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## The reason you're stuck in traffic: There isn't one

**BYLINE:** Kelly Daniel**DATE:** March 26, 2001**PUBLICATION:** Austin American-Statesman**SECTION:** Metro/State**PAGE:** B1

It was a quarter after 9 a.m., and South Lamar Boulevard traffic was as snarled as spaghetti hurled to the floor.

This was not normal. South Lamar traffic usually hits the 40 mph speed limit with ease that time of morning. A quick shortcut past South First Street -- yep, clogged -- to South Congress Avenue found even more jams. The clock edged toward 9:30 a.m. Traffic on those primary routes into downtown usually flows fine by then.

Life in North Austin was surely the same: Major streets that normally shake off rush hour's sluggishness around 9 a.m. suddenly stop. Ask someone later what happened on that street, and you'll hear that nothing was amiss.

No wrecks. No police cars. No construction crews. A puzzle that perplexes.

We knew what was up: The spillover effect. Something worse than usual happened on Interstate 35, or perhaps MoPac Boulevard (Loop 1). Drivers escaped to alternate routes. Given the dearth of east-west thoroughfares in Texas' fourth-largest city, that meant major north-south streets were stuffed much later into the morning. Backlogs hither and yon. Each one begets another, until all the people who try to travel at the edge of rush hour find themselves abruptly yanked into its reach.

That's the spillover effect. (Eggheads call it nonrecurrent congestion.) It is a fascinating phenomenon of traffic because it is predictably unpredictable and springs upon a city without much warning, without much cure.

Every slowdown on any street sends people fleeing to an exit, creating traffic threads that weave the well-worn plaid of the daily drive. That's recurrent congestion.

This is different. "It's not like your daily congestion pattern or daily commuting pattern," said Hani Mahmassani, professor of civil engineering, management science and information systems at the University of Texas.

Mahmassani, whom the Washington Post once dubbed the leading traffic flow expert in the United States, defines the spillover effect as a sudden reduction in traffic capacity or a sudden spike in demand. (A stadium empties, a lane closes, and jams form blocks away.)

Traffic planners already fretting about normal congestion also focus on spillovers. Researchers try to corral the randomness through networks of intersection cameras, message boards, changeable signs and other so-



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called intelligent transportation management systems. The City of Austin is working on such a system.

Otherwise, everyone's blindly trying to abscond when spillover effects strike.

"When you don't have information, you are sort of taking your chances, going off your own experiences," Mahmassani said. "A lot of times, there is not much you can do."

You can take some comfort in the thought that spillover effects aren't daily events in Central Texas, though they snag cities like Los Angeles just about every day. But, "We are certainly approaching that," Mahmassani said.

So it's not quite clockwork around here yet. But at least you'll know why you're running late next time.

Getting There appears Mondays. For questions, tips or story ideas, contact Getting There at (512) 912-5977 or [commuters@statesman.com](mailto:commuters@statesman.com).

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