

# Chicago Tribune

## Most congested roads in U.S.? You're probably on one

By Jon Hilkevitch | August 25, 2015



Vehicles jam the Kennedy Expressway for the morning commute Aug. 25, 2015, in Chicago.

Chicago is home to five of the top 20 worst roads for traffic congestion in the U.S., a new study says

Five of the 20 most congested stretches of road in the U.S. are in the Chicago area, according to a new study that concludes that traffic has rebounded completely from the Great Recession — and that motorists are paying the price.

Drivers in the northeastern Illinois-northwest Indiana region suffered the misery of 61 extra hours behind the wheel on average in 2014 — equivalent to a week and a half of work — because of delays caused by gridlock, construction zones and collisions that tied up traffic, according to the Urban Mobility Scorecard released late Tuesday by the Texas A&M Transportation Institute.

The time wasted last year because traffic flow lagged well below speed limits during much of the day was six hours more per driver than the 55 hours lost in 2009, a year after the recession began. From 2013 to 2014 alone, the annual delay grew two hours, the report noted.



### Ranking Chicago area traffic (statistics from the 2015 Urban Mobility Scorecard)

Increased traffic congestion is directly related to the post-recession rebound, said Bill Eisele, a senior research engineer at the transportation institute and the report's co-author. The recovery is a double-edged sword.

"You can cheer for economic activity or for lower congestion, but it is difficult to have both unless improvements are made to the transportation system," Eisele said.

The Los Angeles area took the top three spots on the congestion scorecard last year. Locally, different stretches of the Kennedy and Dan Ryan Expressways (Interstate 90/94) gave motorists the biggest headaches, accounting for three spots in the top 20. Two areas on the Eisenhower Expressway (I-290) also were among the 20 most congested.

Coming in at No. 4 nationally was I-90/94 westbound from 35th Street to the Edens junction. The report noted that 4 p.m. on Fridays tended to be the worst time to be driving on the 13-mile section of road where average speeds were as slow as 16 mph. The eastbound stretch from Montrose Avenue to Ruble Street, just south of Roosevelt Road, ranked seventh nationally.

Coming in at No. 14 nationally was the Jane Addams Memorial Tollway (I-90) eastbound starting at the Tri-State Tollway (I-294) and extending to the Kennedy at the Edens (I-94) merge, the report said. Drivers who regularly travel the route can expect to spend 57 extra hours a year compared with smoothly flowing traffic, the report said.



Study: Urban areas where commuters endure the most extra hours

And although the price of gasoline last year in the Chicago region, \$3.37 a gallon on average, was cheaper overall than it was during the previous three years, the commuter who drove predominantly during peak hours in 2014 paid what amounts to a congestion tax of an extra \$1,445, or almost \$30 a week, the scorecard said. The report pegged the additional costs, which totaled \$7.2 billion regionwide, to such factors as lower miles per gallon caused by stop-and-go conditions, lost productivity at work, commuting stress and diminished quality of life.

Congestion resulted in 29 extra gallons of fuel burned per commuter last year, which for some vehicles represents about two tanks of gas.

As bad as it may have seemed to drivers constantly tapping their brake pedals on Chicago-area interstates, the region ranked a perhaps surprising No. 8 in the U.S. in terms of delay hours for each commuter due to traffic congestion.

While bus and train riders like to complain about slow and unreliable service, roadway congestion here would have been staggeringly worse without the 1.6 million CTA rides and the 300,000 Metra rides each weekday, plus service provided by Pace in the suburbs and the city and the South Shore Line commuter rail running between South Bend, Ind., and downtown Chicago.

The Washington, D.C., area, at a numbing 82 hours of delay per commuter, ranked No. 1 on the Texas A&M list of the most gridlocked metropolitan areas last year. Rounding out the top 10 were Los Angeles; San Francisco; New York; San Jose, Calif.; Boston; Seattle; Chicago; Houston; and Dallas.

Nationally, delays due to traffic congestion last year kept drivers and their passengers cooped up in cars for almost 7 billion extra hours and more than 3 billion gallons of fuel were wasted, according to the Texas A&M report, which was jointly produced with INRIX, a data technology company.

Officials at INRIX and Texas A&M said they pulled travel data from almost every mile of major streets and highways in urban America for almost every 15-minute period of the average day. A total of 900 million "speed data points" helped determine that the total nationwide price tag of congestion in the U.S. was \$160 billion in 2014, officials said.



Byrne Interchange work: Get ready for traffic heartburn

"The national congestion recession is over," the report concluded. "The total congestion problem is larger than the pre-recession levels."

The greater urban area that includes the city of Chicago ranked No. 3 in two categories:

- Total travel delay, at 302.6 million hours when adding up the waits of the 3.4 million commuters in the region in 2014.
- The cost of truck congestion, at \$1.5 billion in 2014. It accounted for about 5 percent of the \$28 billion nationally last year in the value of operating time and wasted fuel for commercial trucks stuck in traffic and adding to congestion, the report said.

Another way to look at the congestion stranglehold is that a driver in the Chicago region who really needs to arrive on time at a destination that is 20 minutes away in light traffic should instead budget a full hour to get there during peak travel times, Eisele said.

But a better solution is needed, as the Texas A&M report and other congestion studies indicate that urban congestion will only get worse if not aggressively addressed.

Experts say possible enhancements include expanding roadway capacity, providing incentives for people to alter their travel times away from the 6 to 10 a.m. and 3 to 7 p.m. peak hours, and expanding public transit and attracting new riders with new services that include new rail lines and bus rapid transit, airport express trains and options directed at luring reverse commuters from their cars to trains and buses.

"The first thing we need is leadership in Congress to step forward and properly fund a federal transportation bill. It is way past time to take a look at increasing the federal gas tax, and the fact that it is not indexed to inflation is just a crime," said Joseph Szabo, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, which is the official planning organization for the region.

Temporary extensions for federal transportation funding have been passed because Democrats and Republicans in Congress are at an impasse on long-term legislation.

"There is no question, not just in Chicago but as you look across the country at our infrastructure deficit, that what's going on with transportation, (insufficient investment,) is choking our economic growth and impacting quality of life," said Szabo, who was administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration for the Obama administration.