

Infrastructure crisis a growing concern in U.S.

By David Cay Johnston, Newsweek

The damage wrought by Hurricane Isaac, coming on the seventh anniversary of the flooding that decimated New Orleans and stunned a nation, serves as a not-so-subtle reminder of how much infrastructure matters to our safety and our economy.

This time the levees held, thanks in part to the \$14.5 billion a shamed federal government was forced to invest following the 2005 disaster. But for decades, America has scrimped on taking care of the public furniture, endangering people and weakening the economy as bridges rust, roads crumble, dams weaken, and water mains leak. The sudden collapse of an Interstate highway bridge in Minneapolis in 2007, killing 13, and the cracks that shut down the Sherman Minton Bridge connecting Indiana and Kentucky last year (it reopened in February) are warning signs of widespread, but hidden, dangers lurking all around us.

Even greater threats can be found among the decrepit corporate-owned infrastructure, including high-pressure oil and natural-gas pipelines that can explode without warning, electric power poles long past their replacement dates, and a telecommunications system that is far less reliable today than it was two decades ago—despite customers paying more than a half-trillion dollars for upgrades.

America's infrastructure gets a grade of "D" from the American Society of Civil Engineers, which recommends that we spend \$2.2 trillion on repairs and maintenance.

A troubling event in the July heat foreshadowed what we can expect from continued malign neglect. The electric grid serving more than half of India abruptly failed—twice. Pumps that supply New Delhi with drinking water shut down. Some 300

trains stopped, stranding thousands of passengers. People in elevators found themselves in pitch-black windowless cages with steadily rising temperatures, while 200 miners were trapped underground. Those rich enough to afford air conditioning steamed at the loss of the defining technology of modern life.

The electric power outages affected 670 million Indians— every 10th person on the planet—but the event was treated in the news as a passing curiosity.

Yet what happened in India can, and will, strike America, because our utilities are in dangerous disrepair.

Who can forget the massive outage that nine years ago knocked out the entire Northeast and parts of Canada. With the events of 9/11 still fresh in their minds, Manhattanites stranded in darkened skyscrapers wondered if terrorists had struck again. But this disaster, which caused \$6 billion in damage and resulted in the deaths of six people, was homegrown.

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