

HOW TO IDENTIFY AND AVOID CHOKES POINTS

If any type of disaster, ranging from hurricanes to civil unrest, happens in your city, depending on your specific preparations, you'll want to get out of the immediate ar-

ea as quickly as possible. Unless you live outside the city or just on the outskirts, this may prove quite difficult. People will begin to panic and when that happens they become a danger to themselves, you, and everyone else around them. A person can be a highly intelligent and adaptable creature. However, people in a concentrated area that become panicked react on instinct and not intelligence.

Panic spreads like a wildfire and when a mass of people panic they will spook like cattle, all of them attempting to flee at once. Modern cities were made to house the populace; they were not designed to accommodate a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands at once. Panic quickly turns to anger and anger to violence. This can be easily seen by looking at any type of evacuation in recent history.

With the threat of dwindling supplies and fuel, looting and robbery will quickly ensue. Normally calm and levelheaded people can become savages, committing violent and unspeakable acts if they feel that you have something that they want or need and you are unwilling to give it to them. Desperate people are far more likely to become criminals, especially if there is a lack of law enforcement. You need to learn to not only avoid strangers, but even the people you may know.

The best thing that you can do for the safety of you and your family is to learn where the choke points are on your chosen evacuation route, and make sure that you are long gone before the roads come to a complete standstill. Unfortunately, in most situations you will not have the time to get everything and everyone you need together and leave before gridlock strikes. The only other option you have is to learn how to avoid all of those choke points like the plague.

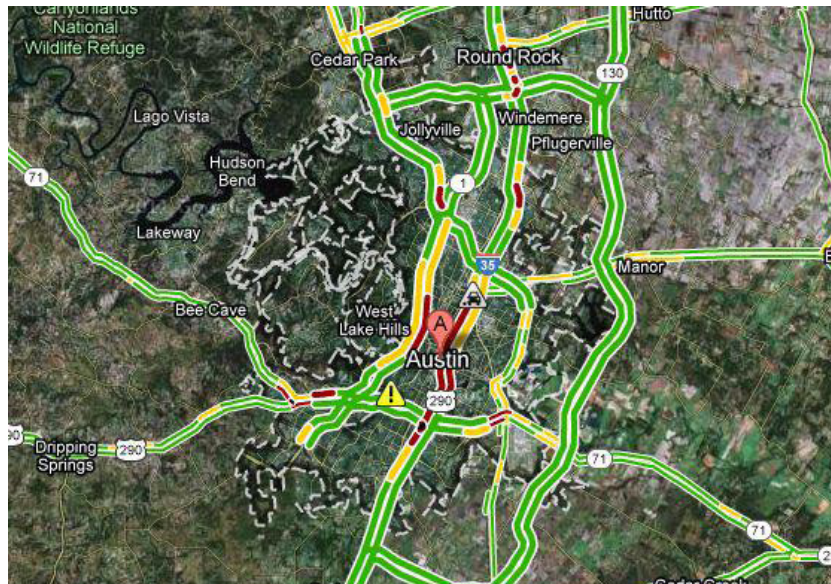
The first thing you need to get is a map of your local area. Physical maps are becoming a rarity to find, but you should still be able to find a good local map at most grocery and convenient stores. You can also choose to take a much more modern approach and use digital software such as Google Maps. Google Maps allow you to see satellite images, road only images, a hybrid of the two, and also street level views of any city in the world. These street level views can be a major help as they will give you a visual representation of what you will be seeing while you are evacuating. This will help you to pick out and plot landmarks and other points of interest that will help you to navigate.

One of the key things to remember when using a digital map is that you still need to print it out. I keep a printed and laminated version of my evacuation routes stored away in the back of my pack for just such an occasion. When things get bad, regardless of whether it is from the weather or a civil breakdown, communication is the first thing to go down. While you can find food water and shelter in the wild, you can't hunt down the internet or snare a Google search result. When the switch gets flipped, it's gone, as though it never existed. So again, anything that you do online; PRINT IT, MEMORIZE IT, KEEP IT SAFE!



