Report No. FHWA-RD- 75-87

A STATISTICAL SUMMARY OF THE CAUSE ANO COST OF BRIDGE FAILURES

F. F. M. Chang

September 1973 Final Report *LA* , *Ll* $\overline{\mathbb{L}}$ \sqcup . Ξ

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Fred F. M. Chang

SEPTEMBER 1973

FINAL REPORT

Prepared for

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION Office of Research Washington, D.C. 20590

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PREFACE

Several million dollars are spent every year on repairs and/or replacements of bridges. To curtail this cost, sizable funds are appropriated each year to conduct research related to bridge failure.

This report presents a very brief statistical summary of the cost and cause of bridge failures which occurred during floods in the last few years, in the hope that a guideline for future research areas and allocation of funds will be revealed,

The project was initiated by J. Sterling Jones and Roy E. Trent both of the Federal Highway Administration and conducted by Fred F. M. Chang of Federal City College under Contract DOT-FH-11-8O93, The data were supplied by the Office of Engineering, Federal Aid Branch.

The cooperation and assistance received from Fred Verity and Harold Bennett both of the Office of Engineering are deeply appreciated; without their help, this project would not have been completed. Special acknowledgments are due to Murry Corry and Chuck O'Donnel both of the Federal Highway Administration for their valuable comments.

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INTRODUCTION

Bridge failures cost millions of dollars each year in the United States in the repair• and restoration of the highway system. In an effort to curtail this cost, government agencies have been conducting various research projects related to scouring around bridge piers and abutments, However, the scour problem is so complicated that their findings are often fragmented and unevaluated, and much more work has yet 'to be pursued, With limited funds available for hundreds of research proposals, it is important that a priority and emphasis be assigned to each subjeci.

This paper reports a statistical summary of the causes of bridge failures that occurred during floods in the last few years, with the objective that a guideline for the direction of future research may be recognized from the results.

The following floods were chosen for the study, with the assumption that these floods (comprised of the East and West Coasts and the Midwest) will adequately represent a cross-section of the United States:

All the data were extracted from the Emergency Relief files at the Office of Engineering, Federal Aid Branch. A large number of files were scanned, and 409 cases of bridge failures each costing more than \$ 1000

were studied to identify (or in some cases to "speculate on") the cause of the bridge failures, Only in about 38 percent of the cases was the cause of the failure clearly stated by field engineers who investigated the failure; the remaining data contained only vague descriptions of the ' damage and made no mention of the possible causes of the failure. In these cases, the causes of the failure were conjectured using the best judgment-of-the-writer. In some cases, however, the writer failed to reach any pertinent conclusion, and the cause of the failure was not determined.

BRIDGE FAILURE

A bridge crossing is composed of three parts: 1. superstructure, 2. substructure consisting of piers and abutments, and 3. approach road. The term "bridge failure" in this report implies that a portion or complete component of the bridge is damaged or dislocated to the extent that it fails to perform its intended functions. The bridge failures treated in this study were only those caused by floods; bridge failures due to tidal wave or earthquake were excluded.

Types of Failure

(a) Superstructure -- Damages to the superstructure may occur when a flood overtops the superstructure. Traffic signs on the superstructure, guard rails, and even members of the truss will be torn and bent. The damage will be more severe if the flow carries large debris, In one case

in the study, a 30-ft piece of timber was caught between the truss and severely bent the frame of the truss, Debris and silt are also deposited on the bridge and traffic is disrupted until they are removed.

Another type of•failure of the superstructure is induced by the failure of the substructure. A fall of supporting piers or abutments often leads to a total collapse of the superstructure. Even a small displacement of the substructure may cause a deformation in the superstructure which reduces the loading capacity tremendously.

(b) Substructure -- A failure of the substructure generally results from severe scouring of the foundation. As scour around a pier or abutment increases, a loss in bearing capacity may occur due to reduced pierto-soil contact in the case of friction piles, because of weight loss in the soil above spread footings, or because the uneven removal of foundation soil, causing the pier to slip, Any increase in the L/r ratio of a pier increases the likelihood of structural failure.

