



EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TRANSIT RIDERSHIP AND ACCESSIBILITY REPORT SUMMARY

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a wave of stay-at-home orders that started in February 2020 and drastically decreased in-person attendance at workplaces, schools, restaurants, and events. As a result, transit ridership decreased 81 percent between April 2019 and April 2020. Of the 518 transit agencies reporting, 97 percent reduced service due to decreased demand. While some agencies attempted to ease the burden on essential workers and historically disadvantaged communities, transit cuts still disproportionately impacted these groups that continued to use transit at a higher rate than other riders.

Overall ridership in September 2023 was approximately 74 percent of September 2019 ridership, resulting in fare revenue losses that transit agencies replaced with other funding sources. Without new or increased funding streams to support operations, many transit agencies faced serious near-term fiscal challenges. These challenges required severe actions to avoid a fiscal cliff, including a negative cycle of service cuts, fare increases, and ridership loss. The pandemic drastically, and potentially permanently, altered how the transit industry provided service. Because a considerable proportion of former transit riders continued to work from home, 9-to-5 commuter ridership was significantly reduced. Service and network redesigns are critical to the long-term sustainability of the transit industry, as well as advancing equity in transportation to ensure that everyone has reliable access to key destinations.

Objectives

This report discusses pre- and post-pandemic ridership trends, changing service levels, impacts on service and accessibility, the riders who were most affected, and the long-term effects on transit accessibility. This report is in response to two Congressional requests for reporting which included:

1. **COVID-19 Pandemic Impacts on Transit Accessibility**—The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) provided a report to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees on the ways COVID-19 impacted transit agencies and transit riders throughout the Nation, including historically disadvantaged communities.
2. **Transit Trends**—The Secretary of Transportation submitted a report to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees providing transit ridership levels from 2019 to present and an assessment of anticipated future trends and needs in the transit industry. The report summarized an analysis of data from FTA's National Transit Database (NTD) as well as a literature review of transportation journals, industry publications, and other sources examining COVID-19 and transit trends.

Findings and Conclusions

The pandemic drastically altered how the transit industry provided service. As a result, several transit agencies had to balance service cuts with the need to provide transit access for riders who needed it the most. Prior to the pandemic, several transit agencies focused their service on peak commuting hours into downtown and major employment hubs. Transit data collected during the pandemic indicate the most frequent and dependent transit riders travel outside peak commuting hours. In response, transit agencies adjusted their schedules and networks during the pandemic to address these travel patterns. Transit service and network redesigns were also critical to the long-term sustainability of the transit industry. These adjustments helped advance equity in transportation and ensure everyone had reliable access to critical destinations.

The transit industry still faces ongoing challenges in the post-pandemic world. While ridership is slowly recovering, several transit agencies face ongoing fiscal challenges due to decreased fare revenues and dwindling federal relief funding. Larger agencies that historically relied on fare revenue were at risk of significant funding shortfalls and reduced Federal grant funding to support general operations. Post pandemic, the industry continues to face workforce and supply chain issues that are driving cost increases for agencies.

Benefits

Considering data from ridership trends, service changes, and the long-term effects of COVID-19 on ridership and accessibility, transit agencies realigned service based on changing travel behaviors. Because of these changes, federal, state, and local governments revisited innovative approaches to transit funding and new ways of managing ridership and service within the transit industry.

FTA Report No. 0268 Project Information

This research project report was written by Office of Budget and Policy, Federal Transit Administration. For more information, contact the U.S. Department of Transportation, 1200 New Jersey Ave, SE, Washington, DC 20590.

All FTA research reports can be found at <https://www.transit.dot.gov/about/research-innovation>.