The next thing you need to identify are the major “choke points” that occur along your main travel routes. A choke point is a place where congestion from traffic/people might get so bad it will slow you down considerably or stop you completely from getting to your destination. Ask yourself, “Where is rush hour traffic the worst in my town?” and highlight those sections of road. Better yet, turn to your old friend Google again. You can search for “live traffic _____ (insert your city) “. This will bring up a live and constantly updating color coded image of the current traffic conditions in your city. Track this at different hours to learn the normal traffic patterns throughout the day.

Austin, TX Traffic Friday 4:15 pm



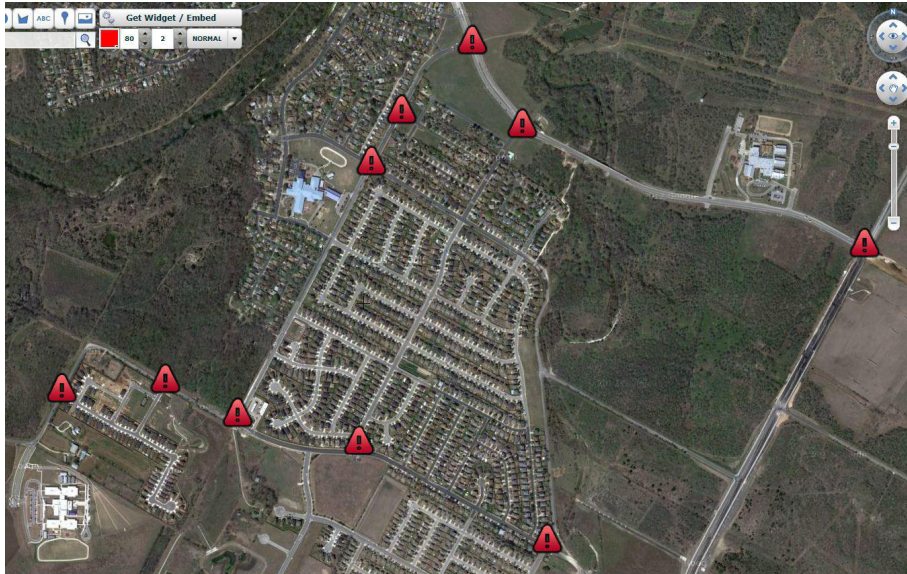
If you live in the United States, you should also be sure to check the Department of Transportation's website. This will keep you aware of any current and ongoing construction that could slow you down.

Be sure to mark these spots with a pencil instead of a pen. This will allow you to be able to erase them when the construction is finished. Other choke points include bridges, tunnels, canyons and other spots that could be closed or that would quickly come to a screeching halt during an emergency. Be sure to highlight them on your map. A good rule of thumb for any type of evacuation or escape plan is that you should know at minimum all streets, alleys, and any other alternate routes within a two mile radius of your home:



Two miles might seem like a lot and to be honest, it is. However, you might be amazed at the amount of ground you can cover in just a few small car rides or short walks. Notice that I said walks and rides. Even though we are in a digital age and you have the ability to view your world from a satellite with Google Maps, seeing a bird's eye view of the world does not compare in any way to actually walking and driving your chosen routes.

Doing so will allow you to see firsthand just how tricky it may be to navigate and also gives you the ability to make a mental checklist of alternate routes that you wouldn't normally think to take, such as cutting across a field or going down an alley.



In the image above I have mapped out a few choke points in my own neighborhood. Let's revisit the term choke point; the dictionary defines a choke point as a place of greatest congestion and often the most hazardous. Choke points are also known as bottlenecks. When you are trying to decipher where the bottlenecks or choke points are in your neighborhood and along your evacuation route, you need to think of the roads as a stream.

All of the brooks (neighborhood streets) flow into the tributaries (main streets), which then flow into the rivers (Freeways and Interstates). At each connection point between the smaller flow and the larger, faster moving flow is a chance for a bottleneck. These choke points can be caused by too much debris (other cars or actual debris on the road). In any neighborhood with a school zone, you will notice that in the summer months you can easily cruise through these areas with little to no traffic. However, during the months when school is in session, if you do not time your departure correctly, the streets become nearly impassible from the swell of vehicles and school buses lurching along at a slower speed and having to make more frequent stops.