For economic reasons, some abutments have been built with timber planks and backfilled with layered gravel and sand. Seemingly, they function satisfactorily when the planks are new, But as they deteriorate, the gaps between the planks become wider, and the swift flow around the abutment gradually siphons out the back fills and creates a large cavity. Finally it induces a total collapse of the entire abutment, dragging down the superstructure with it. Many bridge abutments built with timber planks in Minnesota and South Dakota failed for this reason during the 1969 floods.

For the design of the substructure, engineers generally consider

only the vertical loads of the superstructure and traffic, but seldom account for the lateral forces from floating debris and the drag force exerted by passing flow. Several cases of pier damage due to floating debris and ice were observed in the 1969 Midwest floods. Timber bents were broken into two pieces and bents made of steel pipes were bent by the impact of large debris,

In Iowa, there was a case of abutment failure which resulted from the instability of foundation soils, The foundation soils were composed of clay which were submerged in the water during the flood, The entire mass of soils slipped with the abutment when the flood subsided rapidly. With the high water saturation at high flood stage, shear stress in the soil was reduced; then with the sudden drawdown of the flood stage, the water pressure on the abutment that initially kept the soils in place was removed, causing the soils to slump.

(c) Approach Roads -- As the scour of abutment foundations reaches to the backfill, the flooding water tends to flow around the back of the abutment to carry away more backfill. This process accelerates when the flow finds a bypass behind the abutment. The extent of the erosion increases rapidly; it causes a shift of the main channel to flow behind the abutrent and wash away the approach roads. Erosion of this type usually occurs at river bends where the flow is concentrated toward the outer bank of the bend, and thus the scour of the foundation tends to become deeper. This phenomenon may shift toward downstream tangent sections due to the natural progression of meandering patterns.

There is another type of erosion on approach roads that results

from overtopping flow. This erosion starts from the road surface and proceeds downward. The extent of the erosion is generally wider and shallower. Overtopping may cause two types of failure: 1, the shoulder and downstream embankment may wash out and 2. the paved surface may • float and wash out completely.

For visual understanding, a sketch of a typical bridge failure is given in Figure 1,

Causes of Failure

Bridges fail when 1. the flow overtops the superstructure and lateral forces (either from debris or drag) exceed the design capacity, 2, scour around the foundation of the substructure becomes critical, and 3. the capacity of the bridge becomes deficient. The following paragraphs discuss the causes of these phenomena in more detail,

(a) Overtopping Flow -- It is rather obvious that an inadequate flow path forces the flood to overtop the bridge. Bridge clearance is determined from the hydrological study of a design flood of certain magnitude, Therefore, a flood of magnitude larger than the design flood will most probably overtop the bridge.

Most natural rivers undergo constant change; in the riverbed, aggradation and degradation take place continuously. Aggradation occurs where backwater forces sediment in the flow to settle. If a bridge is located in a reach where backwater exists, the clearance of the bridge seemingly sufficient at construction will become inadequate in later years.

Floating debris carried by the flood often accumulates around the substructure and obstructs the flow path, causing the flow to overtop the bridge. In quite a few cases in the study, the floating debris plugged the flow path completely, so that the flow was forced to overtop the bridge, finally washing out the bridge entirely.

(b) Scour Around Foundations -- Scour around piers and foundations consists of local scour and general scour. Local scour is the work of the intensive diving flow at the leading edge of the structure. Skewed piers (whose axes are not parallel to oncoming flow) are especially susceptible to local scour because of increased diving flow. The scour hole is ordinarily deep and extends in a rather small area in the immediate vicinity of the structural foundation. General scour normally .imp1,ies

1. degradation of the streambed due to increased sediment-carrying capacity,

2. erosion of the streambed due to contracted and thus accelerated flow, 3. erosion of the concave bank of a meandering river, as well as 4. the progressive tendency toward equilibrium of an unstable river. However, two and three could at times be classified as local scour, especially when the erosion is not extensive.

