



HIGHWAY REST STOPS: THE OVERLOOKED FRONT LINE OF TRANSPORTATION SECURITY

Cargo theft, trafficking, cyber risks and smart surveillance are transforming the security mission of roadside infrastructure.

At first look, the rest stops along America's highways seem like nothing special — just places where people can get out of their cars, stretch their legs and grab a cup of coffee before hitting the road again. But to people who work in transportation security, these spots are seen in a whole new light.

Today, rest areas and truck stops are facing big security problems. These include organized gangs stealing cargo, human trafficking, attacks on drivers, crimes against infrastructure and new cyber threats from electric vehicle charging systems. Before, people thought of rest stops as just a place to take a break, but now they are becoming important spots that need strong security like airports, ports and train stations. They need many layers of protection to keep everyone safe.

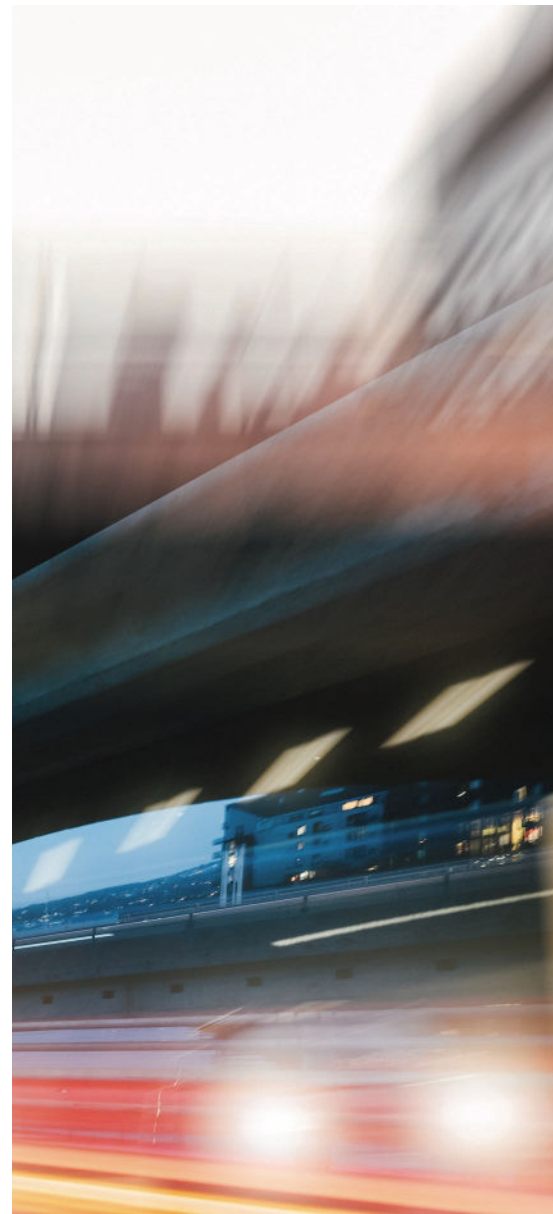
The stakes are high. Freight theft losses alone are estimated in the billions annually, while driver shortages continue to pressure the trucking industry. At the same time, governments are digitizing highway infrastructure through "smart corridor" initiatives that integrate surveillance, connected transportation systems and real-time traffic management.

For security experts, the question is no longer whether highway rest stops deserve greater protection. The question is how quickly transportation agencies can modernize security before

criminal networks and emerging threats outpace them.

CARGO THEFT: A GROWING THREAT ALONG FREIGHT CORRIDORS

Highway rest areas are facing a major threat from organized cargo theft. These days, cargo crime is no longer just about random break-ins. Instead, sophisticated groups of criminals are using advanced techniques like GPS jammers, surveillance teams and fake pickup schemes to target valuable cargo moving along highways. They even have coordinated logistics operations in place to carry out these





crimes. This is a big change from the past and it's making it harder to protect cargo as it moves from one place to another.

Truck parking areas are really vulnerable spots. This is because drivers often don't have many options and have to stop in areas that are far away from everything, with not a lot of people watching and security that's not always there.

Some products are more likely to be

targeted by thieves, such as electronics, medicines, food, alcohol and luxury items. These criminals often keep an eye on how goods are being transported and wait for the perfect moment to strike, usually when the vehicles are stopped overnight.

Rest areas can be pretty predictable, says a transportation security expert who helps freight companies. He thinks

criminals know that trucks will have to stop eventually, and they also know that a lot of these rest areas don't have the same level of security as ports or airports. This makes them easier targets.

Transported Asset Protection Association (TAPA) has publicly warned that cargo theft is increasingly organized and opportunistic. According to industry security groups, organized cargo theft increasingly targets



predictable parking and rest patterns along major freight corridors.

As online shopping keeps getting more popular, more and more trucks are on the road and that means there are more chances for thieves to strike.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING ALONG TRANSPORTATION CORRIDORS

Law enforcement officials also increasingly recognize highway rest stops as important nodes in combating human trafficking. Interstate corridors allow traffickers to move victims rapidly between jurisdictions while maintaining anonymity. Rest stops and truck plazas provide meeting points, recruitment opportunities and temporary staging areas that are difficult to monitor consistently.

Kendis Paris, the head of Truckers Against Trafficking, has stressed that truck drivers have a special role in spotting trafficking activities on highways. She often says, "Truck drivers are like the eyes and ears of our country's roads," meaning they are in a great position to notice and report suspicious activities while they are driving from one place to another.

