

Charter buses: Gambling with riders' safety?

The casino boom has driven coach traffic to an all-time high, but concern also is increasing as transportation statistics show more fatal accidents

By Fred Bayles
and Jayne O'Donnell
USA TODAY

To a casual gambler like Molly Carlevale, riding the bus from Boston to Foxwoods Casino in Connecticut is a safe bet.

For a \$22 fare, she gets \$30 worth of free food and free plays at keno and other games. The 90-minute ride is comfortable and the view is scenic, and a movie is thrown in for free. "I'd rather take the bus than drive," the 75-year-old retiree says. "Especially coming home. When you lose, you might be upset. If you win, you might be too excited."

The monthly gambling excursions that Carlevale and her friends go on are part of an explosion in interstate bus travel, which is among the fastest-growing segments of American transportation.

The number of bus companies has tripled over the decade to 14,000 as casinos have sprouted and a growing population of seniors clamors to leave the driving to someone else. Interstate buses now carry 340 million passengers a year.

But with that growth has come an increase in accidents and fatalities that challenges the safety reputation of bus travel.

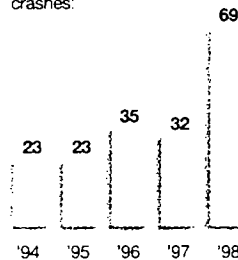
Twenty-two people died in the Mother's Day crash of a casino-bound charter bus near New Orleans, the latest in a series of tour bus accidents over the past 18 months. Interstate bus fatalities used to average six a year. But at least 15 people died in 1998, and the number is up to 26 so far this year.

Troubling signs

The accidents have increased calls for more vigorous inspection of buses, stiffer fines for companies found in violation and the

Fatal crashes

Number of fatal interstate-bus crashes:



Source: Transportation Department

By Genevieve Lynn, USA TODAY

mandatory use of seat belts. While federal officials say the bus is still the safest way to go, there are some troubling signs:

► Bus drivers, in short supply because of the booming economy, are putting in longer, more fatiguing days. The driver in the New Orleans crash also tested positive for marijuana, raising new questions about the thoroughness of required drug and alcohol screening.

► Older buses are kept in service longer, often with cosmetic face lifts to hide their defects. When Indiana stepped up bus inspections after one person died in the crash of a charter bus carrying high school football fans in 1995, officials found that about half the buses they inspected were unsafe.

► Inspections are spotty at best. State programs often are lacking, and federal regulators visited just one-fourth of all bus companies last year.

These regulatory concerns come at a time when the tour bus business is burgeoning. Buses take tourists to New England to see fall foliage, to Missouri for country music in Branson, to California to explore wine country. And more and



By Jim Garam

1,000 buses a day: Tour buses wait while their passengers gamble in Atlantic City casinos. Buses bring 30% of the gambling city's visitors.



By Andrea Hansen for USA TODAY

Booming business: Passengers arrive at the Great Cedar Hotel at the Foxwoods Casino in Connecticut, about 90 minutes from Boston.

more, they're taking tourists to casinos, which are among the top three destinations for tour buses, along with shopping and theater expeditions. An average of 1,000 buses carry people to Atlantic City each day, accounting for 30% of the gambling resort's visitors.

"Our success is a direct result of the casinos," says Michael Curreri, controller of Entertainment Tours bus company in Braintree, Mass. The family operation started with a single, 15-seat shuttle bus in 1992 and now has 14 full-sized buses and adds another two of the \$350,000 highway cruisers each year.

For years, buses have had an enviable safety record.

According to federal safety rec-

ords, an average of six bus passengers died each year over the past decade. The numbers pale when compared with the 40,000 who die each year in all road accidents.

But the numbers are creeping up as more buses take to the roads. Department of Transportation figures show that buses were involved in 69 fatal crashes last year. In 1997, there were 32 such incidents; in 1994, there were just 23.

A question of why

No one is sure whether the increase is a statistical anomaly or an indication of growing problems; there could be more fatal crashes

because there are more total bus trips. But recent accidents have focused on a number of factors, including tour bus drivers, who often put in more than the maximum 10 hours driving and 15 total hours at work per day allowed under federal law.

Officials believe driver fatigue played a role in a Pennsylvania Turnpike crash last June that killed seven people. Passengers on an Atlantic City bus that crashed in December told of the driver falling asleep before the bus went off the road.

David Stopper, a Texas A&M University safety expert who has represented both sides in lawsuits involving bus accidents, says some casino drivers pull double duty, making other runs while their passengers gamble. "They're only making money when the wheels are turning," he says.

The busing boom has made it tough to find drivers, who must have professional licenses and submit to random drug and alcohol tests. The bus industry complains that because licenses are issued by individual states, bad drivers can move from one state in which they've had problems to another without losing privileges.

Norman Littler of the United Motorcoach Association, a bus industry trade group, will tell a congressional panel today that a national commercial drivers' registry should be kept by federal safety of-

Bought and bus, truck rules offered

By Fred Bayles
USA TODAY

Responding to a number of dramatic bus and truck accidents, the Department of Transportation unveiled plans Tuesday for stepped-up inspections, stiffer fines and tougher enforcement to cut commercial highway fatalities in half over the next decade.

"Our plan will focus resources from across the entire department to provide answers to how we produce better vehicles with better drivers and how we get drivers and companies with bad records off the roads," Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater said.

The proposals, released a day before congressional hearings on the effectiveness of the Transportation Department's Office of Motor Carriers, also asks for an additional \$55.8 million to fund enforcement and to study ways to make trucks and buses safer.