Floating debris not only causes flow to overtop bridges as discussed previously, it also plays a major role in intensifying the erosive action of the flow. *A* partial blockage of the upper flow path by floating debris brings forth an increase in flow velocity and thus more violent erosive action. The flow is often concentrated downward and impinges on the foundation soils around piers and abutments; if its progress is not

checked, it will induce a total collapse of the bridge.

(c) Structural Deficiency -- As the bridge gets older, the materials deteriorate and become more vulnerable to the excessive forces and erosive action of the flow, especially for timber abutments. Many such failures were observed in this study, where timber bents were broken by the impact force of large floating debris, and where the backfill and abutments made of timber were washed away by swift flow. Had these bridges been newly constructed, the failures may not have occurred.

Bridges also fail due to the deficiency in internal strength of foundation soils. Two such cases were found in the study. The entire foundation settled in one case; in the other, the foundation soils slumped down in one lump, bringing the bridge down with them.

The causes of bridge failure can be summarized as follows:

Classification of Causes of Failure for Analysis

For analysis, the causes of bridge damage or failure are briefly divided into five categories: 1. Riverbed change, 2. Flow change, 3. Flow path deficiency, 4, Floating debris, and 5. Structural deficiency.

Since no details were given in the original data, aggradation and degradation of the riverbed, and river constriction are combined together as riverbed change, The effects of river bends, skew piers and abutments can be discussed under the category of flow change because the flow characteristics change vigorously with flood stage at river bends and with skewed approaching flow near piers and abutments, causing deep scour that leads to a collapse of the bridge. Whether overtopping flow is caused by under-design of the bridge clearance or an extreme flood is often not too clear, even where detailed data are available; therefore, they are combined as flow path deficiency. However, flow path deficiency caused by floating debris has been combined with the damages of bridge structures due to direct impact of debris in a separate category, floating debris. A broken timber pier or a bent guard rail represent a clear result of this cause. The following cases are included in structural deficiency: failures of older bridges unless the condition of the bridge before the flood was stated as fair, under-design of structural components, and soil failure due to insufficient foundation investigations. It is often difficult to categorize a given failure, especially in light of the limited data that was available for this study.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

For all data, the following items are tabulated in Appendix A: description of bridge, year of construction, location of damage, collapse of bridge, cause of damage, overflow, and total cost of damage,

The files in the Office of Engineering were not particularly designed for the purpose of this study and thus do not contain all the information needed for the analysis. In addition, no unique format was used for reporting the flood damages; therefore, the writer felt that to compile the data in more detail than that appearing in Appendix A would not only be very difficult but quite meaningless. For example, some states reported in much detail while others described bridge damage just $*$ as $*$ "Bridge damaged beyond repair." In the cases where there was no way to speculate where the damage was located and how it happened, the corresponding items were kept blank.

Ordinarily, bridge failure, like other hydraulic structure failure, is attributed to multiple causes, For example, a flood stage was so high that water overflowed an old bridge at a river bend, and the bridge failed. Much debris remained at the bridge site after the flood. Was this'failure attributable to flowpath deficiency, floating debris, concentrated flow at the river bend, or structural deficiency? Would this bridge stand if it were not built at a river bend, if it were new, or if there had been no debris? All these questions are difficult, if not impossible, to answer even where very detailed data were supplied, Therefore, the writer in searching and identifying considered all prevailing causes based on the statements in the files and the attached pictures,

and equal weight was given to each of the various causes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis are tabulated in Table 1. Of 383 cases for which the description of damages was presented, $14:9$ percent of the damages occurred at the superstructure, 24,5 percent at the pier, 71.8 percent at the abutment, and in 43.2 percent the damage extended to the approach road. It is also shown that in 25.6 percent of the 383 cases the bridge collapsed entirely; of these about two-thirds were less than 100 feet long,

Among the 341 cases for which the cause of the failure was either stated in the files or theorized by the writer, only 6.9 percent of the failures are attributed to riverbed changes as defined previously. This figure is smaller than the writer, as well 'as many bridge engineers, expected. Probably, it is due partly to the fact that the field engineers who inspected the sites of the damaged bridges were not aware of slow riverbed changes and therefore did not report them.

