

THE DAILY YONDER

KEEP IT RURAL

One Third of Rural Roads Are in Poor Shape, Report Says

About a 10th of rural bridges are handling loads that exceed their safe limits, a research nonprofit says. The cost of getting these roads and bridges repaired is \$180 billion.

by [Liz Carey](#) | November 23, 2022

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Many rural roads and bridges are in poor shape, a new report says, and fixing them will cost \$180 billion.

The [report from TRIP](#), a national transportation research non-profit, found that nearly a third of rural roads (31%) are in poor or mediocre condition and nearly a tenth of rural bridges lack structural integrity.

States with Highest Share of Rural Pavements in Poor Condition					
1	Arkansas	33%	14	Wisconsin	17%
2	Rhode Island	32%	15	Louisiana	15%
3	New Mexico	32%	16	Colorado	15%
4	West Virginia	31%	17	Michigan	13%
5	Hawaii	30%	18	New Hampshire	13%
6	Mississippi	24%	19	Indiana	13%
7	Connecticut	22%	20	Massachusetts	12%
8	Washington	22%	21	Arizona	12%
9	Missouri	20%	22	Texas	12%
10	Maine	20%	23	California	12%
11	Alaska	19%	24	South Dakota	11%
12	Vermont	19%	25	Utah	11%
13	Pennsylvania	18%		U.S. Average	12%

“A lot of these rural roads were built for very light traffic essentially,” Rocky Moretti, TRIP director of policy and research said in an interview with the Daily Yonder. “Now, whether it’s because of increased agriculture or energy extraction, you’ve got a lot of these roads starting to carry more traffic, and in many cases, large commercial traffic, and they just weren’t built to those standards.”

That leads to more fatal accidents, he said.

In 2020, non-interstate rural roads had a traffic fatality rate of 2.17 deaths for every 100 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT), nearly twice the rate on all other roads (1.09). Despite the fact that rural non-interstate roads only carry 23% of all vehicle traffic in the country, those roads are where an estimated 38% of all the traffic deaths happen.

Researchers attribute the higher fatality rate to road conditions like narrower lanes, small shoulders, and sharper curves.

“Roadway safety countermeasures like median cable barriers, rumble strips and guardrails are among the most cost-effective ways to prevent traffic crashes and to save lives when they do happen,” Jake Nelson, AAA traffic safety advocacy and research director, said in a statement. “At a time when our nation is recording record high traffic deaths, transportation investments ought to prioritize curbing traffic injuries where we can make the greatest impact—rural roads.”

States with Highest Fatality Rate on Rural Non-Interstate Roads, and Fatality Rate on all Other Roads (2020)							
1	South Carolina	4.13	0.99	14	Mississippi	2.45	1.40
2	Oregon	3.12	1.00	15	Virginia	2.32	0.74
3	Arizona	2.78	1.42	16	Nevada	2.30	1.11
4	Georgia	2.74	1.13	17	Kansas	2.29	1.08
5	Louisiana	2.72	1.36	18	Delaware	2.28	1.11
6	Tennessee	2.64	1.30	19	Indiana	2.23	0.77
7	California	2.62	1.08	20	Alabama	2.19	0.99
8	Montana	2.58	0.96	21	Oklahoma	2.16	1.19
9	Kentucky	2.56	1.15	22	Pennsylvania	2.02	1.04
10	West Virginia	2.54	1.09	23	South Dakota	2.01	0.93
11	North Carolina	2.52	1.01	24	Illinois	2.01	1.13
12	Florida	2.51	1.48	25	Colorado	1.99	1.08
13	Texas	2.48	1.23		U.S. TOTAL	2.17	1.09

States with Highest Share of Rural Bridges in Poor/Structurally Deficient Condition

