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# MBTA among nation's worst for derailments, records show

By [Vernal Coleman](#) and [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, June 11, 2019, 7:56 p.m.



MBTA workers trying to put the Red Line train back on its tracks at the JFK/UMass. Red Line station. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

Amid a national uptick in transit train derailments, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority has steadily amassed one of the nation's worst safety records.

MBTA trains derailed 43 times over the last five years, the second-highest total of any metro transit system in the country, federal records show. Only the New Orleans Regional Transit Authority, with 72 derailments on a smaller system of streetcars, logged a worse record.

The federal statistics do not include the MBTA's Green Line derailment on Saturday, which injured 11 people, or Tuesday's Red Line derailment, which caused massive gridlock across the city.

"That's not normal," railway safety expert Keith Millhouse said of the MBTA's derailment history. "It shouldn't be happening with that frequency."

Millhouse, a California-based transit consultant with Millhouse Strategies, said the repeated derailments are a sign of a "real lax safety culture at the MBTA — and that culture emanates from the top."

"At the root of all those derailments is someone not doing their job to the level they need to be doing it," he said.

The T tallied 13 derailments in 2018, 10 in 2017, and 8 in 2016.

Among the country's largest public transit systems — those in which trains traveled at least 1 million revenue miles — the MBTA had the sixth-highest rate of derailments from 2014 through 2018. Each of those systems — including San Francisco, Portland, Ore., and Cleveland — was smaller than Boston, according to Federal Transit Administration data.

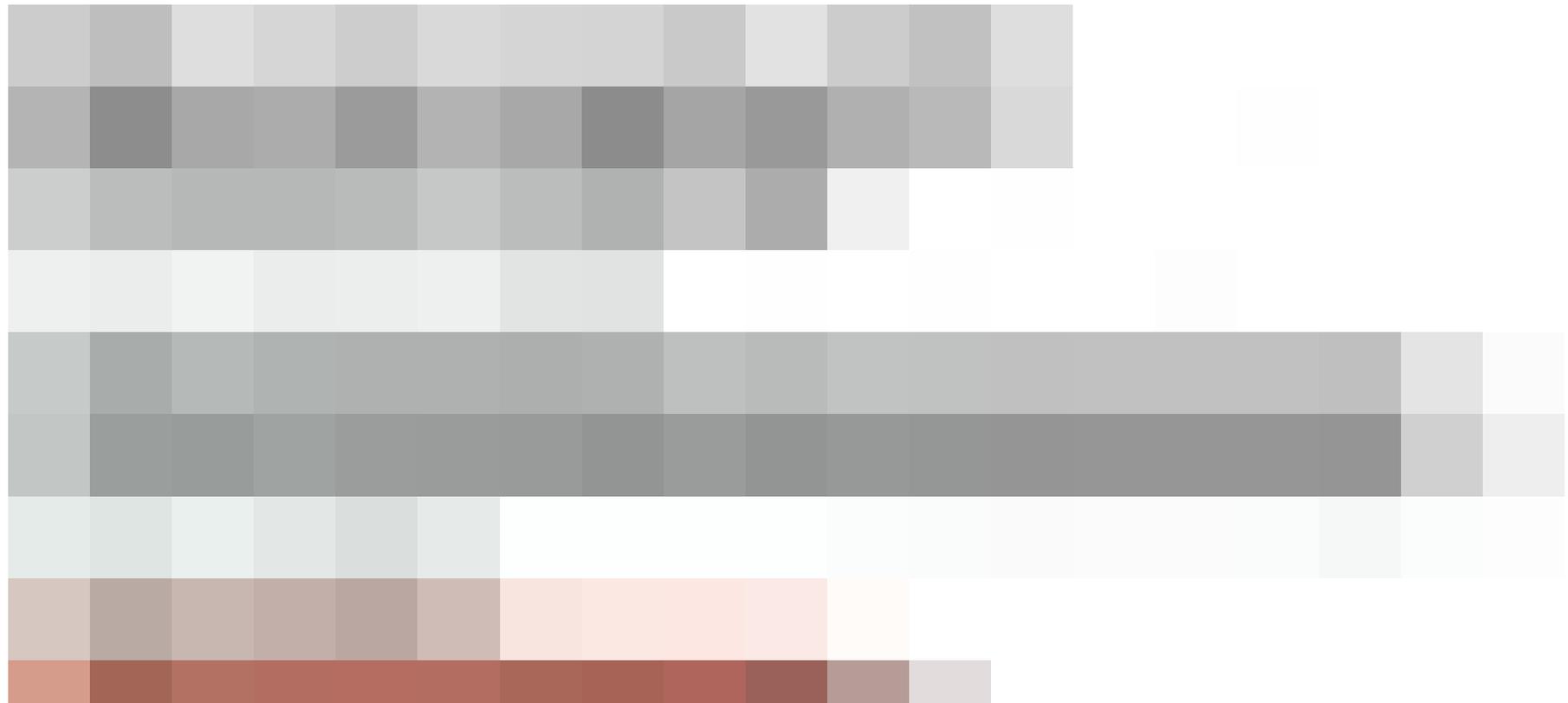
MBTA spokesman Joe Pesaturo said Tuesday that the agency's rise in derailment rankings may be due to stricter reporting. In 2017 the MBTA began collecting data on derailments of maintenance vehicles and that effort is believed to