The bridge failures attributed to vigorous <u>flow change</u> were 29.6 percent, and those attributed to flowpath deficiency were 38.8 percent. A figure of 38.8 percent for flowpath deficiency is, in the writer's opinion, a little high. This high figure resulted in part from the writer's judgment on the cause of bridge failure and partly from the type of data used in this study, since the Emergency Relief files are restricted to catastrophic floods. In all the cases where overflow was

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TABLE 1 SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS

* Percentage of the total number(383) of the cases in which the damage of bridge was described. was overlap in damage categories (For example, both superstructure and pier were destroyed in some cases).

** Percentage based on writer's judgement in most cases as it was seldom precisely clear as to which cause of damage was predominate.

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indicated, flowpath deficiency was assumed, at least as one of multiple causes. But in reality overflow is not necessarily an indication of flowpath deficiency in all cases, since it can result also from unusual floating debris blocking the waterway and thus creating an insufficient ' flow path,

Only 4.7 percent of the bridge failures were attributed to structural deficiency.

All these figures are subject to change because (a) in judging the cause of damage, a certain amount of speculation was involved, and (b) this speculation was based on rather scattered data, More detailed and consistent data will surely improve the results; the findings would then be more conclusive. In order to secure better data for this type of analysis in the future, a suggested format for making damage surveys and reports is provided in Appendix B for use by state highway departments.

The cost of highway damage due to floods from 1951 to 1972 is tabulated in Table 2 and graphically represented in Figure 2. An average line is drawn through the data to determine the expected average cost of highway damage in 1974, The extension of the line indicates an amount of about $$65$ million. In Table 3, the total cost of the highway damage for the floods studied in this analysis is shown. A total of $$162,229,838$ was used to restore the highway system; of this, an amount of $$50,602,301$ was spent on the restoration of damaged bridges, that is approximately 31,2 percent, If this same ratio were assumed to hold for the near future, the federal government will be spending about \S 20 million per average year for bridge failures caused by floods in the next few years,

TABLE 2 COSTS OF HIGHWAY DAMAGES DUE TO FLOODS IN THE UNITED STATES

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 ${\tt FICURE}$ COSTS OF FLOOD DAMAGES ON HIGHWAYS IN THE UNITED STATES $\overline{2}$

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TOTAL COSTS OF HIGHWAY DAMAGES DUE TO FLOODS

Table 3

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Note: Data were taken from the files (Emergency Relief) at Federal Aid Branch, FHWA.

* This figure has not been adjusted for construction cost differentials for various states.

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This amount does not include the costs that will be incurred by state and local governments.

As to the projection of the total losses per year (in dollars) attributable to various types of scour and erosion, the writer was confronted with a certain difficulty in producing precise and confident results. The figures in Table la are based on the counting of the occurrence of the events: the damage at the pier, for instance, occurred 94 times in 383 cases of bridge failures, or 24,5 percent of the time, Since the total cost of the flood damages that were studied was $$ 162$ million, can one then conclude that $$ 39.6$ million (24.5 % of \$ 162 million) was spent on the repair and restoration of the scoured piers? The answer is no, because (a) in a bridge failure, the damages occur often on more than one component of the bridge, and (b) the cost of repairing each component varies. When a bridge is damaged, both the superstructure and the pier usually need to be repaired. In general, the repair of the superstructure costs more than the repair of a scour hole around the pier, The repair of the superstructure occasionally involves • a complete replacement of the entire structure while the repair of the scour hole around the pier foundation needs only a fill of the hole with gravel ripraps. In such a case, a division of the cost evenly between the two parts would be inadequate and misleading. At any rate, more detailed data, such as breakdown figures for the costs of repair, are needed,

With regard to methods of alleviating losses, some corrective measures currently used are described in NCHRP Report No. 5, p, 11, Those measures deal with the direct protection of foundation soils against

scouring, Other measures that protect foundation soils indirectly by reducing the intensity of the diving flow are deflection plates around the pier, protective piles installed upstream of the pier, and the controlled approach of the flow to avoid concentration and meandering. In natural rivers, especially wide rivers, variations in flow are vigorous; the direction as well as the intensity of the flow changes rapidly during floods. When the flow concentrates at the pier with a comparatively large angle of attack, scour can easily exceed the anticipated depth and result in the collapse of the bridge.

