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In Rural America, the Postal Service Is Already Collapsing

Cutbacks have created a labor shortage at smaller stations, and mail carriers are struggling to do their jobs.

By [Jake Bittle](#)

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A demonstrator protests the dismantling of the United States Postal Service on March 24, 2013, in Southfield, Michigan. (AP Photo / Bryan Mitchell, Detroit News)

As a late-season snow began to fall, Jessica, a mail carrier for the United States Postal Service, sped down a country road in upstate New York toward the next mailbox along her route. Her left hand steadied the wheel of her nearly 10-

year-old Jeep Compass as she slowed in front of the mailbox. With her right, she grabbed a few magazines and slid them into the box. Accelerating again, she checked the bank of the road to make sure it wasn't too rough or muddy: She's gotten stuck in ditches and suffered flat tires before, and there's no cell-phone service on these roads.

I watched from the back as Jessica steered her car down hilly, unpaved roads, keeping her pace even as hail began to fly through the car's open windows. She's one of four mail carriers for a small town a few miles from the Canadian border. The town, and the ones around it, have seen better days: The mills closed decades ago, and the county's sole remaining factory has threatened multiple times to outsource jobs. Most of the retail in the area is gone too; at the closest mall, about a half an hour away, there are fewer than a dozen stores still open, and the next closest shopping center is a two-hour drive.

This "retail apocalypse," brought about by private equity and the rise of e-commerce, has in turn made Amazon even more essential for the people in Jessica's area; for those who work long hours, have to watch their kids, or can't spend a fortune on gas, driving two hours to buy a television or new clothes isn't an option. They have no choice but to shop on the Internet, which means that the back of Jessica's vehicle is filled with more packages than ever before. The packages would be hard enough on their own, since Jessica often has to get out and trudge through the snow to deliver them, but they're not the worst of her worries: For upwards of a year, half the positions at Jessica's postal station were vacant.



“This is the first time in years we’ve had a fully staffed office,” Jessica says. “I had to do double the work, which got to be exhausting, and *very* stressful.”

Jessica, who asked that her full name and station not be printed because she’s not authorized to speak to the press, is a rural mail carrier, one of more than 100,000 postal employees responsible for bringing mail to the most remote American households. She’s worked with the USPS for five years, but is technically still a “rural carrier associate” (RCA), a part-time employee who substitutes for the full-time carriers in her station.

She and other rural carriers deliver letters and packages in areas where private companies like FedEx and UPS can’t make a profit, and in small towns where brick-and-mortar stores have been vanishing. This means that Amazon, which ships an estimated 40 percent of its packages through the USPS, relies on the agency even more in rural areas, where no one else will fulfill its orders.

It’s in towns like Jessica’s that the Postal Service is most indispensable as a public institution, but rural areas are also where the agency’s recent cutbacks have been the most

debilitating. As the USPS has phased in workforce cuts over the past decade, it has created what amounts to a labor shortage at the country's smaller stations. Across rural America, routes are vacant, offices are understaffed, and turnover rates are high.

"Before the most recent RCA on the [station's] other route, we went through three or four in a year," Jessica said.

"They'd train the new ones when they came in, and they'd be gone in a few weeks. Some of them just weren't ready for how intense the job was."

Nearly a dozen rural carriers who spoke for this article described the consequences of this labor shortage. Their routes have gotten longer and more packages have filled the backs of their cars, often keeping them out past dark on unlit roads. They've all been called on days off and ordered to work unfamiliar routes in far-off towns. They've worked double-length days for no extra pay. Taken together, their experiences represent a grave threat to one of the country's most essential public institutions.

"A lot of people have started to depend on us," Jessica told me as she left an Amish farm and drove down another dirt road. "They don't just get bills from us—it's farm supplies, food, presents, everything. And a lot of that stuff you can't get around here anymore."

The difference between rural and city mail carriers is about more than where they drive. Ever since rural delivery was introduced in the 1890s for farm families, rural carriers have done very different work than their city counterparts. For one thing, most of them drive their own cars, since the iconic Grumman mail trucks can't handle

many country roads. They are represented by a separate union, the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, which lacks the funding and thus the leverage of its city equivalent, the National Association of Letter Carriers. (The NRLCA did not respond to multiple interview requests.)

Rural carriers are also compensated according to an idiosyncratic “evaluated pay” system. Instead of getting paid for every hour they work, rural carriers receive a flat rate based on how long their route *should* take to complete—no matter how heavy or light the mail is on a given day.

And though rural carriers have to walk less than city carriers, rural delivery can be dangerous: Many rural roads are hilly and unpaved, and some require carriers to drive over unmaintained bridges or along steep slopes and cliffs. In the winter, snow and ice make some routes almost impossible to complete without risking serious injury, even death.

