

This is America: Government

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1. Infrastructure

- Infrastructure in the United States is in the midst of a crisis: Billions of dollars are needed to fix, expand and improve crumbling infrastructure.
- The 2013 Report Card for American Infrastructure, graded by the American Society of Civil Engineers, gave an average score of D+ for the current state of U.S. infrastructure.
 - The only category to score above a C grade was solid waste at a B+ for a 34% recycling rate- a great improvement since 1980.
 - Most other categories scored D grades or lower: dams, drinking water, hazardous waste, levees, wastewater, aviation, inland waterways, roads, transit, schools, and energy.
- At least 69,223 American bridges are structurally deficient- meaning that they require significant work to remain safe. Over 11% of American highway bridges are classified as deficient.
 - Nationally over 6% of bridge traffic travels on deficient bridges, meaning on an average day 280 million cars will traverse a bridge in need of serious repair.
- It is estimated that the US needs to spend over \$30 Billion between now and 2020 to maintain ports that are invaluable to our economy.
- The American Society of Civil Engineers believes that by 2020 the United States needs to invest an additional \$1.1 Trillion to upgrade infrastructure.

Source: American Society of Civil Engineers, *2013 Report Card for America's Infrastructure*, 2013.

2. Lack of Government Oversight

a. Medical and Science Labs

- There are no clear government standards or oversight right now for the more than 1,500 medical science labs currently active in the U.S. - a number that rose from only 400 labs in 2004.
- The number of accidents in labs involving microbes that can cause severe illnesses have also increased since 2004 (when there were only 16) to 269

in 2010, the last year with reported data (although only 11 workers have actually gotten ill in any accidents between 2004 and 2010).

- There were several instances in 2014 of dangerous pathogens being discovered—forgotten and unprotected—in various locations, or being sent incorrectly through the mail: For example, sixty-year-old vials of live smallpox samples were discovered in a lab, workers were accidentally exposed to active anthrax, and a deadly strain of the H5N1 bird flu was shipped unintentionally to another lab.
- Many in the scientific community are calling for one independent national agency to oversee labs that work with the most dangerous and contagious agents.

Source: Lena H. Sun and Brady Dennis, *CDC says it Improperly sent dangerous pathogens in five incidents in past decade*, 7/11/2014; Denise Grady, *Pathogen Mishaps Rise as Regulators Stay Clear*, NYTimes, 7/19/2014.

b. Cybersecurity

- From October 2011 to February 2012 there were 86 reported attacks on US computer systems that control critical infrastructure- up from 11 attacks during that same period a year earlier. It's unclear if the higher numbers are because of increases in hacks or increases in detecting hacks.
- The FBI's top cyber cop issued a stern warning about cybersecurity before leaving the bureau in 2013 stating that "the current government stance is failing and current policies are unsustainable."
- Generals who served under both President George W. Bush and President Obama have warned of looming threats of a catastrophic cyberattack.

Source: Devlin Barrett, *U.S. Outgunned in Hacker War*, The Wall Street Journal, 3/28/2012.

c. Painkiller Problems

- In 2009, for the first time ever, drugs caused more deaths than motor vehicle accidents.
- In 2010, over 16,000 individuals died from painkiller overdoses, accounting for over 40% of all drug deaths.

- Comparatively, fewer than 3,000 Americans died from malnutrition, so in 2010 more than five times as many people died from painkiller overdoses than from starvation.
- Increased attention to the problem has led to decreased use but the problem continues to be serious.

Source: Lisa Girion, Scott Glover and Doug Smith, *Drug deaths now outnumber traffic fatalities in U.S., data show*, Los Angeles Times, 9/17/2011.

i. Overdosing on Painkillers: Why death rates among white women are soaring

- In 42.8% of U.S. counties, mortality rates for women rose between 1992 and 2006. Between 1999 and 2011, death rates climbed substantially among *only* white women, ages 15 to 54, and a recent study attributed half the rise to “accidental poisoning,” or drug overdoses.
- Only 3.3 per 100,000 white women died from opioid-related (or painkiller-related) complications in 1999. That number surged to 15.9 per 100,000 white women in 2011.
- Deaths from painkiller overdoses among women have increased more than 400 percent since 1999, compared with a 264% increase among men.
- Nearly 48,000 women died of overdoses between 1999 and 2010.
- The highest concentration of counties with rising female death rates is clustered in historically impoverished regions of the Southwest where doctors and clinics are known to write more opioid prescriptions.

