

Log 4-345

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: October 6, 1982

Forwarded to:
Honorable Raymond A. Peck
Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety
Administration
400 7th Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20590

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)
H-82-38

About 7:25 a.m., on December 17, 1981, the driver of a 16-passenger Head Start school van, traveling southbound on a two-lane dirt road near Hermanville, Mississippi, lost control of the vehicle and ran off the right side of a one-lane wooden bridge. The roadway condition on the approach to the bridge was muddy as a result of rain, and there was a light rain at the time of the accident. The van fell about 9 1/2 feet onto a creek embankment and came to rest on its right side. A fire developed in the front engine compartment and, after burning for 11 to 13 minutes, spread through the interior of the van. Five of the 32 occupants of the van were killed and 11 persons were injured. 1/


The most significant factors that may have influenced the severity of the accident and loss of life after the crash were the lack of precise Head Start occupant capacity guidelines which permitted an excessive number of passengers in the van, a lack of driver emergency training, and a limited availability of exits. Windows other than the driver's window were not accessible or easy to adapt as escape areas. The right front passenger door was blocked because the van came to rest on its right side, and the driver's door was jammed because of accident damage. After the accident, the rear doors of the van could not be opened. Because of limited evidence, it could not be established whether these rear doors were not functional before the accident or as a result of crash forces. However, the important fact from a safety standpoint is that they were not functional for unknown reasons, and further study and action are therefore necessary. Because rescuers elected to use only the driver's window during the early evacuation efforts and because the precise time when the fatalities occurred is unknown, the Safety Board is not certain that a limited availability of exits contributed to the loss of life in this accident. However, the limited availability of exits in this accident did delay final rescue efforts, which had some potential to contribute to the loss of life in this accident, and could contribute to a loss of life in future accidents.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has responsibility for testing and establishing standards for the crash performance of vans and other vehicles. The Safety Board believes that NHTSA should use its programs to determine if there is any tendency for doors and other escape areas to unnecessarily jam or be blocked in low-speed crashes and if additional performance standards need to be established for these items. Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration:

1/ For more information read Highway Accident Report—"Pattison Head Start Center School Van Run-off Bridge and Fire, Near Hermanville, Mississippi, December 17, 1981" (NTSB-HAR-82-5).

Examine the crash performance of vans in rollovers and all accident types, through its crash testing and accident investigation programs, to determine if there is any tendency for doors and other escape areas to unnecessarily jam or be blocked in low-speed crashes. If necessary, establish additional crash performance standards for van escape areas, especially those used for public transportation. (Class II, Priority Action) (H-82-38)

GOLDMAN, Vice Chairman, McADAMS, BURSLEY, and ENGEN, Members, concurred in this recommendation. BURNETT, Chairman, did not participate.


By: Jim Burnett
Chairman