

Focusing on Transportation Safety in the Faith Community

EDITOR'S NOTE: From Sunday school classes to daycare centers, to church camps, to university-level athletic teams, faith-based organizations transport millions of people each year. Unfortunately, accidents sometimes turn fulfilling activities into tragic, life-altering events. The National Catholic Risk Retention Group is committed to safe transportation of everyone in the faith community. Therefore, we have chosen to focus on two transportation safety topics in this issue of the *COMMUNICARE*[®] newsletter. First, we'll provide you with an overview of some special safety concerns with the use of 15-passenger vans. Then, in our continuing look at school violence-related topics, we'll explore some of the risks associated with bullying on school buses.

Special Safety Concerns for Those Using 15-Passenger Vans

Two times in as many years, the federal government has issued warnings to users of 15-passenger vans.¹ Federal law prohibits the sale of 15-passenger vans for school-related transport of school-age students, but does not prohibit the sale to colleges and other organizations. Hence, the government warnings—which are based on an increased rollover risk under certain conditions—are of particular concern to churches and other organizations that use the vans to transport passengers.

Fifteen-passenger vans usually have seating to accommodate a driver and 14 passengers. Research conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) indicates that the vans have a rollover risk that increases dramatically as the number of occupants increases from fewer than five to more than 10. NHTSA research shows that 15-passenger vans with 10 or more occupants had a rollover rate in single-vehicle crashes that was nearly three times the rollover rate of those with a minimal number of passengers.

Why are these vans at increased risk of rollover?

NHTSA says the increased risk is largely due to design characteristics of the vans. An increase in the number of passengers creates an increase in passenger weight that raises the vehicle's center of gravity and causes it to shift rearward. This causes the vans to be less resistant to rollover and to handle much differently than other passenger vehicles, making them more difficult to control in emergency situations. Plus, many of the vans come equipped with luggage racks on the roof. Anything placed on the luggage racks further impacts the center of gravity and contributes to the rollover risk.



Because their length and width is significantly larger than other passenger vehicles, 15-passenger vans:

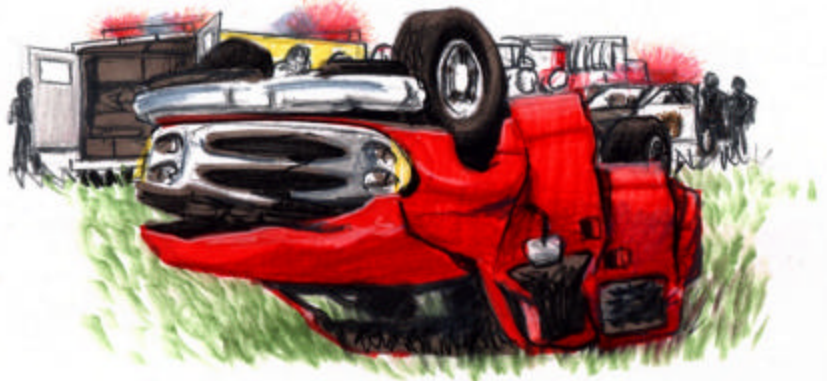
- Require more space and additional reliance on the side-view mirrors for changing lanes.
- Do not respond as well to abrupt steering maneuvers.
- Require additional braking time.

A rollover crash is a complex event, according to NHTSA, and is greatly affected by the driver and road conditions, in addition to the design characteristics of the vehicle. NHTSA studied single-vehicle crashes and discovered that more than

¹ This article is based largely on information provided in an April 15, 2002, press release from the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), a unit of the U.S. Department of Transportation, and in a flyer the agency produced on the safety of 15-passenger vans. To visit the NHTSA website, go to www.nhtsa.dot.gov.

90 percent of rollovers occur after a driver loses control of the vehicle and runs off the road. NHTSA reports three major situations that can lead to a rollover in a 15-passenger van:

1. **The van goes off a rural road.** If this occurs, the van is likely to overturn when it strikes a ditch or embankment or when it is tripped by an object or runs onto soft soil.
2. **The driver is fatigued or driving too fast for conditions.** A tired driver can doze off and lose control. The driver can also lose control when traveling at a high speed causing the van to slide sideways off the road. The grassy or dirt medians that line highways can often cause the van to overturn when the tires dig into the dirt.
3. **The driver overcorrects the steering as a panic reaction to an emergency or to a wheel dropping off the pavement.** Especially at freeway speeds, this situation can cause the driver to lose control, resulting in the van sliding sideways and rolling over.