Source: Danielle Paquette, *Why death rates among white women are soaring*, Washington Post, 3/5/2015; Nan Astone, Steven Marten, Laudan Y. Aron, *Death Rates for US Women Ages 15 to 54: Some Unexpected Trends*, Urban Institute, 3/2015.

3. EMPLOYMENT

a. Not Enough Jobs

As of July 2014:

- Full-time jobs plunged by 523,000 in June, meaning that the jobs that were created were part-time positions.
- Only 47.7% of adults in the U.S. were working full time.
- In 2007, 4.4 million people were involuntary part-time workers, but that number has risen drastically to 7.5 million workers in 2014.
- Millions of Americans are trying to support themselves and their families on limited, low-paying jobs. These low-paying jobs now account for 44% of all employment growth since employment hit bottom in February 2010.
- Five years after the Great Recession, more than 24 million working-age Americans remain jobless, work part-time involuntary, or have left the workforce.

Source: Mortimer Zuckerman *WSJ* op-ed 2/15/13; Mortimer Zuckerman *WSJ* op-ed 7/23/14

b. Underfunded Job Corps

- The Job Corps, established in 1964 as a technical training and education program is in need of more funding and an overhaul.
- 2014: The Job Corps continues to be underfunded and the Labor department is threatening to close several of the lowest-performing centers and transferring students. This is problematic for Job Corps supporters since even the lowest-performing centers have better results than vocational schools or other job training programs and closing any centers decreases access and opportunities for those that most benefit from Job Corps.
- In 2011, for the first time since its creation under President Johnson, the Job Corps had to halt enrollment and had to place a freeze on new enrollees from June to July.
- Up to 30,000 young adults missed out on job training opportunities and another 10,000 Job Corps employees stood to lose their positions during the 6 month freeze.

Source: Tracie Mauriello, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, *Job Corps makes case for more Funding*, 4/1/14.

c. Manufacturing Jobs

- Manufacturing jobs have drastically decreased since the 1980s, from 19.2 million in 1980 to only 12 million in 2013:

Year	Manufacturing Jobs
1970	18.4 million
1980	19.2 million
1990	17.8 million
2000	17.3 million
2010	11.5 million
2013	12.0 million

- Former manufacturing workers often end up being unemployed for years, if not permanently, when they lose their manufacturing jobs.
- These workers have a difficult time transitioning to different trades and many do not have college degrees, adding to the challenge of finding employment.

Via Bureau of Labor Statistics, data is from January of each year; Peter Dizikes, The Fiscal Times, The High Price of Losing Manufacturing Jobs, 2/26/12; Bureau of Economic Research.

4. THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

a. Congressional Approval

- Congressional approval ratings have progressively fallen since 2009 when it was at 39% to where it currently rests at 13% in late 2014 (up from a dismal 9% approval at the beginning of the year).
- Before 2008, the yearly averages were higher, averaging no lower than 25% from 1994-2008.

- The most recent peak was 56% approval in late 2001, right after the 9/11 attacks.

Source: Gallup Polling, *Congressional Approval Ratings*

b. Federal Money Waste

In 2013 the federal government spent at least \$891,000 on service fees for accounts that were empty. When grants run out of funding, agencies are required to close accounts. However it takes a slight effort to close the accounts, and many agencies do not make that effort. Each account costs \$5.42 per month, a small amount, but which adds up when 7% of the government's 202,000 accounts have no money in them. Last summer the Obama administration directed agencies to start closing off these accounts. Some agencies, like the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services, listened to the president and closed a significant amount of empty accounts. However other agencies, like the USAID had the same amount of empty accounts in 2013 as they did in 2011.

The federal government also wastes millions of dollars each year on duplicate and inefficient programs. Even more money is wasted because contracting organizations do not coordinate their efforts and end up doing duplicate or unnecessary work. "In 2014, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found 162 examples of government duplication or other inefficiencies while analyzing programs in virtually all major federal departments and agencies over a three year period."

