

The Antiplanner

Dedicated to the sunset of government planning



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Transit Lost 84 Percent of Riders in April

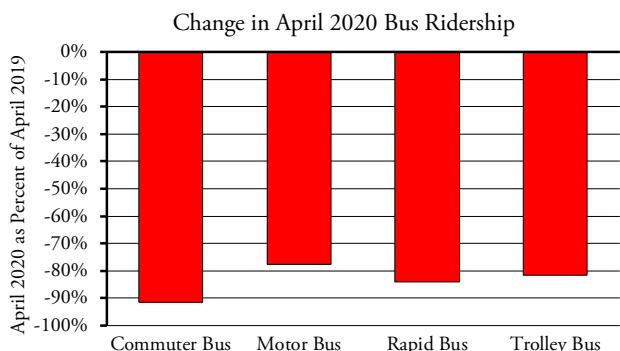
Transit ridership in April 2020 was 84 percent less than it had been in April 2019, according to [data](#) released last week by the Federal Transit Administration. The media has reported falling ridership due to the coronavirus and resulting quarantines, but these data reveal exactly how much it has fallen for each mode and urban area.

For example, ridership is down 92 percent in the New York urban area and 93 percent in Philadelphia but only 58 percent in Dallas-Ft. Worth and Las Vegas. The Bay Area Rapid Transit District saw a 94 percent decline, but ridership in Tucson fell by just 44 percent.

By comparison, [data released yesterday](#) by the Federal Highway Administration estimates that driving in April 2020 declined by less than 40 percent from April 2019. Urban arterial roads saw 41.6 percent less driving in April 2020 than 2019, which is less than half the decline in urban transit ridership. This is another indication that motor vehicles are more resilient than transit.

Ridership by Mode

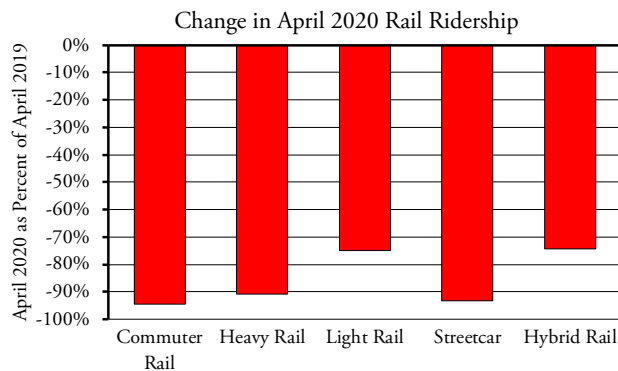
Ridership on rail lines, including commuter rail, heavy rail, light rail, streetcars, and hybrid rail, fell by 91 percent, while ridership on buses, including commuter bus, rapid bus, trolley buses, and regular buses, fell by just 78 percent. But this lumping is a little unfair as commuter bus fell by 92 percent while light rail fell by only 75 percent and hybrid rail by 74 percent.



Commuter buses lost a much larger share of their riders than conventional buses (which the FTA calls "motor buses").

Ridership Change Influenced by Income

These numbers reflect the bifurcation of the transit industry. Most people with upper-income jobs can do those jobs at home; most people with lower-income jobs don't have that flexibility. So the larger decline of certain modes reflects the fact that those modes, notably commuter bus, commuter rail, and heavy rail, mainly serve high-income commuters while other modes, particularly conventional buses (which the FTA calls "motor buses"), mainly serve low-income people.

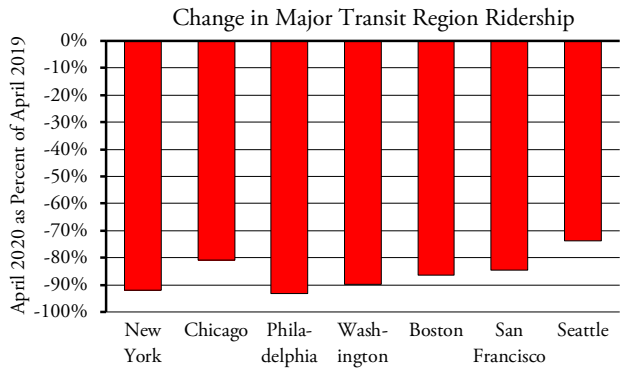


Light rail and hybrid rail lost about the same percentage of riders as motor bus, while commuter rail and heavy rail lost about the same as commuter buses.

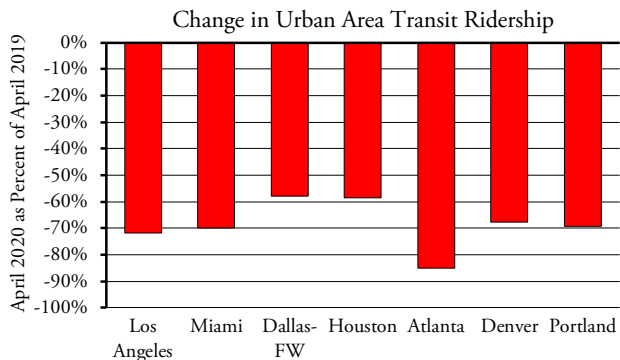
That point was made in a [recent analysis](#) of the 2017 National Household Travel Survey, which collected data from about 130,000 households. The analysis, which was published by the University of South Florida's National Center for Transit Research, found that buses were most likely to be used by low-income people, with more than 3 percent of travel by bus for people earning under \$25,000 but only a half a percent of travel for people with incomes above \$100,000. Rail transit was most likely to be used by high-income people, with more than 2 percent of travel by rail for people earning over \$200,000 but less than 1 percent of travel for people in most income brackets below \$35,000 a year.