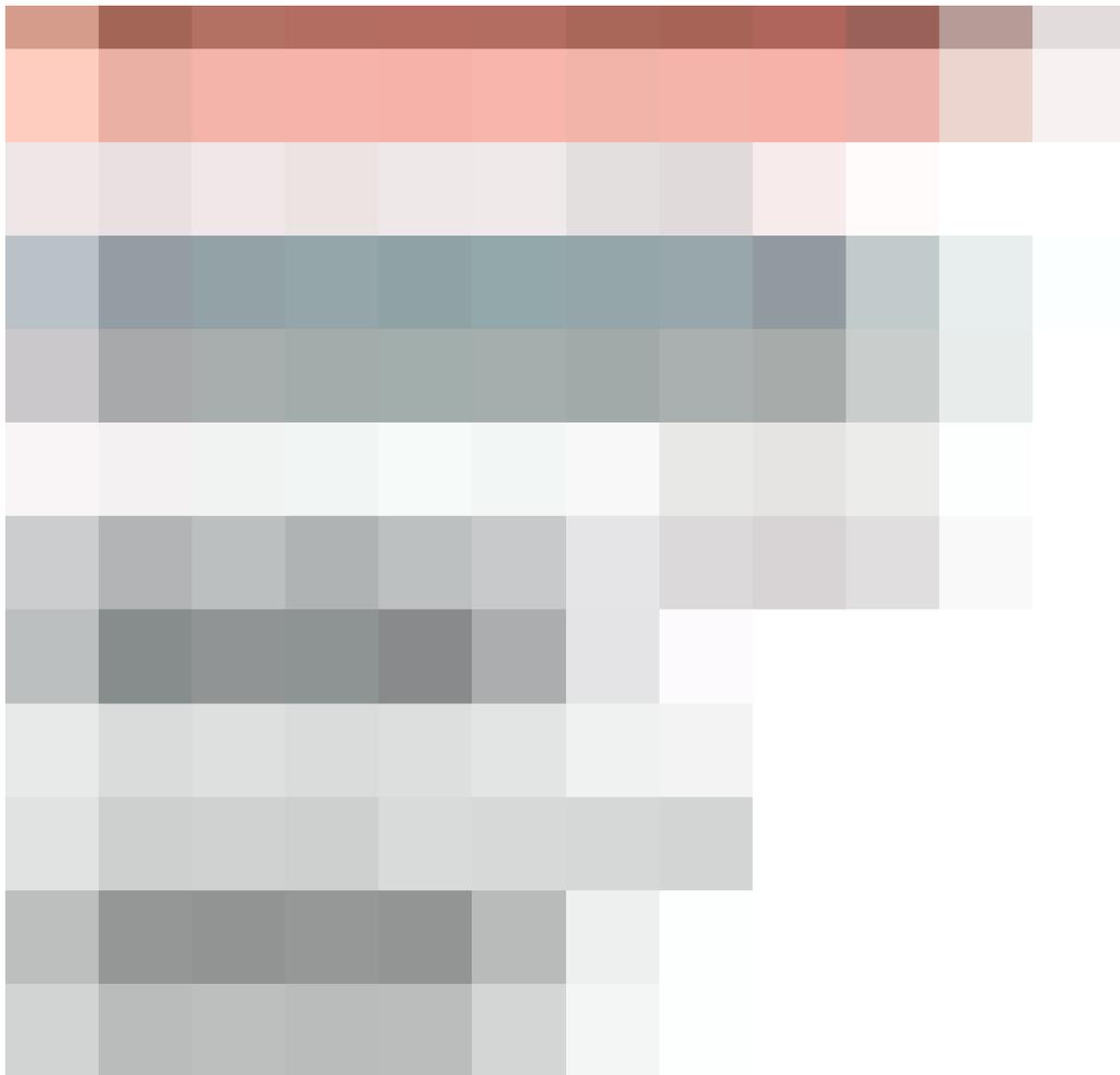
have caused an uptick in reported derailments over the past few years, Pesaturo said in an e-mail.