Source: David A. Fahrenthold, *Feds spend at least \$890,000 on fees for empty accounts*, Washington Post, 4/25/2013; Josh Hicks, *Duplicative programs wasting government funds, report says*, Washington Post, 4/9/2013.

c. Small State Senate Clout

62 Senators represent roughly one fourth of the nation's population:

30 are Republicans, 30 are Democrats, and 2 are Independents

32 Senators represent states with half of the country's population:

13 are Republicans, 19 of Democrats

6 Senators represent another quarter of the nation:

2 are Republicans, 4 are Democrats

d. Partisan Geography

Both Congress and the country are getting further divided across party lines- the red states are getting redder and the blue bluer:

113th Congress (2013-2015)

- 10 states with all Republican representatives in the House, 5 of which were states with an at-large representative (predominantly in the Great Plains and West).
- 8 states that only sent Democrats to the House, 2 of these states had an at-large representative (both in New England).
- 25 states that had House Delegations at least 2/3rds Republican
- 13 states that had House Delegations at least 2/3rds Democrat (only 3 of which are not from the Northeast)
- Only 12 states had House Delegations that were not dominated by one party: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, Washington and Wisconsin.

108th Congress (2003-2005)

- 9 states only sent Republicans to the House, but 7 of these states had an at-large representative (most of these states were in the West, but Delaware and New Hampshire were part of this group).
- 4 states only sent Democrats to the House, none had an at-large representative (3 of 4 were located in New England)

- 24 states sent delegations at least 2/3rds Republican
- 9 states sent delegations at least 2/3rds Democrat
- 17 states sent delegations not dominated by one party

103rd Congress (1993-1995)

- 3 states only sent Republicans to the House, all of which sent at-large representatives
- 6 states only sent Democrats to the House, 3 of which were from states with an at-large Rep. (None of these states were from New England)
- 7 states had House Delegations at least 2/3rds Republican (6 of the 7 states were west of the Mississippi River)
- 17 states had House Delegations at least 2/3rds Democratic (no real geographic trends)
- 26 states had House Delegations not dominated by either party

Changes: The country is much more divided into red states versus blue states. There are fewer states that are not dominated by one party or the other, fewer “purple states.”

e. Presidential Approval Ratings

President Obama	Approval Rating	
	Approve	Disapprove
February 2015	45%	51%
September 2014	39%	54%
June 2014	44%	50%
December 2012	54%	38%
June 2010	47%	45%
February 2009	64%	16%

- President Obama’s September 2014 approval rating is only 2 points higher than the lowest rating received by President George W. Bush (37%) during his eight years in office.

Source: Gallup Polling, Presidential Approval Ratings

f. U.S. Voter Registration and Voter Turnout

- In 2014, a general election year, the voter turnout was at 36.4% which was the lowest voter turnout since 1942.
- In 2012, a presidential election year, the voter turnout was 58.6% of eligible voters.
- In 2010, a general election year, voter turnout was 41.8% of eligible voters.
- 2012 Census Bureau data on Americans eligible but not registered to vote:
 - 17,318,000 unmarried women in America are eligible to vote but have never registered to vote
 - 9,632,000 Latinos are eligible but not registered to vote
 - 7,235,000 Africans Americans are eligible but not registered
 - 19,226,000 young voters, ages 18 to 29, are eligible but not registered.
- Why such low turnout?
 - “The reasons [for the low turnout] are apathy, anger, and frustration at the relentlessly negative tone of the campaigns.”
 - Other reasons range from: “too busy”, “not excited about either candidate,” “vote doesn’t really matter”, and “nothing ever gets done, anyway.”
 - For some, the process of registering and going to the polls is too much and seen as a barrier to voting: “The responsibility is on the citizen to get registered [making] voting a two-step process, and a significant number of potential voters don’t take that first step.
 - For youth: One explanation is that “young people today do not feel they have much of a stake in society. Having children and owning property give you a direct interest in how schools and hospitals are run and whether parks and libraries are maintained. But if they settle down at all, young people are waiting ever longer to do it.”
 - For many, and particularly for young people, they do not feel that there is anyone worth voting for.