"The ability to attract higher income individuals to public transportation indicates that the services are suffi-

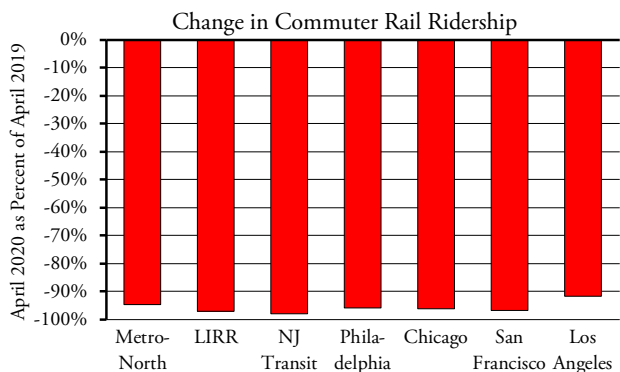
ciently attractive to appeal to individuals who are likely to have other choices for travel,” says the University of South Florida study. In other words, if we subsidize it enough, people will come, or at least 2 percent of them will. The question is: why do people earning over \$200,000 a year need such subsidies? To put it another way, are those subsidies a cost-effective way of achieving any of the goals of spending limited transportation dollars?



These regions are the only ones where transit normally carries 10 percent or more of commuters to work. All but Seattle lost more than 80 percent of their riders.



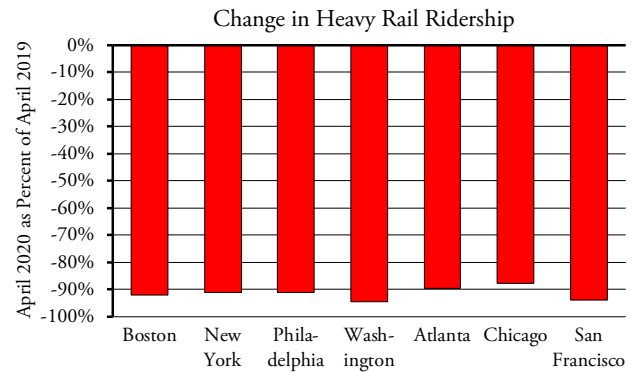
Transit carries a lot of riders in these regions but less than 10 percent of commuters to work. For various reasons, transit lost fewer riders in these regions than in the seven shown in the previous chart.



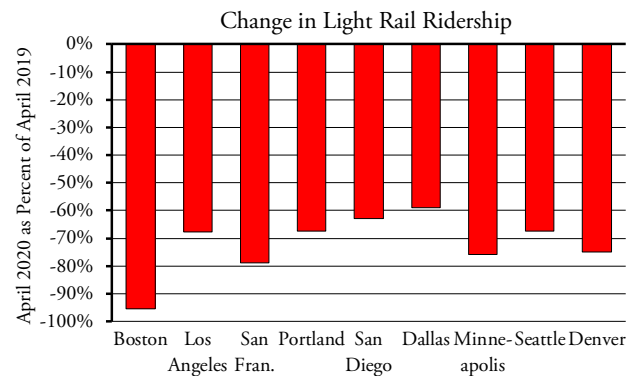
Commuter rail was hit hardest, losing more than 90 percent of riders in these seven urban areas, which have the largest commuter-rail riderships in the country.

In any case, it appears that most of the people who have stopped riding transit are high-income earners, while the few transit riders who remain are mostly low-income people. Commuter bus, for example, tends to connect

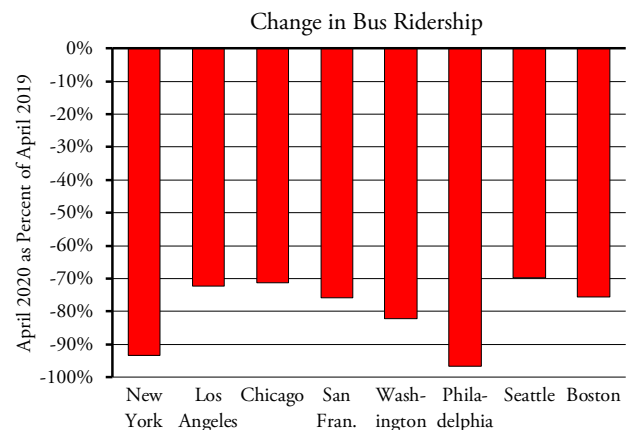
high-income suburbs with downtown areas, the same as commuter rail, so it's not surprising that they both saw more than a 90 percent decline in April ridership.