One carrier, Rosie, who delivers in eastern Washington, described an incident in which a muddy riverbank collapsed while she was driving alongside it, causing her truck to slide down an embankment and crash into a tree. The collision broke her back and several other bones.

“I just laid on the horn until a couple that happened to be on a walk came to my rescue,” she said. “It was maybe half an hour until anyone heard me.” She’s not alone, either: RuralInfo, a site for rural carriers, has an “In Memoriam” page that commemorates rural carriers who have lost their lives on the job. The site has recorded at least five of those incidents in the past year alone. (The USPS declined to say whether workplace injuries have increased on rural routes.)

Rural carriers who spoke for this article said that, until recently, rural delivery was a difficult but ultimately rewarding job. They were doing something essential for their communities and making a decent wage while doing it, with good benefits and health insurance. They cultivated years-long friendships with their customers, too.

“Saying ‘hello’ to the mail person is sometimes a customer’s only contact with the world on a given day,” said Tim, a retired carrier who also delivered in eastern Washington. “I’ve got customers that I knew for years who’d come out and say hello every single day, ask about my family, tell me about theirs.”

For the people who live along rural routes, carriers also serve as mobile post offices—they sell stamps and provide other postal services out of their vehicles. And since they’re often the only people who travel certain roads and visit certain remote houses, they often serve as de facto first responders.

But once the package volume started to ramp up in 2010, the things that made rural delivery unique started to make it almost unbearable. Carriers who used to see a dozen packages per day now see as many as a hundred. They have to shoehorn these parcel loads, which are hard enough to fit in a Grumman mail truck, into private vehicles.

The fact that packages have to be left on doorsteps, not just in mailboxes, means carriers often spend up to an extra hour per day slogging through snow or mud with packages in hand. Sometimes, doorstep delivery means contending with angry dogs unaccustomed to seeing strangers on their turf.

The evaluated-pay system, too, was not designed for such heavy package volume. Especially around the holidays, carriers have found that each day's mail load exceeds the estimated time it takes to complete the route, which means they work longer hours for no additional money. The pay system currently estimates that it takes about 30 seconds per parcel, which seems to some carriers almost comically low when they're carrying a 50-pound bag of dog food or a cage of baby chickens to a farmhouse doorstep.

"I walk in and the gurneys are completely overfilled," said Katie, a rural carrier who delivers in central Ohio, "or there are multiple box holders stacked by our case, and we're expected to get all that out and delivered in one day." Katie said she used to be able to get all her mail to the truck in one cart, but it now takes three: "The conditions have changed drastically."

The rise of Amazon has placed an increased strain on postal workers across the country. But rural carriers, even as they've coped with new physical demands, have also wrestled with a separate crisis: There are simply no longer enough people to carry the mail.

In response to both the recession and an onerous 2006 law that required the agency to pre-fund decades of retiree benefits, USPS management has adopted a conservative financial strategy. They've shied from investing in infrastructure, pursued a number of privatization deals, and sought to end Saturday delivery.

But the biggest cuts by far have been to the workforce, despite fierce opposition from all three postal-workers' unions. The number of career USPS employees decreased

from around 750,000 to around 500,000 over the past 20 years. These cuts have led to increases in overtime hours as well as turnover in non-career positions.

Rural carriers have seen even further cutbacks, mostly owing to the relative weakness of their union. Management successfully slashed the starting pay for part-time rural carriers from around \$21 per hour to around \$15 per hour in a contract that took effect in 2010. (In the 2015 contract, the salaries were pushed up to around \$17 per hour.)

The 2015 contract also saw the creation of the Assistant Rural Carrier (ARC), a part-time position with even fewer benefits than the RCAs receive. ARCs only work weekends and holidays, which means applicants often already have another job. Many ARCs are so overwhelmed and inadequately trained that it often falls to subs and career carriers to help them finish Amazon deliveries on Sundays.

As a result of these cuts, many stations are chronically understaffed. Jessica, for instance, was until recently the only RCA substitute carrier at her station, which has three routes. On her carrier's day off, she had to work not only her assigned route but also the other routes that didn't have substitutes. This frequently led to 12-hour days—and, on top of that, other offices in the area were constantly calling and asking her to fill in.

A New Hampshire-based carrier, who asked to be identified as Heather for fear of reprisal from management, said she currently holds down a vacant route as well as a half-length route. Last year, after she'd been back from a major surgery for a few weeks, she finally got a day off. But, she said, "I made the mistake of answering my phone, and it was my

boss, and she said they needed someone to an office I'd never been to. This was at two in the afternoon, the day after an ice storm, and I'd have to go to another station, pick up a vehicle, and then go deliver a route I'd never done.... They're desperate—they'll have people come in from more than an hour and a half away.”

