
Limousine Car Crash Kills 20 In New York, Nation's Deadliest In A Decade

08/10/2018



Parking lot of a crowded store in Upstate New York on Saturday, in what federal authorities are calling the deadliest US crash in nearly a decade.

Police said that just before 2 p.m., they received reports of a crash involving two vehicles in Schoharie, about 30 miles west of Albany.

Authorities said a 2001 Ford Excursion limousine traveling southwest on State Route 30 ["failed to stop"](#) at an intersection with State Route 30A and flew into the parking lot of the nearby Apple Barrel Country Store and Cafe.

The limousine struck an unoccupied 2015 Toyota Highlander, New York State Police First Deputy Superintendent Christopher Fiore said at a news conference Sunday. Two pedestrians standing nearby were fatally struck, Fiore said.

"There were witnesses on the scene, but just from the evidence discovered at the crash, it was apparent that this was the direction of travel and what happened," Fiore said.

The National Transportation Safety Board said members of its "go team" were at the crash site to investigate what happened and possible factors, including road and vehicle conditions.

Police said everyone inside the limousine, including the driver, died in the crash, and all those killed were adults.

Schoharie Town Supervisor Alan Tavenner described how two state highways meet at the bottom of a steep hill at a T-shaped intersection, with a three-way stop. The limo blew past the stop sign at speeds upward of 60 mph, according to witness accounts, Tavenner said.

Tavenner said the New York Department of Transportation outlawed heavy trucks on the hill in recent years because of instances when runaway trucks lost their ability to brake down the steep grade. He said the limo was carrying out-of-towners during a busy tourist weekend, Stone Fort Days.

"If somebody's new to the area or not familiar with the area, I can see how it'd be easy to miss that you're coming down to the T-intersection and going to have to stop at the bottom of it," he said.

"Twenty fatalities is just horrific," NTSB Chairman Robert Sumwalt told reporters Sunday. "This is the most deadly transportation accident in this country since February of 2009."

It was unclear how many other people, if any, were injured. Police said Sunday that they were not releasing any of the victims' names, pending autopsies and notification of next of kin.

There were conflicting reports about where the passengers in the limousine were headed. The Albany Times Union reported the limo was carrying people from a nearby wedding to the reception. The Associated Press reported that the limousine passengers were on their way to a birthday party.

Erin McGowan's aunt Valerie Abeling confirmed that her 34-year-old niece and her new husband, Shane McGowan, 30, were among the 20 people killed. The couple were married in June.

"It's tragic. Horrible. I can't even begin to even explain. . ." Abeling said in an interview from upstate New York where her family was gathered. "Our lives have been changed forever."

The families have obtained little information about the circumstances surrounding the deaths of their loved ones, largely comprised of a close-knit group of high school and neighborhood friends from Amsterdam, New York. The McGowans were part of the group of 18 people on their way to a brewery in Cooperstown, New York, for a party celebrating a friend's 30th birthday, Abeling said.

That friend, her husband, and three of her sisters, all of whom were accompanied by spouses, were among those killed in the crash, Abeling said. Erin McGowan's cousin, Patrick Cushing, was also among the dead.

Calls to the families of the other victims were not returned, and The Washington Post is withholding their names until they can be confirmed by relatives.

Abeling said her daughter, who was invited but did not join the party, recounted that the group had rented "some kind of bus" to go the Cooperstown but the vehicle broke down before reaching its destination. The travel provider then sent a stretch limousine to take the group the rest of the way.

"The vehicle appeared in terrible condition," Abeling said, recalling a text message her daughter received from Erin McGowan.

Twenty minutes later, all passengers on board the limo were dead.

"These were friends just starting their lives, getting married and this is how it ended," Abeling said. "It's a tragic loss of beautiful souls."

Photos from Schenectady Daily Gazette photographer Peter Barber showed a white van-style stretch limousine lodged in a ditch, along with police and emergency vehicles that had converged on the scene.

Jessica Kirby, the manager of the Apple Barrel Country Store and Cafe, told the New York Times that the limousine was probably traveling over 60 mph as it came down the hill and that the store was crowded with visitors from out of town because of the long holiday weekend.

"I don't want to describe the scene," Kirby told the newspaper. "We've heard accidents before. You know that sound when it happens."

Calls to the Apple Barrel Country Store and Cafe were not answered Sunday afternoon. In a Facebook post, the store said that it would remain open through the weekend despite the "horrific accident in front of our business."

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, D, said state agencies should "provide every resource necessary" to investigate the crash.

"My heart breaks for the 20 people who lost their lives in this horrific accident on Saturday in Schoharie," Cuomo said in a statement. "... I join all New Yorkers in mourning these deaths and share in the unspeakable sorrow experienced by their families and loved ones during this extremely difficult time."

Questions arose in 2015 about the safety standards governing stretch limousines after four women touring wineries in Long Island were killed when a limo was struck by a pickup driver.

Months later, the NTSB committed to investigating crashes involving stretch limos on a "case-by-case" basis. Officials, including Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., pushed for better federal safety regulations for limousines after the crash, citing "significant gaps" in safety standards for the vehicles - which are often modified using aftermarket parts and techniques.

Many stretch limos "may lack certain basic safety features like the necessary number of side impact air bags, reinforced rollover protection bars, structurally sound frames and accessible emergency exits that can aid passengers and first responders in the event of a crash," Schumer's office said in a news release at the time.

It's not known whether the limousine involved in the Schoharie crash had any of those deficiencies.

It's "just really sad - the whole damn thing," Tavenner said. Residents in the town of 3,000 mourned Sunday afternoon as the town supervisor reflected on the two volunteer ambulance companies who responded.

"There wasn't anything they could do there," he said. "It doesn't sound like anybody survived in that limo."

"It's sad because it's a small community, it's a nice place to live, we all like the people that come

around here and visit here," he said. "It's just so tragic."