“Because of these risks, it is vital that users of 15-passenger vans be aware of some safety precautions that will significantly reduce the risk,” said Jeffrey Runge, M.D., head of the NHTSA.

How can an organization reduce the safety risk of these vans?

The unique design and handling characteristics of 15-passenger vans make them drive much differently than most passenger vehicles. Hence, organizations that use the vans should select one or two experienced drivers to drive the vans on a regular basis. These drivers will gain valuable experience with the vans’ unique safety issues—something that can greatly improve the safety risk of using these vehicles.

Because most rollover crashes are single-vehicle accidents, NHTSA says they are often preventable. Specifically, the agency recommends that drivers take the following precautions to reduce the risk of accidents:

- **Avoid conditions that lead to a loss of control.** Never drive while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Make sure you are well rested and attentive, and always slow down if the roads are wet or icy.
- **Drive cautiously on rural roads.** Be particularly cautious on *curved* rural roads and maintain a safe speed to avoid running off the road.
- **Know what to do if your wheels drop off the roadway.** If your wheels drop off the roadway, or pavement, *gradually* reduce speed and steer back onto the roadway when it is safe to do so.
- **Properly maintain your tires.** Make sure your tires are properly inflated and the tread is not worn down. Worn tires can cause your van to slide sideways on wet or slippery pavement. Improper inflation can cause handling problems and can lead to catastrophic tire failures, such as blowouts. Therefore, check tire pressure and tread wear once a month.
- **Insist that passengers wear their seatbelts.** NHTSA reports that passengers can significantly reduce their risk of injury or death in a rollover crash by wearing their seatbelts. The agency says seatbelt usage is especially critical because many of the rollover deaths result from passengers being partially or completely ejected from the vehicle. NHTSA estimates that those who wear seatbelts are about 75 percent less likely to die in a rollover crash than those who don’t wear seatbelts. As a result, the agency says organizations that use 15-passenger vans should have a written seatbelt use policy, and drivers should be responsible for enforcing the policy.
- **Never allow more than 14 passengers (plus the driver) in a 15-passenger van.** Every passenger must have access to a seatbelt, and a van with a full complement of seats will have belts for one driver and 14 passengers. Do not overfill the van under any circumstances. And, remember, a lesser number of passengers results in a safer van.

- **Arrange occupants according to their number.** When a 15-passenger van is not full, passengers should sit in seats that are in front of the rear axle. This helps improve the center of gravity and makes the van safer.
- **Avoid using the luggage racks.** The luggage racks are provided as a convenience, but their use raises the center of gravity and contributes significantly to an increased risk of rollover. Resist the temptation to place anything on the luggage racks. To minimize this temptation, many organizations choose to have the luggage racks permanently removed.

Some final thoughts

While the federal government does not regulate the use of vans and buses by organizations that are not school-related, churches and other non-school organizations should consider all of these safety issues before choosing and using vehicles to transport people—especially children. As a rule, school buses that meet the federal regulations for school bus safety are among the safest passenger vehicles on the road. Children are approximately eight times less likely to be injured or killed in a properly equipped school bus, than in an average passenger vehicle. The NHTSA reports that there's an average of one passenger fatality for every 500 million miles traveled by school buses in the United States.

Additional resources are available from NHTSA and may be accessed from the VIRTUS® programs website at www.virtus.org. On the green vertical bar on the left side of the screen click "Understanding the Risks of 15-Passenger Vans," in the list beneath "This Week's Content," which is directly beneath the subscriber login area.

Implementing Effective Policies and Practices To Reduce Bullying on the Bus

By Philip J. Lazarus, PhD, NCSP

Carlos, a 7th grade student had been teased, pushed, and knocked around on the bus for the past five months. Carlos was a small boy with a dark complexion and a slight speech impediment. He was an awkward athlete and his only friend on the bus was Freda, his next-door neighbor. When her girlfriend did not ride the bus, Freda would sit with Carlos. Sean and Harrison, both 8th graders, were the primary bullies. However, on some occasions, other boys would join in. Perhaps they enjoyed the excitement or just wanted to fit in with the crowd.

Carlos often missed the bus (most probably on purpose), and when this happened, he would ask his mom to drive him to school. He felt too ashamed or embarrassed to tell his mother about the bullying. Carlos' mother who was not alert to how much bullying was occurring at the school, never even thought to ask her son about the possibility of him being tormented on the bus.