T officials said more than one-third of the 43 derailments were maintenance vehicles, which don't carry passengers. But even when discounting those cases, the T still posted the third-highest number of derailments nationally. The federal data doesn't detail how many derailments reported by other systems were maintenance vehicles.

Derailments can be caused by a number of issues, including operator error, poor rails, or shoddy equipment. The T's derailment Tuesday is under investigation. The agency suspended the driver involved in Saturday's incident.

Millhouse and other specialists attribute the rise in derailments across the country to the government's failure to improve and maintain train system infrastructure.





SOURCE: Federal Transit Administration IRFAN URAIZEE/GLOBE STAFF

Ten years ago, the number of reported heavy-rail derailments among US commuter transit systems stood in the single digits. By 2017, it reached a 10-year peak at 28.

The derailment on the Red Line was the fifth this year, putting the T on pace for the most in a decade, according to the agency's own records.

An outbound train carrying around 60 people crashed at 6:10 a.m. while entering the JFK/UMass station. The incident prompted major system delays and forced riders into shuttle buses. Service was restored late Tuesday afternoon.

Millhouse, who led Southern California's Metrolink commuter rail system through safety reforms after a deadly accident in 2008, blames the national rise in derailments on widespread failures to invest in aging rail systems.

"You can only kick the can down the road for so long and then it adds up," he said.

Former state transportation secretary James Aloisi said the derailments are having an impact, further eroding the public's trust in the MBTA.

"We have an old system that's been underinvested in," he said Tuesday. "It's not complicated. It just takes political will to do it."

In May, the MBTA estimated that the cost to fix or replace the MBTA's aging equipment and upgrade to new, modern infrastructure is \$10 billion.

The MBTA system includes two types of lines — the heavy-rail systems on the Red, Orange, and Blue lines — and a light-rail system on the Green Line and Mattapan Line.

Federal statistics also highlighted problems with the MBTA's heavy-rail lines, which, like other transit systems around the country, are derailing at an increased rate.

A 2015 state audit found that the T was not adequately maintaining its Green Line tracks or the wheels on a type of Green Line car with a history of derailment. Auditors also found over 50 instances of Green Line operators traveling over speed limits.

Virginia Miller, a spokeswoman for the American Public Transportation Association, which represents the MBTA, said that railway remains one of the safest ways to travel.

At a press conference Tuesday, MBTA general manager Steve Poftak said investigators are still working to determine a cause of the latest derailment.

Poftak said he would bring in an outside agency to review all T derailments over the past two years.

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