Some states in the U.S. are now putting up signs and giving out important phone numbers in rest stops and truck stops to help people know about human trafficking. They're also teaching truck drivers about the signs of trafficking, so they can help report it. This is a big deal because truck drivers are often in a good position to see things that might be suspicious and they can help stop bad people from hurting others. By working together, we can make a difference and keep people safe.

Security experts note that transportation infrastructure operators are now expected to play a broader role in identifying suspicious activity, much like airport and rail personnel have increasingly done over the past two decades.

DRIVER SAFETY AND WORKFORCE CONCERNS

For the trucking industry, security concerns at rest stops are also becoming a workforce issue.



Many drivers have expressed worries about their safety on the job and some of the things that concern them the most include being robbed, attacked, having their vehicles broken into and feeling unsafe at night. This is especially true for female drivers, who often talk about feeling scared when they have to park in isolated areas that don't have good lighting or security guards to keep an eye on things.

The issue is compounded by a chronic shortage of secure truck parking nationwide. Drivers operating under strict hours-of-service regulations are often forced to park wherever space is available, even if conditions appear unsafe.

Trucking companies are having a tough time finding and keeping drivers and one thing that might help is making rest stops safer. Industry groups think that if rest stops were more secure, it could be a big plus for recruiting and retaining drivers.

SMART SECURITY TECHNOLOGIES ARRIVE ROADSIDE

To better protect people and goods, transportation agencies and private companies are starting to use advanced security systems, similar to those used in airports, ports and train stations.

Artificial intelligence-powered video analytics can now identify suspicious behavior patterns such as loitering, perimeter breaches, abandoned vehicles, or unauthorized access to restricted areas. Companies such as Axis Communications, Genetec and Avigilon

provide surveillance systems increasingly used across transportation infrastructure.

License plate recognition systems are also becoming more common. Vendors including Flock Safety and Motorola Solutions offer technologies capable of identifying stolen vehicles, monitoring suspect traffic patterns and assisting investigations linked to cargo theft or trafficking activity.

Some state transportation agencies are now using surveillance feeds in their traffic control centers, which lets police and transportation officials watch what's happening on major roads used for shipping in real time. This means they can see what's going on right away and make decisions quickly. By doing this, they can keep a closer eye on the roads that are important for moving goods around.

CYBERSECURITY RISKS EMERGE WITH EV INFRASTRUCTURE

Another emerging concern involves cybersecurity. As more people switch to electric vehicles, rest stops are starting to add new technology like charging systems that can connect to the internet, payment platforms and ways to manage energy. But this also means that there are more ways for hackers to try and break in.

Security researchers have warned that compromised charging infrastructure could enable payment fraud, malware distribution, or even broader attacks on connected energy systems.

While the transportation sector has spent years strengthening cybersecurity

protections for aviation, rail and maritime systems, roadside infrastructure has historically received far less attention. That may soon change.

Rest areas are turning into modern hubs with digital connections, according to a cybersecurity expert who specializes in transportation systems. When you link up systems that handle operations, payments and communications, keeping them secure from cyber threats becomes a key part of protecting the physical space.

“Critical infrastructure security and resilience require collective action,” stresses the Cybersecurity Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA).

THE RISE OF SECURE TRUCK PARKING

A growing market has emerged around secure truck parking technology. New systems allow operators to reserve secure parking in advance, monitor trailers remotely, deploy geofenced security alerts, detect unauthorized trailer access and integrate cargo-monitoring sensors.

Technology firms such as Geotab and Samsara are increasingly integrating fleet security and visibility tools into broader transportation-management platforms.

In Europe, they’ve taken a big step to



make truck parking safer. They’ve set up special areas called Secure Truck Parking Areas, or STPAs for short, to cut down on cargo theft along main roads where lots of goods are transported.

A TRANSPORTATION SECURITY BLIND SPOT?

Many experts think that security at highway rest stops is not taken seriously enough, even though there are more and more risks. They believe it gets less attention than security at airports or train stations.

Airports operate under extensive federal security frameworks. Ports and rail networks increasingly integrate cybersecurity and perimeter monitoring into critical infrastructure strategies. Roadside infrastructure, by contrast, often

remains fragmented across state agencies, private operators and local jurisdictions.

Yet the consequences of disruption can be significant.

A major cargo theft operation can ripple through supply chains. Human trafficking investigations may span multiple states. Cyberattacks against charging infrastructure could disrupt travelers and logistics operations alike.

As transportation infrastructure becomes increasingly interconnected, the distinction between “critical” and “non-critical” nodes may continue to blur.

THE FUTURE OF ROADSIDE SECURITY

Over the next five years, experts expect highway rest stop security to evolve rapidly.

Likely developments include technology such as AI-assisted threat detection, drone-supported perimeter monitoring, integrated freight-security networks, biometric access control for commercial facilities, cybersecurity standards for EV charging infrastructure and smart-corridor operations centers linking transportation, law enforcement and emergency response systems.

In many ways, highway rest areas are following the same trajectory airports experienced after 9/11 — moving from basic infrastructure to layered security environments integrating technology, intelligence and real-time monitoring.

The challenge for transportation officials will be balancing security, privacy, operational efficiency and public accessibility in spaces designed to remain open and convenient for millions of travelers.

Because in an increasingly connected transportation system, even the most ordinary roadside stop can become part of the broader security landscape. 