One day when Carlos was walking down the bus steps, Sean pushed him. Harrison was directly in front of Carlos, and Carlos responded to this provocation by pushing Harrison. Once all three boys were off the bus, a fight broke out between Carlos and Harrison. Another Hispanic boy, thinking that Carlos was being beaten because he was Cuban, rushed in and tried to break up the fight, but instead ended up in the middle of it, and a larger melee erupted. Before the morning was over, six boys were suspended from school, and Carlos went to the hospital to be checked for a possible concussion and to receive stitches.



Safety risks

In this article, I will discuss what steps both the school and the bus driver can take to eliminate or reduce bullying on the bus. In the accompanying article, I will discuss how training helped one bus driver effectively manage a potentially catastrophic situation.

Bullying on the bus creates safety risks. The bus driver needs to focus on the road—and any pushing, taunting, and teasing can create a volatile situation. Though a fight broke out as soon as the bus unloaded, it could have been much worse. The fight could have occurred while the bus was on the highway. Consequently, the driver could have been distracted or lost control of the vehicle, which may have caused a major accident, perhaps resulting in serious injuries or deaths.

Many schools cannot afford to hire adult school bus monitors to supervise student behavior. Consequently, this leaves drivers to simultaneously manage traffic and student safety. In addition, few bus drivers have received training in behavior control, and many drivers view transporting children and solving discipline problems as two unrelated and incompatible tasks. Also, in some districts there is a high turnover rate among drivers—a factor that interferes with drivers' opportunity to establish long-term rapport with students.

Reducing bullying by making schools “No Bullying” Zones

It is the school's responsibility to do everything in its power to ensure the safety of all the students and staff. Students, parents, faculty, staff, and affiliated personnel need to be aware of what constitutes bullying and need to support the position that schools are “no bullying” zones. Schools should develop zero tolerance policies against any type of bullying—whether it is on campus, on buses, or at any other school-sponsored or sanctioned activity. Bus drivers can be trained to use effective intervention techniques to respond to any bullying that does occur.



Effective bully-proofing programs transform the silent majority of students into a “caring majority.” The focus is on changing the entire climate of the school and converting bystanders into caring individuals that support and intervene to help the victim. The caring majority of students actively use their strength in numbers to inform bullies that this type of behavior is not acceptable in their school.

If all stakeholders support the concept of schools as “no bullying” zones, then a student who is being victimized would be more likely to make his or her concerns known to a responsible adult. Also, other students, who are bystanders, would be more likely to either take action to prevent the bullying from happening or at least report these incidents to school authorities.

Research has shown that more bullying occurs when there is a lack of adult supervision—such as on the playground, on the school bus, or on the way to and from school. If bus drivers are aware of bullying—either by watching for it or being informed by other students—they can take active steps to prevent it. Bystanders who are aware of bullying can intervene or tell the bus driver. Then, effective actions can be taken.

Potential interventions

When students are unruly, the job of the bus driver can be difficult. Therefore, it is necessary to consider interventions to prevent bullying or violence from happening. Schools need to consider putting two-way radios in all buses so that drivers can summon assistance. Some districts have installed video surveillance cameras to monitor student behavior. Cameras serve as a deterrent to many students, and for those not deterred, the video serves as good evidence for administrators and parents to use in disciplinary or criminal procedures.

Some districts provide behavior management training to bus drivers. For example, a Houston school district established an assertive discipline program for drivers that emphasized getting to know students and treating them with dignity. These principles were stressed:

- Immediate consequences for misbehavior.
- Consistency on the part of the driver.
- Remaining calm and restating the expected behavior.
- Frequent praise of appropriate behavior.
- Separating the misdeed from the worth of the student.
- Using appropriate eye contact.

There are a number of other interventions that are helpful *after* bullying has occurred. The driver and school authorities can use judgment in selecting those that fit the individual circumstances. This list is not intended to be exhaustive and creativity is suggested. The most important thing is to adopt a zero tolerance policy, that is, to stop the bullying by taking immediate action.

If the bullying is non-violent, some interventions that bus drivers can use are listed below:

- Separate students and place them in assigned seats.
- Place the victim in a seat near the front of the bus.
- Warn the bullies that this kind of behavior will not be tolerated.
- Alert school authorities to any volatile situations or potential problems.

