

# Dozens missing, four confirmed dead in Minnesota bridge collapse

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A major highway bridge in Minneapolis, Minnesota collapsed during the evening rush hour on Wednesday, sending dozens of cars and trucks plunging into the Mississippi River.

As of Thursday afternoon four people were confirmed dead, but this number is certain to rise as recovery efforts proceed. Minneapolis Police Chief Tim Dolan said Thursday that several more people had already been found dead, trapped in their automobiles beneath the rubble or submerged in water.

Estimates of the number of people missing range from 20 to 65. At least 79 were injured in the collapse, many seriously. Some 50 cars fell more than 60 feet when the bridge gave way. Other vehicles toward the edge of the bridge fell a shorter distance, including a school bus carrying 59 people on board, mostly children. All of those on the bus survived.

On Thursday morning officials announced that the rescue effort had been called off and they were shifting to the recovery stage. This means no more survivors are expected. It is estimated that the recovery effort will take at least three days to complete because workers confront dangerous conditions.

Family members on Thursday waited anxiously for news of relatives and loved ones, hoping that somehow additional survivors would be found.

The suddenness with which an ordinary rush hour commute turned into a deadly tragedy and the terrible death suffered by those who were trapped underwater in their cars contributed to widespread shock and horror over the disaster. So did the sense that something similar could happen almost anywhere in America, where bridges, roads, levees and other elements of the physical infrastructure have long been neglected.

The *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* reported one eyewitness account: “Brandon Andreen, 20, of Blaine, was driving down University Avenue when he saw a huge cloud of dust and smoke, and people running.... Cars were crushed, sunken, floating and hanging from the bridge. A car exploded in front of him. Screams echoed down the river. ‘It was the worst thing I’ve seen in my entire life,’ Andreen said. ‘You couldn’t breathe, there was so much smoke.’”

The bridge, which runs near the main campus of the University of Minnesota, is the main north-south highway in the area of downtown Minneapolis and carries an estimated 141,000 cars and trucks every day.

The Bush administration, somewhat the wiser—from a public relations standpoint—after its open demonstration of indifference to the fate of the victims of Hurricane Katrina two years ago, made a show of concern over the bridge collapse. Bush announced on Thursday that the federal government would provide “robust” support, but he gave no details. Later it was announced that the federal government would provide \$5 million to help rebuild the bridge—in itself, a mere drop in the bucket. White House Press Secretary Tony Snow insisted that it was the job of local and state governments to repair any deficiencies in the nation’s roads and bridges.

It is impossible to say for certain at this point what caused the collapse of the bridge, and investigations have just begun. Possible factors that have been suggested include vibrations, perhaps from construction work or a passing train, combined with the heavy load from rush hour traffic.

Whatever the immediate cause, there are indications that the bridge was not structurally sound and was in need of repair or replacement. The bridge, which takes Interstate 35W across the Mississippi, was built in 1967, before more recent standards for bridges were enacted. In particular, it is a “non-redundant structure”—that is, it lacks a backup support system that could localize any failures.

Unlike other bridges in the same area, there are no piers supporting its mid-section. This design, intended to allow freer transportation on the river, is now considered archaic. There are only four structural supports, two on each of the riverbanks. One of these apparently failed on Wednesday, bringing the whole bridge down with it.

The I-35W bridge has been inspected on several occasions over the past six years, and has consistently received poor marks. A 2005 report by the US Department of Transportation found that it was “structurally deficient” and gave the bridge a score of 50. Generally, a score of 50 or below means a bridge may need to be replaced. This particular bridge has been categorized as “structurally deficient” since 1990.

Other reports found similar problems. A 2001 report by the University of Minnesota Department of Civil Engineering found that there were “many poor fatigue details” that could cause serious problems in the future. However, it concluded that there was no need for immediate action and that

“replacement of this bridge, and the associated very high cost, may be deferred.”

Governor Tim Pawlenty of Minnesota, a Republican, has resisted calls within the state legislature for more spending on infrastructure. On Thursday, he sought to avoid any responsibility by pointing out that the previous reports did not recommend immediate action.

The Minneapolis bridge is hardly unique in its structural problems. The American Society for Civil Engineers (ASCE) has for years sought to call attention to the decaying national infrastructure. Its infrastructure report card for 2005 concluded: “As of 2003, 27.1 percent of the nation’s bridges (160,570) were structurally deficient or functionally obsolete...”

Structurally deficient means that significant bridge elements have deteriorated, resulting in reduced load-carrying capacity. Tens of thousands of bridges have the same or worse rating as the one that collapsed on Wednesday.

The report card gave an overall grade of “D” to public infrastructure, and concluded that \$1.6 trillion is needed over a five-year period to address problems with roads, bridges and other systems.

A report card issued by the ASCE in 2003 cited roads, mass transit and bridges as the top three infrastructural concerns for Minnesota. It found that 16 percent of bridges in the state were structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, a figure that decreased to 13 percent in 2005. Other states were even worse—particularly states with more heavily populated urban areas, where bridges tend to be in poorer shape.

In New York, the ASCE determined in 2005 that 38 percent of bridges were structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, and in Washington DC, 64.8 percent were given this designation.

Officials said on Thursday that the collapse of the bridge was not related to terrorism, and there was no earthquake or accident that triggered the event. Nick Coleman, writing in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, commented that this made the disaster “worse than any of those things, because it was more mundane and more insidious: the death and destruction was the result of incompetence and indifference. In a word, it was avoidable.”

Such official incompetence and indifference occur within a definite context. For decades, social infrastructure in the US has been starved of resources, even as trillions of dollars have been funneled into the pockets of a small layer of the population. Hundreds of billions are spent every year on the US military, but when it comes to the physical infrastructure and basic social services, adequate funds are never available.

Minnesota was not so long ago considered one of the more socially progressive states in the country. Its politics were dominated by the Democratic Farmer-Labor Party, the state’s branch of the Democratic Party. The twin cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul were often cited for maintaining a superior—by American standards—social network, as well as a better-than-

average physical infrastructure. In recent years, the remnants of past reform policies have been abandoned in favor of the “free market” and fiscal austerity dogmas that dominate both the Democratic and Republican parties.

An integral part of the economic and social policies that have effectively redistributed the national wealth from the bottom to the top, vastly enriching the uppermost social layers at the expense of the working class and to the detriment of the material foundations of modern society—roads, bridges, levees, water, electricity—is the removal of virtually all legal restrictions and regulations on the profit-making activities of big business. This includes the enforcing of basic safety standards and the monitoring of companies that repair bridges.

In the United States, there is no “erring on the side of safety.” Infrastructure is allowed to decay until it must be replaced, an accident occurs, or there is some business interest involved. This can lead to tragic results. Just last month an underground steam pipe exploded in midtown Manhattan, killing one person and injuring dozens. In 2003, as a result of an overburdened and under-maintained transmission grid, a major blackout cut off power to large sections of the Midwest and Northeast United States, as well as parts of Canada.

The same tendencies were also present two years ago in the virtual destruction of a major American city, New Orleans, in Hurricane Katrina. For all the official talk about “securing the homeland,” the American people are more threatened by the neglect and incompetence of the government and the subordination of all social questions to the enrichment of a financial oligarchy than they are by terrorism.



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