

The U.S. is choking on its traffic and it's going to get worse

By Ashley Halsey III,
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The United States is choking on its traffic, with the average driver losing 42 hours a year in the bumper-to-bumper grind and a drain on the economy costing \$160 billion, according to a new report. The report to be released Wednesday shows that traffic delays in most parts of the country have bounced back to pre-recession levels. That undermines the hope that three trends — telecommuting, the movement of people back to cities and a decline in millennials seeking driver's licenses — might provide an antidote to congestion. And with the U.S. population projected to grow by 70 million in the next three decades, there is little chance that the transportation network can keep pace with that growth or alleviate the current crush. In other words, it's going to get worse.

"If you look at corridors like the Capital Beltway, it's going to be hard to figure out how you scale up to make it accommodate another million people, 20 or 25 percent more travel demand," said Tim Lomax, co-author of a joint report by the Texas A&M Transportation Institute and the traffic monitoring firm Inrix. "We need to figure out how to use our existing capacity smarter."

The report arrives five days after the U.S. Transportation Department said that Americans drove a record 1.54 trillion miles in the first half of this year, topping the 1.5 trillion miles driven in 2007. On the United States' 10 most congested highways — six are in Los Angeles, and Chicago and New York have two each — drivers sacrifice an annual average of 84 hours caught in gridlock, the Texas A&M Transportation Institute-Inrix report says. When calculated by urban region, Washington ranks worst, with 82 hours of delay per driver. Los Angeles, with drivers delayed 80 hours per year; San Francisco (78); New York (74); and San Jose (67) fill out the top five.

But congestion is no longer a distinctly urban phenomenon. The report said that drivers in midsize cities were delayed in traffic only slightly less than the 42-hour national average, and small-city backups cost drivers in those areas 30 hours a year. Total the numbers and, the report says, Americans spend 6.9 billion hours battling traffic and burn 3.1 billion gallons of fuel while nudging inch by inch down the roadway. It's also more than rush-hour headaches for workaday commuters. When considering the vagaries of traffic — bad weather, collisions and construction zones — for a trip at any time of day, drivers need to allot an average of 48 minutes for a trip that would take 20 minutes in light traffic.

"One of the strategies we point to is, have some realistic expectations," Lomax said. "If you live in Washington, D.C., for example, and you don't think you're going to encounter traffic congestion on the way to work, you must work the night shift." Although he said it was too early to say whether the millennial generation will rethink its dedication to the urban lifestyle, Lomax says there are inklings.

"Some of what we may be seeing as the economy recovers is that many of these millennials aren't so different from their parents," he said. "They have an economic reason to not buy a car and live relatively close to where they work. When those hard times start to go away, the behavior begins to look a whole lot more like everybody else." Lomax sees another congestion challenge in the creation of planned satellite urban hubs around big cities.

"You see the jobs sort of chasing the workers out into the suburbs," he said, citing the development of Tysons Corner in Northern Virginia. "The people who developed Tysons thought, 'Oh, well, let's move out to where the houses are.' Now you see people commuting really long distances into Tysons Corner. The houses just went farther out" into suburbia.

In addition to losing 82 hours a year to traffic congestion, drivers in the Washington region burn more than 88 million gallons of fuel stuck in traffic. For a must-make-it appointment, the region's drivers need to allow 35

minutes for a trip that would take 10 minutes if there are no backups.

“Some of this is individuals taking some responsibility for knowing their options and figuring out how to plan around stuff,” Lomax said, “and their employers offering options that still work for the business but make that commuting experience less onerous for their employees.”

That balm for the irritation of traffic will come from technology, he said. “The ability of the car to sense that it’s going to hit the car in front of it,” he said. “That kind of technology can help the Capital Beltway handle more cars.” But it’s greater integration of traffic monitoring apps into vehicles that will take the next leap forward. “You can also take that same kind of information stream and turn it into something that helps people understand that there’s a crash six miles up ahead, here are the options,” he said. “Maybe that helps you to understand that transit is a better option, rather than have the car shove you toward the Beltway on a big accident day.”

He foresees a day when information about the daily commute will feed into a home computer calendar a few minutes before the alarm clock rings. “Say you’re commuting in from Manassas: Your computer looks at your calendar, sees that it’s a regular commute day and that the weather’s going to be terrible so traffic is going to be bad, and there’s already been a big crash on I- 66,” he said. “So, your computer goes out and finds the VRE train schedule and the bus schedule, and here’s the Metrorail schedule and where it drops you off. So, at 5:45, you’re shaved and showered and your computer presents you with your travel options for today.”

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