Some interventions that school administrators can use are listed below:

- The parents of bullies can be brought to the school and informed about the behavior of their children. They can be told that if this behavior occurs again there will be serious consequences such as possible suspensions.
- Perhaps some major stressors are occurring in the homes of the bullies. A dialogue could be opened with the bullies to determine what is happening in their lives and why they feel it is necessary to intimidate other students.
- The bullies could be empowered to take positive action and told that the school is concerned about bullying happening on and off school grounds. The culprits could be recruited to serve as safety monitors to prevent students from intimidating or bullying others.
- Of course, if violence occurs on the bus, then school board disciplinary policies and procedures should be followed.

When there is a violent incident on the bus, determining the truth regarding what happened can be most difficult. Therefore, it is recommended that the culprits as well as the bystanders be immediately separated and interviewed. Students can then write their statement about the incident. By using this approach usually some well-meaning students tell authorities exactly what happened. This makes disciplinary actions easier to carry out.

In conclusion, it is important to ensure that Catholic schools become “no bullying” zones where students feel safe and protected. Consequently, all schools need to consider implementing anti-bullying policies and programs.

Bus Drivers are Critical Personnel in Any School Safety Plan

By Philip J. Lazarus, PhD, NCSP

The ride to school for Bus No. 59 began like any other normal Monday morning. David Sterling, a bus driver for the Morris School District, in Ostego County, New York, was traveling the same route he takes every day. Mr. Sterling likes children and has established a good rapport with his passengers. Driving a bus full of noisy youngsters—and breaking up an occasional scuffle—is a part of his normal, daily routine. However, Monday morning that routine quickly changed and the bus ride did not remain normal for long.

Two miles from school, a gunman pulled a revolver from his duffel bag, fired a shot toward the front of the bus and then ordered Mr. Sterling to stop the vehicle. Actually, the gunman was a boy—a 14 year-old 9th grader who had never exhibited problems on the bus before that day. Mr. Sterling obeyed the order to stop the bus, but that was the last demand he followed.



Mr. Sterling's first concern was getting the other children off the bus—but he thought of the younger students first. Mr. Sterling said that everything happened so fast that there was no time to assess the situation. Instinctively, the bus driver asked, "Can I let the little kids off the bus?" After the teenage gunman released the younger children, Mr. Sterling persuaded the gunman to let the remaining *older* passengers go. Then Mr. Sterling thought, "I must get the boy to put down his gun."

"There is no reason to shoot," Mr. Sterling remembered telling the boy and then he and the youth talked for about 45 minutes. Speaking in a low-key voice, he finally suggested that the boy put down the gun and that they both get off the bus. The student put the gun on the seat but then picked it up again. "That made me a little nervous," Mr. Sterling said. He gave the request again, and the boy unloaded the revolver, put it down, and they both exited the bus through the front door.

After stepping outside, Mr. Sterling asked if it would be all right to give him a hug. "I told him I loved kids and cared about kids." He gave the boy a gentle hug and they talked as they walked down the road.

Following the incident, the boy was taken to a hospital psychiatric unit for an evaluation. As is often the case, the youth was found to be suicidal.

David Sterling was a hero that day. Mr. Sterling said his actions were guided by safety training he received from the New York State Troopers in how to handle a volatile situation. From the recesses of his memory, he heard, "Don't jump the guy. Don't make any quick moves. The longer you talk, the better your chances."

An important lesson for all school districts is exemplified here: *Every member of the school community must be trained in violence prevention.* In addition to administrators and teachers, other personnel such as custodians, secretaries, cafeteria workers, crossing guards, maintenance workers, school volunteers, and bus drivers all need training, practice, and support. As in Ostego County, the skills learned are often needed when least expected—on a *normal* Monday morning.

As for David Sterling, he drove the bus on the homeward bound route that Monday afternoon—to help the students and himself get back to the normal routine. As heroes are apt to say after performing an extraordinary action, Mr. Sterling remarked, "You have a job to do. You do it!"

Material for this article was gleaned from these sources:

Morris driver is a real hero. *Daily Star*, Oneonta, NY. September 22, 1995.

Teen fires gun on school bus. Morris driver convinces boy to free passengers, surrender his pistol. By Denise Richardson. *Daily Star*, Oneonta, NY. September 19, 1995.

A genuine hero. *Press and Sun-Bulletin*, Binghamton, NY. September 20, 1995.

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