



ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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Rural roads pose disproportionate hazards, study says

Is the peaceful drive in the country masking a hidden danger?

TRIP, a national transportation research group, published a report last week that found that traffic accidents and fatalities remain "disproportionately high" on rural roads when compared to other roads.

While traffic accidents and vehicular deaths have generally declined in the past five years, fatalities on rural roads have dropped more slowly, the report found. Missouri ranked No. 9 among states in 2009 with 533 noninterstate traffic deaths.

Why so many traffic fatalities on rural roads?

The authors say the nation's rural roads are more likely to be poorly designed than those in urban areas. They tend to have narrow lanes, sharp curves, skimpy shoulders and treacherous dropoffs. They're more likely to be two lanes, increasing the risk for crossover accidents, the authors said. Country roads generally have higher posted speeds because their primary function is to handle traffic between urban areas. And serious accidents tend to be in remote spots, meaning it takes longer for help to arrive.

But a large share of rural highways and bridges also are in poor shape. Missouri and Illinois ranked 11th and 18th, respectively, for having the largest percentage of major

rural roads that are in poor condition.

"This report points out that rural Americans are put in an environment where transportation fatality rates are triple what they are anywhere else," said Frank Moretti, TRIP's director of policy and research and an author of the report.

Moretti said the study delved deep into the critical role rural roads play in the national economy, including that of providing a link between farm and market. Economic sectors in rural America rely heavily on these road networks as well, he added.

Making rural roads safer will depend largely on the amount of money available to tackle the job and the complexity of the individual safety problems, TRIP said.

Some of the lower-cost improvements include installing rumble strips along the edges and the center lines of the roads, improving signage and pavement markings, better lighting and resurfacing dangerous curves with skid-resistant materials.

The more expensive fixes include realigning roads, reducing the angle of some curves, widening some lanes and adding shoulders.

Of course, these reports tend to be accompanied by a pitch for more highway spending. TRIP is financed by insurance companies,

businesses involved in the design and construction of highways, equipment manufacturers and organized labor.

In the news release announcing its findings, TRIP's brass and that of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials urged Congress to take some action, and that means passing a "robust, multiyear highway and transit bill."

Don Hillis, assistant chief engineer for the Missouri Department of Transportation, agreed with the need for additional investment in transportation infrastructure, including rural highways and rural roads.

MoDOT has responsibility for the seventh-largest highway system in the United States, and the majority of it is rural highways.

Hillis said the state has invested in safety improvements on rural highways and elsewhere. It has refurbished 530 of 802 bridges targeted by its \$685 million Safe & Sound bridge improvement program. Many of the targeted bridges are on rural roads.

"The idea was to take some of the worst bridges we had in the state and fix them," he said. "We are making great progress on that program."

Preservation efforts like the Missouri bridge program rate high with authors of the TRIP report.