Sources: Page Gardner, *Four Numbers I think About Every Day*, Huffington Post, 10/8/14; U.S. Census, *Reported Voting and Registration, By Sex, and Age for States: November 2010*, Table 4A; Dr. Michael McDonald, *United States Elections Project*, 2914; D.K., *Why young people don't vote*, The Economist, 10/29/2014; Eric Black, *Why is turnout so low in U.S. elections?*, Minneapolis Post, 10/01/2014.

5. VETERANS

a. VA Health Care

In early 2014, a scandal broke over Veteran's Affairs handling of health care. It all started with a report from a Phoenix office that officials there had falsified records at a medical center, hiding the amount of time that veterans had to wait for medical appointments. New VA patients are supposed to see a doctor within 14 days after their paperwork is accepted and existing patients are supposed to see a doctor between 14 and 30 days after requesting an appointment. When the scandal broke, however, it was discovered that some 1,700 veterans had waited an average of 115 days for an appointment and the Phoenix office was making false waiting lists to try cover up the long wait times.

After this initial scandal broke, investigations into other VA offices discovered additional misconduct: falsifying records, cover-ups, illegal drug dealing, veterans dying while on waiting lists, disease outbreaks, etc. The scandal has hit cities all over the country including Pittsburgh; Columbia, South Carolina; Fort Collins, Colorado; and Miami. It led to the resignation of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, who has been replaced by Robert McDonald in an effort to "restore trust" in the system. Needless to say, these scandals have brought many of the issues facing veterans in the United States under a microscope and will hopefully bring about important changes and progress.

b. VA Backlog: Disability Claims

- The Department of Veterans Affairs runs 58 regional benefits offices which assess claims made throughout the country. VA claims that take over 125 days to complete are characterized as backlogged.
- From March 2013 to April 2014, the VA reduced its disability claims backlog by nearly 44%*- the result of much needed reforms and aggressive actions. Prior to March 2013, the backlog was estimated to include over 1 million cases with the goal of getting through it by 2015.

Working on the backlog:

- In 2009:
 - There were 11,000 (2.6%) claims pending a full year after they were filed.
 - The average claim was assessed in 161 days
 - There were just over 400,000 veterans
- In 2012:
 - There were over 225,000 (26.8%) claims pending a full year after they were filed
 - The average claim took 273 days, for first claims it was over 300
 - There were over 1 million veterans

As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama ran on the promise of modernizing the claims system. In 2009 the VA started an effort to make the claims process electronic to prevent backlog. After 4 years, and \$537 million in system updates, only 3% of the claims are even computerized. Additionally, the VA stated it would increase the number of claims processors. Between 2010 and 2012 the VA claimed to have hired 3,300 more claims processors, but by 2012 there were only 289 more workers than in September 2010, for a total of 14,491 workers.

*In March of 2013 the VA claimed that it took 273 Days to process a claim BUT an independent investigation found that 244,939 veterans had been waiting more than one year, 58,477 veterans had been waiting more than two years, and veterans filing their first claim waited more than 315 days. The release of this data led to a big push by Veterans groups, President Obama, and the VA to end

the backlog. Secretary Shinseki set the goal of processing all claims in less than 125 days with a 98 percent accuracy rate by the end of 2015.

c. Veterans and Employment

- The jobless rate for all veterans edged down to 6.6% as of March 2014.
- Among the 722,000 unemployed veterans in 2013, 60% were age 45 and over. 35% percent were age 25 to 44 and 5% were age 18 to 24.
- Among all veterans, the unemployment rate for women declined to 6.9% in 2013. The rate for male veterans edged down to 6.5%.

The employment situation is getting much better for veterans in comparison to rates in earlier years: The unemployment rates for post 2001 veterans rose to 12.1% in October 2011, up from 9.8% in August of that year. For the general population the unemployment rate in October 2011 was 8.9%

- 44% of veterans who served in the past decade called the transition back to civilian life difficult, twice the rate of veterans from earlier eras.

