

## The Baltimore bridge collapse is a reminder of the scale of U.S. infrastructure

The collapse of the Francis Scott Key bridge doesn't appear to have been a function of disrepair. But fixing other spans remains an enormous challenge.



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There's little indication that [the collapse of Baltimore's Key Bridge](#) early Tuesday morning was realistically preventable. A key support for the structure was struck by a massive container ship, a heavy vessel with enormous momentum that the bridge was unable to withstand. The bridge wasn't in perfect condition, certainly, as no construction is more than a day after its completion. But the Federal Highway Administration's determination that it was in "fair" condition (rather than "good") is not why the bridge is no longer standing.

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That said, the collapse again shines a light on the scale and status of American infrastructure. In the hours following the collapse, [President Biden](#) said that rebuilding the bridge would be a priority for his administration — with the huge cost of doing so borne [by the federal government](#). At least one Republican legislator, though, used the collapse to throw up her hands at efforts to improve roads and bridges across the country.

Rep. Nancy Mace (R-S.C.) [appeared](#) on Newsmax shortly after the collapse and was asked about the bipartisan bill that was signed into law in 2021 that focused on funding fixes to American infrastructure.

"Why — after all these bills, after the money — do we still have really old bridges and really old roads?" the Newsmax host asked.

“Because we’re not spending it on roads and bridges,” Mace responded. She pointed out that only a portion of the total amount allocated by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act — \$110 billion of \$1.2 trillion total — went to roads and bridges.

“I look at South Carolina when the infrastructure bill came through. We only got about \$1 billion more than we otherwise would have over a five-year period,” Mace said. “I can barely build a bridge in my district for \$1 billion.”

Mace voted against the bill. Her point about the scale of the investment, though, is well taken. There are hundreds of thousands of bridges in the United States, according to data compiled by the Federal Highway Administration. As of 2023, more than 300,000 were determined to have been in “fair” condition. Another 42,000 were in “poor” condition, including some large spans.

A lot of bridges were determined to have been in “good” condition — more than 275,000 in total, in fact. (The 2023 data includes information from each bridge’s most recent inspection, which may not have been conducted that year.)

But, again, tens of thousands were rated “poor,” often, but not always, relatively small bridges.

In January 2022, a bridge in Pittsburgh that was determined to have been in “poor” condition collapsed just as Biden was planning a visit to the city. That bridge has since been rebuilt, in part thanks to funds from the infrastructure bill.

This is the central question raised by Mace’s interview: To what extent are bridges improving? If we compare 2020 data with 2023 data, we see that the percentage of bridges in a state determined to be in “good” condition increased in 11 states and the District of Columbia. The percentage of bridges determined to be in “poor” condition increased in 37 states.

Entropy, the natural tendency toward disrepair, is an enormous political headache in a country the size of ours. Case in point: The ratings of more than 110,000 bridges changed between the 2020 and 2023 data sets. About 43,000 were improved. Nearly 70,000 had deterioration.

About 56,000 bridges went from “good” to “fair” or “poor” condition. Another 13,000 went from “fair” to “poor.”

Of the 43,000 bridges that improved, most (about 33,000) went from “fair” to “good.” Only about 10,000 “poor” bridges improved.

But, again, the issue is scale. The 42,000 bridges that are in “poor” condition nationally have a combined deck area (the length times the width of each) of nearly 20 million square meters. That’s about 4,900 acres of bridge. Each wouldn’t cost \$1 billion to repair, certainly, but those repairs bring a cost.

The question for politicians, then, is whether it’s wiser to invest more now in addressing infrastructural shortfalls than it is to clean up after a disaster. But we know the answer, the same one offered so many times before: It is, at least, politically easier to do the cleanup.