The corrective measures mentioned here are concerned only with local phenomena, and the most important problem - river regime - has not been considered. A stabilization of the entire river system by river training certainly could alleviate the loss of bridges.

SUGGESTED FURTHER STUDIES

The following studies are suggested for further investigation:

(1) As mentioned previously, the present study should be revised **by** using•more accurate, consistent, and detailed data. In order to collect such data, the appropriate state agencies need to be contacted and requested to complete the questionnaire given in Appendix B, Also, it may be necessary for the investigator to visit the field engineers in order *(* to discuss more extensively the bridge failures which occur during floods, Most importantly, all available photographs taken during and after floods

should be examined thoroughly in order to correctly determine the causes of the failure.

(2) The effectiveness and feasibility of the following corrective measures should be evaluated:

a. A roughened approaching section of the channel to avoid flow concentration,

b, An emergency relief system to mitigate flow in the main channel when the flood exceeds a certain critical high stage.

(3) The on-going effort to evaluate the applicability of existing empirical formulas for scour depth by using field data should be continued.

(4) A warning system should be developed to determine when corrective action must be taken to counteract scour damage before the superstructure becomes endangered.

(5) A study should be conducted to establish criteria for site selection which will include the geologic and geomorphologic characteristics of channel networks and drainage basins in relation to floods of various magnitudes.

APPENDIX A. BASIC DATA

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Damage \log वि Flow Change $\overline{\text{bot}}$ 100 $|100$ $|100$ Flow Path لى Floating Debris $\ddot{\mu}$ Struc. Deficiency ЪS \gtrsim Overflow $\overline{\mathbf{x}}$ \approx \times \rtimes 11,000 $\frac{Cost}{U1}$ $3,000$ $1,100$ $1,200$ 2,200 1,550 $1,000$ $4,250$ $\frac{2,400}{ }$

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I.D. No. Location State: County: Town: Time of Failure:

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Date \sim 1 Bridge No. Highway No. : Over(River):

[l] BRIDGE. A. Year of Construction: B. Superstructure: C. Substructure: Type: Length= ft. Width= ft. No. of Spans= Max. Span= Clearance from Design Flood Stage= Alignment with Center Line of River= 1. Bent: Type: Pier Pile Other Material: Shape: Length= ft: Width= ft. No. of Piers(or Piles) at Each Bent=
Type of Web: Beam Frame Wall Type of Web: Beam Frame Alignment with Center Line of Bridge= 2. Abutment: Type: Spur Dike: 3. Foundation: Yes No Type: Spread Footing Caisson ft. Min. Span= ft. **0** $Height =$ ft. Other 0 ft. Friction Piles: Yes No If Yes, answer the Followings No. of Piles per Footing= Material: Diameter of Pile= **in.** Length of Pile $=$ ft. **4.** Foundation Soil: Classification: Protective Measure(If Any): [2] RIVER CHARACTERISTICS. A. Geometry of Approaching Channel: Length of Straight Reach= ft. Slope= Effective Width= ft B. Stability of Riverbed:

- Degradation of Riverbed= Shifting of Thalweg: No Little Depth to Bedrock= ft. ft/yr. Some Frequent
- C. River Improvement and Construction:

 $B-1$

C. River Improvement and Construction: Dredging Floodway Cutoff Revetment Levee
Dike Lock Dam . Dike Lock Dam Description: $\sim 10^{-10}$.

Location from Bridge= mi. Up(Down)stream

[3] FLOW CHARACTERISTICS.

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[4] POST FLOOD SURVEY.

A. Description of Damage(including Sketch and Photograph):

Scour and Erosion: -Max. Depth= Remaining Debris: -Quantity: None Few -Size Length= ft. -Size: Some ft. Many Width= ft.

B. Opinion on Cause of Failure:

C. Estimated Cost of Damage= US \$