Sources: Pew Research Center; Bureau of Labor Statistics- Employment situation of veteran's summary, March 20, 2014.

d. Veterans and Suicide

Veterans now account for 20% of the nation's annual 30,000 suicides.

- About 22 veterans take their own lives a day.
- From 2009 to 2011, suicides for male veterans under 30 saw a 44% increase. Female veterans had an 11% increase.
- In some cases, veterans committed suicide or overdosed on drugs while waiting for help from the VA.
- In April of 2011, the VA suicide hotline fielded over 14,000 calls, over 400 a day, the most ever in a single month.

- In the four years since the VA started the hotline they have taken over 400,000 calls and referred over 55,000 for same day or next day service.
- According to the department, they have succeeded in slowing the steady increases in suicides that began in 2006.
- Persuading younger veterans to seek care remains particularly problematic, because of stigma associated with mental health problems.

The Associate Press, Appeals Court Blasts VA Mental Health Care System, San Francisco News Tribune, 5/11/11; Department of Veterans Affairs Suicide Data Report, 2012.

e. Veterans and Homelessness

- The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that 49,933 veterans are homeless on any given night.
- About 12% of the adult homeless population is veterans.
- 20% of the male homeless population is veterans.
- Young veterans only make up 5% of the veteran population but make up almost 9% of homeless veterans.
- Roughly 8% of homeless veterans are female.
- The majority of homeless vets are single, live in urban areas, and suffer from mental illness, alcohol and/or substance abuse.
 - 50% have serious mental illness
 - 70% have substance abuse problems
- About 1.4 million other veterans are considered at risk of homelessness.

Sources: Veteran Homelessness: A Supplemental Report to the 2010 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, Department of Housing and Urban Development; National Coalition for Homeless Veterans FAQ Sheet; Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013.

f. Veterans and Military Sexual Trauma

GALLUP POLL: Veterans and Military Sexual Trauma (MST)

One in Four Vets Know a Military Sexual Trauma Victim

Veterans: Percentage who know a victim of military sexual harassment, assault, or rape (Military Sexual Trauma or MST):

	Total	Men	Women
Yes	24%	20%	60%
No	76%	79%	37%
I was the victim (vol.)	1%	Less than 0.5%	4%

-For the 2013 fiscal year there were 5,061 incidents of sexual assault and 1,366 incidents of sexual harassment

Nonveterans: Percentage who know a victim of workplace sexual harassment, assault, or rape:

	Total	Men	Women
Yes	18%	17%	19%
No	79%	80%	78%
I was the victim (vol.)	Less than 0.5%	1%	--
Don't know/Refused	4%	3%	4%

Veterans' and nonveterans' views on military's effort to address MST: Has the military done too much, too little, or the right amount to address the issue of rape?

	Total Veterans	Male Veterans	Female Veterans	Total non-veterans	Male non-veterans	Female non-veterans
Too much	5%	5%	3%	3%	5%	2%
Too little	48%	46%	69%	64%	61%	66%
Right Amount	35%	36%	23%	24%	25%	23%
Don't know/Refused	12%	12%	6%	10%	10%	10%

Has the military done too much, too little, or the right amount to address the issue of sexual harassment?

	Total Veterans	Male Veterans	Female Veterans	Total non-veterans	Male non-veterans	Female non-veterans
Too much	12%	13%	4%	5%	7%	4%

Too little	42%	41%	61%	51%	49%	52%
Right Amount	37%	38%	30%	35%	34%	35%
Don't know/Refused	9%	9%	5%	9%	10%	9%

Important notes:

- More than half of women who have served in the military report knowing someone who has been a victim of rape, sexual harassment, or sexual assault while in the military- much higher than their female non-veteran counterparts.
- These results suggest both that sexual victimization is a real and substantial problem in the military and that the current perception is the military is not doing enough to address these issues.

Source: Gallup Poll: One in Four Vets Know a Military Sexual Trauma Victim, July 9, 2014.

