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What the Baltimore Collapse Tells Us About Bridge Safety.

The Francis Scott Key Bridge suffered a catastrophic failure after a pier was struck by a cargo ship, raising questions about what might have averted disaster.

It took more than five years to build the Francis Scott Key Bridge across Baltimore's Patapsco River, but only a few terrifying seconds to destroy it. A pier supporting the structure's 1,200-foot-long main span was struck by the loaded container ship Dali leaving the Port of Baltimore early on Tuesday morning; several vehicles plunged into the icy river below as the bridge's roadway collapsed. A mayday call saved lives, but six people who were working on the bridge are missing and presumed dead after rescue efforts were suspended on Tuesday evening. The scale of the disaster and the bridge's importance mark the accident as one of the worst US infrastructure failures in decades, and its impact stands to play out for years across the Baltimore region and the US economy, since the bridge facilitated so much trade. As the country grapples with the tragedy's fallout, pier protections will likely become a focus on other American bridges.

Aftermath of the Collapse

Completed in 1977, the Key Bridge carried about 35 million vehicles annually as part of Interstate 695, a beltway that circles the city of Baltimore. In addition to its role as a key commuter link, the highway is part of the complex network of transportation and logistics infrastructure surrounding the Port of Baltimore, which handles more than 10 million tons of cargo annually. Shipping traffic has been suspended for the foreseeable future, as bridge debris has blocked the narrow shipping lane into the port itself. Vehicle traffic, meanwhile, has been diverted to alternative routes, including a pair of tunnels beneath Baltimore harbor. But trucks carrying hazardous materials are barred from those routes, which is expected to delay freight traffic up and down Interstate 95.

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By Linda Poon and David Dudley

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