If you take a look at the map above, I have plotted markers on some of the intersections of the “streams.” You will notice that there are quite a few of them in my neighborhood. These are all locations that I have seen as a potential threat for a bottle neck, as there are multiple narrow streets that flow out into the slightly larger streets, and they only have a minimal amount of connections to the main roads that would lead me to the highway.

I have also been able to plot the times that are most likely to become clogged. With the above plotted information, I have been able to create a map that would take me away from the normal “flow of traffic” during a crisis.

In a mandatory evacuation, my personal choice would be dictated by the disaster at hand. But my first plan, regardless of the situation, is going to be for me to find the most direct route out that takes the least traveled roads. While most people are going to head straight to the main roads and try to get on the highways (that will most likely already be at a standstill when they get there), I will head the opposite direction and take several smaller roads that will lead me to a less traveled highway.

As these back roads will have far fewer houses and therefore far less traffic to contend with, I should have no trouble getting to my desired area based on my plan. However, with that being said, you never can tell what will happen to a road in a crisis.

This is where knowing every road within a 2 mile radius comes in extremely handy. Having that knowledge affords you a plethora of contingency plans to choose from. The knowledge and ability to choose a different path on the fly without having to backtrack or run the risk of becoming lost will afford you the peace of mind and precious minutes to sail out of a disaster long before the masses catch up to you.

In any critical situation, traffic won't be the only hazard that you need to worry about. You'll also want to avoid any group of people outside of your personal community during and immediately after a crisis, as they may still be panicked and irrational.

In a disaster, those who aren't prepared tend to flock to areas in which they believe food and water will be freely available. Even if there is initially a surplus of supplies, it will run out. This will cause a second wave of panic and some of these people may again turn violent and start looting or robbing one another. This sort of thing happened during Hurricane Katrina, when government-designated shelters ran out of provisions, even in churches.

Find these places on your map and avoid them like the plague:

- Churches
- Hospitals
- Schools
- Stadiums

One of the easiest ways to locate these places and steer clear of them is to again use Google Maps. Once you have selected your area, type in of the keywords above one at a time and it will locate them for you automatically. Now you will need to mark each of these locations with an easily recognizable symbol, such as an X.

Lastly, you'll want to find out about areas with a high criminal activity in your city. Keep track of the local news and be sure to visit sites like CrimeReports.com or SpotCrime.com to find crime hot spots in your area. Just type in your home address and zoom out enough to where you can also see your place of work. Set the period to 30 days, then click on "Crime Types" and uncheck everything but the violent crimes/robberies. Note that the light blue boxes that have two smaller boxes inside. These indicate there have been multiple incidents in these locations. If they are dangerous spots now, just imagine how much worse they will be in a disaster, so be sure to circle them and give them a wide berth from your evacuation route.

If you follow the above directions, you should now have an extremely detailed and personal map of your area with heavy traffic and choke points noted, large gathering places marked with an X, and places with large amounts of crime circled. Adding all of these items together will allow you to plan, alter and perfect your emergency evacuation route.

The next thing you need to do is either plan your escape route or alter it based on the criteria you have added to your map. When TSHF, odds are you will not be at home, and the average American commutes almost 30 minutes to work. It would be a good idea to use the same criteria above to create and plan an alternate route from your workplace to your home that avoids all of these. You should also create a plan if getting back to your home is not an option and you need to get directly from your workplace to your bug out location.

There will more than likely be several possible routes, so go for a drive and try each of them. Whichever ones have the best roads and the widest and most easily accessible streets are probably the ones you should plan on using. Regardless of which one you plan to use, you will

still want to know all of the possible routes to avoid becoming stuck in a dead end, or utterly lost and losing valuable time during the small window that you have to get out before panic strikes. Use a red pen to draw this route on your map and make color copies, one for every car and a few more to keep at home in your go bags. Having a plan made out ahead of time will afford you the precious moments you need to get out ahead of the crowd. Keep your escape route free and looking like...

this

and not

this.



Good luck & Safe travels,

Joe

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Published by:

Absolute Rights, LLC

4330 Gaines Ranch Loop, Suite 120

Austin, TX 78735

Website: <http://www.AbsoluteRights.com>

E-Mail: support@absoluterights.com