The new regulations would allow the Office of Motor Carriers to revoke immediately the licenses of truckers who disregard rail-crossing warnings and to quickly shut down operators deemed unfit by the department. They would raise fines to \$10,000 per violation from the present \$1,000 and a total maximum limit of \$10,000. It now can take federal officials up to a year to shut down a company. Slater said the department would double the number of on-site inspections of bus and truck companies. In a related matter, Gene Conti, assistant director of transportation policy, said the department hoped to adopt a regulation in 90 days mandating use of seat belts on commercial buses.

Walter McCormick Jr., president of the American Trucking Association, complained that promised regulations limiting the amount of hours drivers are permitted to work weren't part of the package. Steve Sprague, spokesman for the United Motorcoach Association, said the fine increase won't make much difference: "There will always be some character who justifies it as a cost of doing business."

About 5,300 people are killed in truck-related crashes annually and another 35 in bus accidents. In March, an Amtrak passenger train smashed into a steel-hauling tractor-trailer at a railroad crossing in Bourbonnais, Ill., killing 11. Earlier this month, 22 people were killed when a casino-bound charter bus went off a highway in New Orleans.

A congressional subcommittee is scheduled to review a report on enforcement of the bus and truck industries.

Written by former representative Norman Mineta, D-Calif., the report is expected to acknowledge shortcomings and recommend more money, more staff and better supervision by the Transportation secretary and the head of the Federal Highway Administration.

Contributing: Jayne O'Donnell, Scott Bowles, wire services

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will take a written test for prospective drivers. He said he had just returned from Moscow, where, for the first time, the complete four-volume set of his father's memoir *Time, People and Power* was published. "I spent a great deal of my life editing that work. Now I hope to have it published in its complete version here," he said.

Sergei Khrushchev has written several books about his father, who led the Soviet Union from 1953 until he was ousted in 1964. Nikita Khrushchev died in 1971.

At the height of the Cold War, Khrushchev told the United States, "We will bury you," and he boasted that his rockets could hit a fly over the USA.

The statements added to the alarm of Americans. Congress subsequently increased the military budget and stepped up the arms race with the Soviet Union.

neurologist and vestibular physiologist who has led several studies of imbalance in NASA astronauts.

Using knowledge gained from Glenn's mission and an extensive study of how other NASA astronauts recover their sense of balance, researchers hope to develop techniques to predict and prevent falls among elderly men and women, Black said. He is head of the Neurotology Research Laboratory at Legacy

took gravity away and then reintroduced it," Black said Tuesday.

He spoke at a forum sponsored by the American Federation for Aging Research, where Glenn's flight and biomedical research were discussed.

Much of the physiological data collected before, during and after Glenn's flight is being analyzed, and NASA scientists aren't prepared to discuss what, if anything, they have found.

pig" was included to assist researchers trying to understand physical changes that astronauts and the elderly appear to share.

These include bone and muscle loss, disrupted balance, irregular sleep and depressed immune systems.

"If we can learn more about this process of aging, perhaps some time in the future we can turn off some of the frailties that plague us in old age now," Glenn said.

phon money of cargo away from the new International Space Station. He said Russia's top priority, no how long Mir remains in

In town for Disco launch to the International Space Station on Thursday, 4,300 pounds of supplies troumov said his agency enough money to keep flying through August.

But Mir's present or

Bus traffic, and fears, driven to new levels

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officials to keep track of all drivers. The association also wants to make it tougher for drivers to get into the business and is calling for private inspectors to help keep unsafe drivers and buses off the road.

"Entry into the business of carrying passengers by bus or motor coach is far easier today than it should be," Littler says. "Virtually anyone may purchase a used bus and pay a modest \$300 fee . . . for their interstate operating authority."

Defective buses also are slipping through a haphazard system of inspections. Buses don't always show their age because of a practice known as "capping." A capped bus gets a new front and rear and the body is freshly painted. Inspectors examining the Indiana football fans' bus could push their fingers through rusted metal of some parts that were hidden from view.

Limited inspections

Maj. Bob Seifert, commander of the Indiana State Police's motor carrier division, says the discovery was "a wake-up call" about tour buses that carry gamblers to riverboat casinos on the Ohio River and Lake



By Bill Haber, AP

In New Orleans: Emergency workers remove the body of one of the 22 people killed when a casino-bound bus ran off a highway earlier this month.

Michigan. But Seifert says few buses are inspected while in service because officials don't want the public relations problems that would arise if they stranded a bus full of passengers.

"We don't want to stop a bus with 50 little old ladies going to a casino," he says.

Federal inspectors make random

visits to bus companies, but not with the frequency that safety advocates would like. Only 3,200 of 13,000 bus companies operating last year were inspected.

When federal motor carrier inspectors show up at bus companies to inspect their buses, they check only the vehicles parked on the premises. Critics suspect that companies delib-

erately keep their worst performers parked somewhere else when inspectors are coming by.

Some states are adding teeth to their inspections. New Jersey soon will increase fines for unsafe buses from \$40 to a range of \$500 to \$5,000. Other states are considering steep fines, too.

The National Transportation Safety Board also is expected to release a study this summer that will make the strongest case yet for commercial bus seat belts. The safety agency will argue that tour bus passengers are at risk of being thrown from buses during accidents because the windows are large and the seats aren't designed to protect passengers.

Seat belts are the last thing on the minds of 34 weary passengers one recent Wednesday as they board an Entertainment Tours bus for the trip home to Boston from Foxwoods. Most are exhausted from the crowds, the gambling and free drinks. One man fans his bare feet with his socks as the bus backs out of the loading bay.

Bob Bowman, a workman on his day off, explains why he prefers the bus to driving.

"Driving down here is not so bad," he says, laughing. "But the drive back takes forever."

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