A horrific train crash in Europe just days ago received minor attention in the United States. What failed to hit home is that a similar tragedy could happen here in Illinois, safety experts warn.

Thirteen people were mowed down and killed by an express train Wednesday when a group of mostly young people who had gotten off a separate train at a station in Castelldefels Playa, Spain, tried to race across the tracks instead of using an underground pedestrian tunnel.

One witness said he heard the horn of the oncoming train, followed by what sounded like "rocks being crushed, but it was humans," the daily newspaper El Mundo reported. In addition to the 13 deaths, 14 people were injured. Authorities said the trespassers apparently thought the 86-mph train was going to stop at the station.

The carnage reminded me of a crash on the North Shore, in Lake Forest. Teresa Spradlin was to meet her fiance on a Metra train last Dec. 10 when it arrived at the station. Lights and bells signaled the approach of an oncoming train. Spradlin, 43, thinking she was on the wrong side of the tracks, ran across a pedestrian crossing, despite the activated warning devices.

The Grayslake woman was killed by an Amtrak train bound for Seattle that she mistook for her Metra train. It was the second pedestrian fatality involving similar circumstances at the Lake Forest crossing in a little over two years, authorities said.

After Spradlin was struck, parts of her body were thrown forward, striking two people waiting for the Metra train, according to a police report. The bystanders were injured by the impact and taken to Lake Forest Hospital.

Then in March in North Chicago, Blanca Villanueva-Sanchez, cradling her 18-month-old goddaughter, ignored warning devices and ran across tracks as a 70-mph Metra train
approached. As relatives who had already made it across the tracks watched helplessly, both the woman and the child were killed by the express train, which Villanueva-Sanchez, 34, apparently thought would stop at the station, authorities said. The crash was captured by a video camera in the locomotive.

Unlike in Spain, there were no pedestrian underpasses to separate trains and people in any of the crashes here. And there is no move to improve the situation any time soon.

Illinois ranks No. 2, behind Texas, for having the most railroad crossings and the most crossing crashes in the nation. Last year, six pedestrians were killed at crossing in Illinois. That's down from 10 pedestrian fatalities in 2008 and 12 in 2007, according to records compiled by the Illinois Commerce Commission.

But an increasing number of such crashes are likely as the Illinois Department of Transportation reports it is within a couple of years of implementing 110-mph passenger rail service — without any plan to protect pedestrians, according to safety experts.

The state this year received a $1.23 billion grant from the Obama administration to help build high-speed rail corridors, despite failing to demonstrate how the public will be safeguarded. The state's grant application did not specify how much money would be needed for pedestrian safety.

"IDOT doesn't even have a plan for grade crossings at 110 mph," said Dennis Mogan, a railroad safety specialist with the Illinois Commerce Commission. "We are trying to get answers."

The commission is responsible for overseeing IDOT's grade-crossing protection program.

The state plans to operate 110-mph passenger service initially from Chicago to St. Louis. There are about 280 crossings on the route. Additional corridors include Chicago to Detroit, Milwaukee and other Midwest cities in partnership with the neighboring states. Long-term plans call for boosting train speeds to 220 mph.

IDOT spokeswoman Marisa Kollias confirmed no decisions have been made to upgrade pedestrian crossings for high-speed rail.

"Eliminating crossings would be the best result, but we understand that may not be possible at every location," Kollias said. "Tunnels, overhead walkways or gate protection with additional warning systems will be some of the options. … However, we are just formulating that process."

Commerce commission officials point out that there is no consistency from state to state.

"Michigan has no problems going 110 mph with basically existing technology and longer warning times to activate gates, bells and flashing lights," Mogan said.
The commission wants IDOT to install grade-crossing occupancy detectors that warn the engineers of approaching trains whether a vehicle or a pedestrian is on the tracks, and also systems to confirm that the crossing warning systems work properly.

"Those decisions should already have been made before you even consider high-speed rail," Mogan said.

The **Federal Railroad Administration** requires that crossings be separated from vehicles or closed down where trains operate above 125 mph. Among the concerns of safety experts in Illinois is that the mix of 110-mph passenger trains and slower-moving freight trains will create confusion for pedestrians attempting to cross tracks except at designated, adequately protected crossings.

"On the high-speed routes you will have a combination of trains that is like a baseball game," said John Blair, a commerce commission rail crossing safety specialist. "The 110-mph trains will be like fastball, fastball, followed by a slow pitch when a freight train comes through."

"The trains will be running through small towns with children playing on both sides of the tracks, especially in summer," Blair said. "In the case of a 110-mph train that is 500 feet away, you, the pedestrian, have 3 seconds' reaction time. That simply is not long enough to process the information in your brain."

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