Heavy rail was also hit hard. "New York" includes only the MTA, not PATH or Staten Island. "Philadelphia" includes only SEPTA.



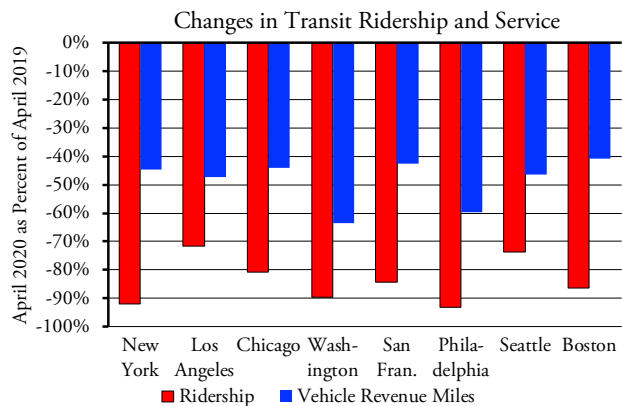
Except in Boston, light rail didn't do as badly as other rail modes. Shown are the eight urban areas with the highest light-rail ridership before the pandemic.



In most regions conventional buses lost 60 to 80 percent of riders. Shown are the urban areas with the most bus riders including all transit agencies in those urban areas. Commuter, rapid, & trolley buses not included.

The smaller decline of light rail is more surprising. It is partially because some of the major light-rail lines were not coronavirus hot spots. Dallas, for example, has the nation's largest light-rail system and it saw just a 59 percent decline in ridership because stay-at-home measures there weren't as strong as in some other cities. But why did San Francisco light rail lose only 79 percent of its riders when

BART lost 94 percent? It is possible that light rail is more heavily used by blue collar commuters than commuter rail and heavy rail.



Service didn't decline as much as ridership, but probably too much to allow social distancing during rush hours.

Early in the pandemic some people complained that transit agencies reduced their service by so much that passengers weren't able to socially distance themselves. Service did decline, but not as much as ridership declined. Nationwide, April service fell by 52 percent compared with the 84 percent decrease in ridership. Similarly, service fell by 18 percent in March compared with a 42 percent decline in ridership. Still, that may not have been enough service to allow for 6-foot distancing during some rush-hour periods.

Will Riders Return?

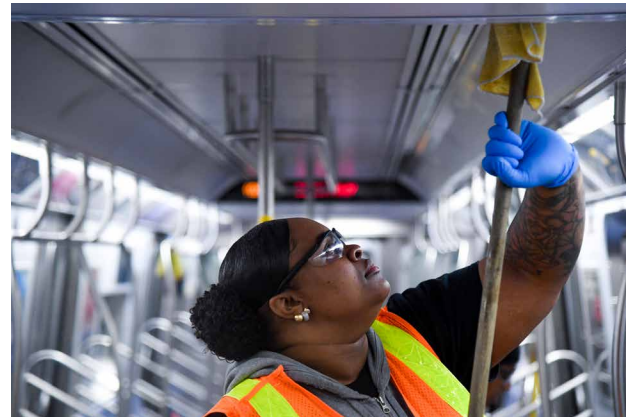
Transit agency officials are clearly nervous about whether riders will return as the economy opens up again. Agencies are making a big show of sanitizing transit vehicles. But agency employees in both [New York](#) and [Chicago](#) have complained that they aren't being given the right tools to properly disinfect buses and trains.

It doesn't help that the Centers for Disease Control have urged employers to give their employees incentives to [drive to work](#) rather than take transit. Transit agencies were [upset about this](#), but since they themselves have been telling people [not to ride transit](#) at the height of the pan-

demic they can hardly complain.

"We've never had a situation where everyone in authority told the public to avoid public transit," [observes](#) transit consultant Jarrett Walker. "We're basically training the entire public to view public transit as dangerous. That's going to take awhile to come back from."

I've posted an [enhanced data file](#) that shows the FTA's raw monthly data in cells A1 through HU2182. Annual totals are in columns HV through IN. Column IO shows the percentage change in ridership between April 2019 and April 2020. Column IP shows the percentage change in ridership between January through April 2019 and the same period in 2020.



Transit agencies claim to be disinfecting vehicles at least once a day, as if that will do any good if someone sneezes during a morning transit ride. [MTA photo](#) by Marc A. Hermann.

Rows 2184 through 2205 show totals by transit mode. Rows 2210 through 3209 show agency totals. Rows 3220 through 3420 show totals for the nation's 200 largest urban areas. I've made these enhancements on both the "UPT" (unlinked passenger trips) and "VRM" (vehicle revenue miles) pages.

[Randal O'Toole](#), the *Anti-planner*, is a transportation and land-use policy analyst and author of *Romance of the Rails: Why the Passenger Trains We Love Are Not the Transportation We Need*. [Masthead photo](#) of a Portland bus showing that social distancing will allow only ten people to ride a 40-seat bus is by [Steve Morgan](#).