safety instructions for motorists in the late 1960s. However, manufacturers and rental companies lobbied intensely to fight implementation of the proposal and it was dropped in 1972. Why would industry lobby against reasonable safety proposals. And, why does NHTSA

give in to special interests groups instead of doing its job of setting real safety standards?

In January 2006, Charles Lewis was the victim of a runaway trailer accident that could have been prevented had the runaway trailer's owner had instruction and/or training on how to properly attach and hook up a trailer. The driver of a pickup towing a 14-foot utility trailer was traveling south on U.S. Route 50 in Missouri. Lewis was traveling north on the same Route when the 14-foot trailer detached from the pickup and flew across the road straight at him. The trailer collided head on into Lewis' Ford Explorer, killing him instantly.

The 14-foot trailer broke loose because of an improper attachment. The trailer's coupler was wider than the hitch ball on the tow vehicle and did not allow a secure latch grab. Police investigators learned that it was the first time the truck driver had towed a trailer and that he had never received any training or instruction on proper trailer attachment. Maybe if the truck driver had proper instruction, the ball and hitch attachment would have been the correct size and the deadly accident may have never occurred.

Accidents involving any kind of runaway trailer can lead to catastrophic injuries and/or death. The speed and momentum that is present at the time of collision increases the seriousness of these accidents. If a truck driver's negligence, use of inadequate equipment, and/or lack of instruction causes a trailer to break loose, the truck driver is liable for any injuries and or deaths to motorists, passengers, bicyclists, and pedestrians.

### About the Author

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