1	Iowa	21%	14	Illinois	9%
2	West Virginia	20%	15	New Jersey	8%
3	South Dakota	18%	16	Nebraska	8%
4	Pennsylvania	15%	17	North Carolina	8%
5	Rhode Island	15%	18	Alaska	8%
6	Maine	15%	19	New Hampshire	8%
7	Louisiana	14%	20	California	7%
8	Michigan	12%	21	Kentucky	7%
9	North Dakota	11%	22	Montana	7%
10	New York	10%	23	Massachusetts	7%
11	Oklahoma	10%	24	Wisconsin	7%
12	Missouri	10%	25	Mississippi	7%
13	Hawaii	9%		U.S. Average	8%

The report also found that 8% of the country’s rural bridges are rated poor or structurally deficient, meaning they have significant deterioration. Those bridges often have lower weight limits or are closed to traffic, requiring larger vehicles, like agricultural equipment, commercial trucks, school buses and emergency services vehicles, to find alternative routes.

“In some cases, the classic situation is a one-lane bridge that now is carrying essentially suburban-level traffic,” Moretti said. “A lot of those (bridges) are inadequate.”

Although the road systems may be in sparsely populated areas, officials said, they are key economic drivers, not just to rural residents, but to the country as a whole.

“Farmers and ranchers depend on rural roads, highways and bridges to bring critical inputs like fertilizer and feed onto the farm and to move their products to market,” Zippy Duvall,

president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, said in a statement. “As recent supply chain challenges have highlighted, transportation delays and costs take a bite out of our profitability and competitiveness and impact the quality of rural life.”

Fixing rural roads and bridges, the report said, will take \$180 billion – about 40% of the country’s entire infrastructure budget for roads and bridges. The price tag includes \$109 billion in rural road and highway rehabilitation, \$35 billion for rural bridge rehabilitation and \$36 billion for rural roadway enhancements.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), also called the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, passed last November will provide \$454 billion over the next five years to improve the country’s transportation infrastructure.

But it’s up to the states where most of that funding will go.

“The current (federal) level of investment on rural roads and bridges is \$21 billion per year over a 20-year timeline,” Moretti said. “If (the federal government) were investing at the level it needed to be investing at, that level would be \$29 billion per year – about 38% more... At the end of the day, the IIJA and some of the additional money that came to states through Covid packages... is going to be very helpful in addressing some of these rural challenges.”

Some states are addressing rural road improvements head on. In September, the Colorado Department of Transportation (DOT) announced it would be investing more than \$940 million in its rural roads over the course of 10 years. Shoshana Lew, Colorado DOT executive director, said the additional funds ensure the state’s “low volume roads” get “the attention they need.” Over the past four years, the department has spent \$382 million to improve rural roads in 55 counties across the state.

“As we traveled the state to hear from neighbors at the very beginning of the 10-year plan’s development, we heard loud and clear how important it was to reinvest in our rural roads,” she said in a [statement](#). “Across the state, citizens can see completed projects that together comprise record investment in rural roads, and we look forward to the continuation of this important program with the next phase of the plan.”

And in June, Maine Governor Janet Mills said investing in rural infrastructure strengthened the state’s economy. The \$9.2 million Maine Western Gateways Project is the Maine Department of Transportation’s work to revitalize roads leading to the state’s western mountains, home to the state’s recreation areas. That work will also reconstruct roads accessing rural forests vital to the forest industry. Forestry generates \$8.5 billion in economic activity for Maine, and supports 33,000 jobs.

“The Western Gateways Project is the perfect example of how we can modernize rural infrastructure to ensure that our roadways are safe for people and strong for our economy,” said Gov. Mills in a [statement](#). “This work ... will strengthen the local economy, bolster the forest products industry, support tourism, and improve public safety.”

One problem facing states as they develop their roads, however, is inflation, Moretti said.

“Unfortunately, inflation is going to erode a lot of these benefits (from increased federal spending),” he said. “We’re all hopeful that... we’ll see inflation numbers come down. From a transportation perspective, without the (IIJA) boost in funding, it would have been catastrophic because you would have seen a significant drop in the ability to address these challenges.”