6. HEALTH CARE

a. Health System Infrastructure: Health Care Costs

Americans pay more for routine medical procedures than citizens of the rest of the world. According to the International Federation of Health Plans, an angiogram (basically an X-ray to observe blood flow in the body) costs four times as much in America than in Switzerland (\$914 vs. \$218), a heart bypass surgery costs three times as much here as in France (\$73,420 vs. \$22,844), and a hip replacement almost four times as much in America compared to Britain (\$40,364 vs. \$11,889). In other nations the providers negotiate down costs in a way American companies do not. Medicare however is able to negotiate, and procedures paid by Medicare average out to 89% of the cost compared to other providers. If there was a public option to buy into Medicare, our nation's health costs could be lower by \$10 billion a year for a decade.

Source: Ezra Klein, *Why an MRI costs \$1,080 in America and \$280 in France*, Washington Post, WonkBlog, 3/15/13.

b. Uninsured Americans:

Percentage of residents aged 18 and older who lacked health insurance in 2012

1. Texas 28.8%	18. Ore. 17.6%	36. S.D. 14.4%
Uninsured	19. Tenn. 17.6%	37. N.D. 13.8%
2. La. 24.0%	20. Idaho 17.2%	38. N.H. 13.6%
3. Nev. 23.3%	21. Ill. 17.2%	39. N.Y. 13.0%
4. Calif. 23.2%	22. Colo. 17.1%	40. Md. 12.3%
5. Fla. 22.8%	23. Mont. 16.9%	41. Pa. 11.9%
6. Ga. 22.5%	24. Wash. 16.9%	42. Iowa 11.8%
7. Ark. 21.9%	25. Ind. 16.7%	43. Wis. 11.8%
8. Alaska 21.8%	26. Mo. 16.4%	44. Minn. 11.5%
9. Okla. 21.4%	27. Neb. 15.9%	45. Hawaii 10.5%
10. Wyo. 21.3%	28. Utah 15.7%	46. Conn. 9.9%
11. Ariz. 20.5%	29. Mich. 15.4%	47. Del. 9.6%
12. S.C. 20.5%	30. N.J. 15.2%	48. Vt. 9.2%
13. N.M. 20.1%	31. R.I. 15.2%	49. D.C.* 7.5 %
14. Ky. 19.8%	32. Maine 14.8%	50. P.R.* 6.7%
15. N.C. 19.4%	33. Ohio 14.7%	51. Mass. 4.5%
16. W.Va. 19.0%	34. Va. 14.7%	
17. Ala. 18.8%	35. Kan. 14.6%	

Source: Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, *Uninsured Rates by State*, 2013.

i. Uninsured Children

Half of uninsured children live in six states:

State	2011 Number Uninsured	As a Share of US Total
Texas	916,522	16.6%
California	744,797	13.5%
Florida	475,112	8.6%
Georgia	236,568	4.3%
Arizona	208,419	3.8%
New York	180,834	3.3%
Six State Total	2,762,252	50.0%
National Total	5,527,657	---

c. Primary Care Doctors

- A 2012 Urban Institute study of 500 primary-care doctors found:
 - 30% of primary-care doctors, aged 35 to 49, planned to leave their practices within five years
 - 52% of those over 50 planned to leave their practices within five years
- The Association of American Medical Colleges estimates the United States will be short 45,000 primary-care doctors in 2020.
- Nearly half of more than 7,200 doctors responding to a 2012 Mayo Clinic survey reported at least one symptom of burnout, up from 10 years ago when only one quarter of doctors reported burnout symptoms.
- Nearly half of surveyed physicians in a RAND study called their jobs “extremely stressful” and more than one-quarter said they were either “burning out,” experiencing burnout symptoms “that won’t go away,” or completely burned out” and wondering if they “can go on.”
- Burned-out surgeons were more likely to report having made a major medical error in the past three months.

The salaries of primary care physicians lag behind those of their peers in specialties:

- Salaries of primary care physicians were around \$220,000 in 2012
- Salaries of specialist were averaging close to \$400,000
- Cardiologists and orthopedic surgeons earned over half a million dollars

Sources: Roni, Caryn Rabin, *Burnt Out Primary Care Docs are Voting with Their Feet*, Kaiser Health News/Washington Post, 4/1/2014; Bradford H. Gray, Karen Stockley, Stephen Zuckerman, 2012 Urban Institute Study: American Primary Care Physicians’ Decisions to Leave Their Practice, 3/15/2012.