At a rural station, when one carrier gets injured or takes unpaid family leave, it means the station loses one-quarter or even one-third of its staff. Other nearby offices are usually spread too thin for regional management to replace the temporarily absent carriers; in the meantime, subs have to do twice the work.

A career-carrier job offers some of the best and most stable work available in many rural areas, and so most career carriers stay put until they retire. But for RCAs and ARCs, who make up about half of all rural carriers, it's a different story: Turnover in non-career positions at many stations is higher than ever. Most carriers who spoke for this article said they'd seen three or four subs join and quit their stations within a year. Some simply aren't cut out for the growing physical demands of the job, but others tire quickly of getting summoned to unfamiliar routes and called in on their days off, or of a job with low pay and limited upward mobility.

A 2016 report by the USPS inspector general found that turnover among RCAs was about 36 percent that year. This was lower than the 60 percent turnover rate among non-career city carriers, but the statistics mask the relative impact turnover rates have at different stations. A sub's departure is much less significant at a large station than a

smaller station, and the carriers I spoke with said the turnover was much lower until the cutbacks hit and the Amazon packages started to flow. “They basically throw new RCAs in the middle of it,” said Heather. “You have to be willing to do what is now a very grueling job, a lot of physical labor, for low pay and with almost no days off.”

Every full-time carrier is entitled to a substitute on their route, and when an RCA quits, their replacement is supposed to be hired within a few months. But substitute positions frequently stay open much longer, leaving the rest of the office to make up the difference. If a position stays open for too long, carriers can send a “120-day letter” to management; if regional higher-ups can’t find a replacement after 120 days elapse, they’re required to create a new “flexible” part-time position to spread out the work. (A spokesperson for the Postal Service declined to say how many 120-day letters were filed in 2017.)

What happens more often, though, is that the remaining carriers work extra hours to make sure all the mail for the day gets delivered. This usually entails delivering after dark, especially around the holiday season: Nearly every carrier I spoke with said they’d stayed out delivering packages until 9 or 10 PM at least once. In the winter, when roads are unplowed or slicked with black ice, this significantly increases the risk of on-the-job collisions and injuries.

In response to questions about after-dark delivery, a spokesperson for the USPS commented that “all employees understand it is their responsibility to work safely and to report any unsafe conditions to their supervisors.”

It's difficult to estimate just how much rural carriers work overtime, or how overtime trends have changed, but one inspector-general report found that in North Dakota, rural-carrier overtime increased by 241 percent between 2011 and 2014.

Rural carriers will only see their working conditions improve if the Postal Service's Board of Governors reverses the cuts it has phased in over the past decade and if management takes steps to ensure that small stations are adequately staffed and managed. But this reinvestment is unlikely without serious changes to the Postal Service's financial situation.

The agency's revenues have stayed level over the past decade, but recently the decline in first-class and marketing mail has started to outpace the increase in packages. Plus, the Postal Service is still burdened by a bizarre requirement that it pre-fund decades of retiree health benefits, which has put it definitively in the red. Congress could pass legislation at any time that would ease the pre-funding obligations and allow the agency to pursue revenue-generating operations like postal banking—indeed, Democratic Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York unveiled one such proposal on April 25. But such bills are unlikely to go anywhere as long as both chambers remain under Republican control.

Numerous observers—including the president—have speculated that the Postal Service could raise revenues by charging Amazon more for parcel delivery. The agency's secretive Negotiated Service Agreement with the tech giant is set to expire this October, and reworking its terms could be a boon for the Postal Service: The agreement, for

instance, does not seem to take into account the weight of each package, meaning a flat-pack sofa is just as expensive to ship as the book *Fire and Fury*. And because the USPS has an unparalleled delivery network, especially in rural areas, it's unlikely that Amazon could take its business elsewhere if the Postal Service raised rates.

Separately from the agreement with Amazon, President Trump on April 12 issued an executive order calling for a new task force to evaluate the Postal Service's finances. This task force could in theory demand that the USPS charge Amazon more, but as David Dayen wrote recently in *The American Prospect*, Trump's order will more likely serve as "the formal unveiling of a long-wished right-wing project to destroy the post office and have private industry take over its infrastructure." Republican politicians have attempted to gut the Postal Service in the past, and the fact that Trump's task force will be stewarded by the likes of investment banker turned Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Tea Party darling and director of the Office of Management and Budget Mick Mulvaney does not bode well.

The crisis among rural mail carriers shows all the more clearly why postal reform is needed: In many small towns, the Postal Service isn't headed for collapse, it's already collapsing. Carriers are working longer hours, and putting themselves in danger, to make up for management's anti-worker initiatives. At the same time, the rural populations they serve are growing more reliant on the agency to connect them to the rest of the world.

“People are frustrated,” Heather said. “Management is so focused on saving a dime here and there that they fail to see the whole picture, which is that their carriers, who are some of the toughest people I’ve ever met, are struggling *a lot*.”

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