

Oakland Has The Worst Roads In the U.S., A Country Where Roads Are Terrible Everywhere

Bad roads are costing us all a lot of cash.



[Charlie Sorrel](#) 11.11.16

The worst roads in the entire U.S. are in Oakland, California, which will surprise nobody who lives or drives there. A has been compiled by nonprofit transport research group TRIP, and the diagnoses isn't good. In short, America's roads suck.

The report looks at the nation's urban roads, as well as the current trends in road building and repair, including how to make them last longer. To rank the state of the roads, it uses a pavement rating index to measure the smoothness of the pavement surface. All the data comes from Federal Highway Administration, gathered annually from state DOTs.

The roads are classed into the percentage which is poor, mediocre, fair, and good. The overall picture for the U.S. is embarrassing: "Nearly one-third (32%) of the nation's major urban roads—interstates, freeways and other arterial routes—have pavements that are in substandard condition and provide an unacceptably rough ride to motorists," says the report. That is, one third of the country's urban roads are in poor condition. Most of the rest are in mediocre or fair condition, and only 28%, barely more than a quarter, are "good."

California takes the top three spots in the chart for cities of over half a million souls. In Oakland and San Francisco, 71% of the roads are classed as "poor". In LA, Long Beach, and Santa Ana, 60% score as poor. San Jose scores a 59% poor rating. Even in smaller urban areas (200,000-500,000 population), California wins again: Concorde's roads are 75% poor.

Roads are expensive. Not because they cost a lot to repair, because nobody seems to be repairing them. No, poor roads cost the individual driver a fortune in car damage. In Oklahoma City, a motorist will pay \$1,025 in additional vehicle maintenance because of the potholed roads.

Oakland comes in at the 3rd on this list, with car owners paying an extra \$978.

Why are the roads so bad? Partly it's a lack of repair, but it's also down to more and more vehicles battering the streets. Vehicle travel, says the report, has increased 15% since 2000, and in the first eight months of 2016, traffic has already grown 3.1% over 2015. If you only look at heavy trucks, it's worse, with a 26% increase between 2000 and 2014. And truck traffic is expected to from another 72% by 2030.

Meanwhile, the federal government isn't spending enough on roads. Or, you may argue, they are cleverly making the roads so bad that people abandon their cars to use public transit instead. Except that there's no good way to get between cities in the U.S. except by road or air.

Even if you don't like cars, the savings of a well-maintained road system are surprising. A dollar spent on highway or bridge repair, says the Federal Highway Administration, results in \$5.20 worth of benefit "in the form of vehicle maintenance costs, reduced delays, reduced fuel consumption, improved safety, reduced road and bridge maintenance costs, and reduced emissions as a result of improved traffic flow."

The war isn't totally lost. Improvements in road design and materials mean that roads last longer. In the long term, these roads are cheaper, but the up-front costs are higher, which politicians never like. In future, roads should be better designed for heavier traffic, says the report. The below-surface foundation is critical to keep the road surface smooth, and this foundation should be adequate for all those extra trucks. Early preservation treatments are another alternative to too-late repairs, and also save money in the long term. One trick is to seal the surface so that water can't get into the cracks caused by heavy trucks, so causing further damage.

These preservation techniques can extend the life of a road by around a third over its 25-year life.

All of the report's recommendations, most of which are based directly on the FHWA's own studies, come down to one thing: prevention is way, way cheaper than cure. Most of these life-extension treatments are initially more expensive—proper, long-lasting pothole repair, for example—but are cheaper over the life of the road, and much cheaper than building a new road. The catch is that you have to start early, because to be effective, most of these techniques require a road that is in decent condition. So while it's too late for much of the U.S. road system, we can easily do much better in future. And with road travel still growing fast, we're going to have to.