



APTA Public Transportation Ridership Update

Key Takeaways

1. After falling to 20 percent of pre-pandemic levels in April 2020, ridership has recovered to **85 percent** of pre-pandemic levels in the first four months of 2025.
 2. Office occupancy levels increased slightly in the first four months of 2025, averaging 52 percent, compared to 50 percent in late 2024.
 3. Transit riders took **7.7 billion trips** on public transportation in 2024, a **7 percent increase** over 2023.
 4. National public transit ridership has increased **25 percent** since 2022.
 5. Public transportation ridership levels increased throughout 2024, while office occupancy rates remained stagnant.
 6. Ridership recovery is dependent on transit service frequency, reliability, and delivery, together with external factors such as the makeup of local economies.
-

National Ridership Picture

Return-to-office policies and a strong job market both have positive implications for public transportation ridership recovery. Office occupancy rates increased slightly in the first four months of 2025, averaging around 52 percent of pre-pandemic levels, according to Kastle Systems.¹ Regardless of slow office occupancy recovery, public transit ridership recovery has continued. Public transit ridership is **85 percent** of the same period in 2019, according to the [APTA Ridership Trends Dashboard](#) powered by Transit. Agencies continue to attract a wide range of commute and non-commute trips. Current data remains limited, but indicators in several metro regions point to public transit recovery being led by trips to and from residential and commercial areas as opposed to office/work centers. More time and data are needed to determine if this transit demand shift will remain the driving force for ridership return.

With transit ridership recovering at a much faster rate than office attendance, other factors must be considered for transit's rebound. Non-office jobs, such as work in restaurants and bars, have rebounded tremendously since March 2020. According to the National Restaurant Association, the restaurant

¹ Kastle data aggregated from several weekly data update emails. www.kastle.com.

industry was the largest job creator from January 2021 to May 2023.² Many restaurant jobs require late-night hours and are generally lower income than office jobs. Average bus rider demographics generally align with those of restaurant or other late-night employees, indicating a significant reason for bus ridership increases leading overall transit recovery.

The structure and makeup of local economies also impact the degree of ridership decline. Technology-focused economies with an existing and prominent work-from-home culture initially noticed a steeper decline in ridership than those with more service industry jobs and essential workers who power the supply chain. Systems in college towns were also severely affected, as many universities closed and sent students home. Regions of the country that were hardest hit early in the pandemic (e.g., the Northeast, Seattle, and San Francisco Bay areas) had, in general, larger ridership drops than other areas of the country that saw the worst pandemic impacts later in 2020.

Bus ridership recovery has been the consistent leader compared to other transit modes largely due to bus rider demographics. According to APTA's *Who Rides Public Transportation*, 22 percent of bus riders are under the age of 25, twice the percentage of younger rail riders. With bus riders on average earning less than rail riders and often working non-office jobs, they have been a critical driver of ridership recovery for many public transit agencies.³ Regional differences in modal ridership return have presented themselves. Generally, bus and demand response have led the way followed by heavy/light rail and commuter rail trailing. However, some regions have bucked that trend. For instance, at the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority in the Boston area, commuter rail ridership return leads heavy and light rail ridership return.

Ridership tracked closely with job growth generally, and service industry jobs more specifically. The cost of car ownership provides another insight into why people have been choosing public transit. A recent analysis conducted by APTA shows that riders can save more than \$13,000 annually by using public transit instead of driving.⁴

After a rapid decline in March and April 2020 to 19 percent of pre-pandemic levels, public transit ridership recovered quickly to approximately 37 percent of pre-pandemic ridership as of July 2020. National transit ridership remained at that approximate level until early 2021, rising to 42 percent of pre-pandemic levels by April 2021.

In April and May 2021, COVID-19 vaccines became widely available. The availability of vaccines resulted in another sustained increase in ridership, with national ridership rising from 42 percent in April to 57 percent by the end of 2021. During this time, data indicated that more people were returning to offices and starting to increase other types of outside-the-home activities.

In December, the COVID-19 surge due to the Omicron variant led to reduced travel, and it also had significant impacts on public transportation workforces and services. Many public transit agencies reported difficulty with service reliability because of the number of operators, mechanics, and other

² <https://restaurant.org/research-and-media/media/press-releases/restaurant-job-growth-continues-nationwide/>.

³ APTA, *Who Rides Public Transportation*.

⁴ <https://www.apta.com/research-technical-resources/research-reports/transit-savings-report/>

transit workers required to stay at home because of COVID. Ridership dropped to 52 percent of pre-pandemic levels in early January 2022.

As the Omicron wave subsided, public transportation ridership began to rise again and continued growing throughout 2022. As of December 2022, national ridership stood at 66 percent of 2019 levels. Ridership grew 16 percent from 2022 to 2023, ending the year at 76 percent of pre-pandemic ridership, with 7.2 billion trips taken during the year.

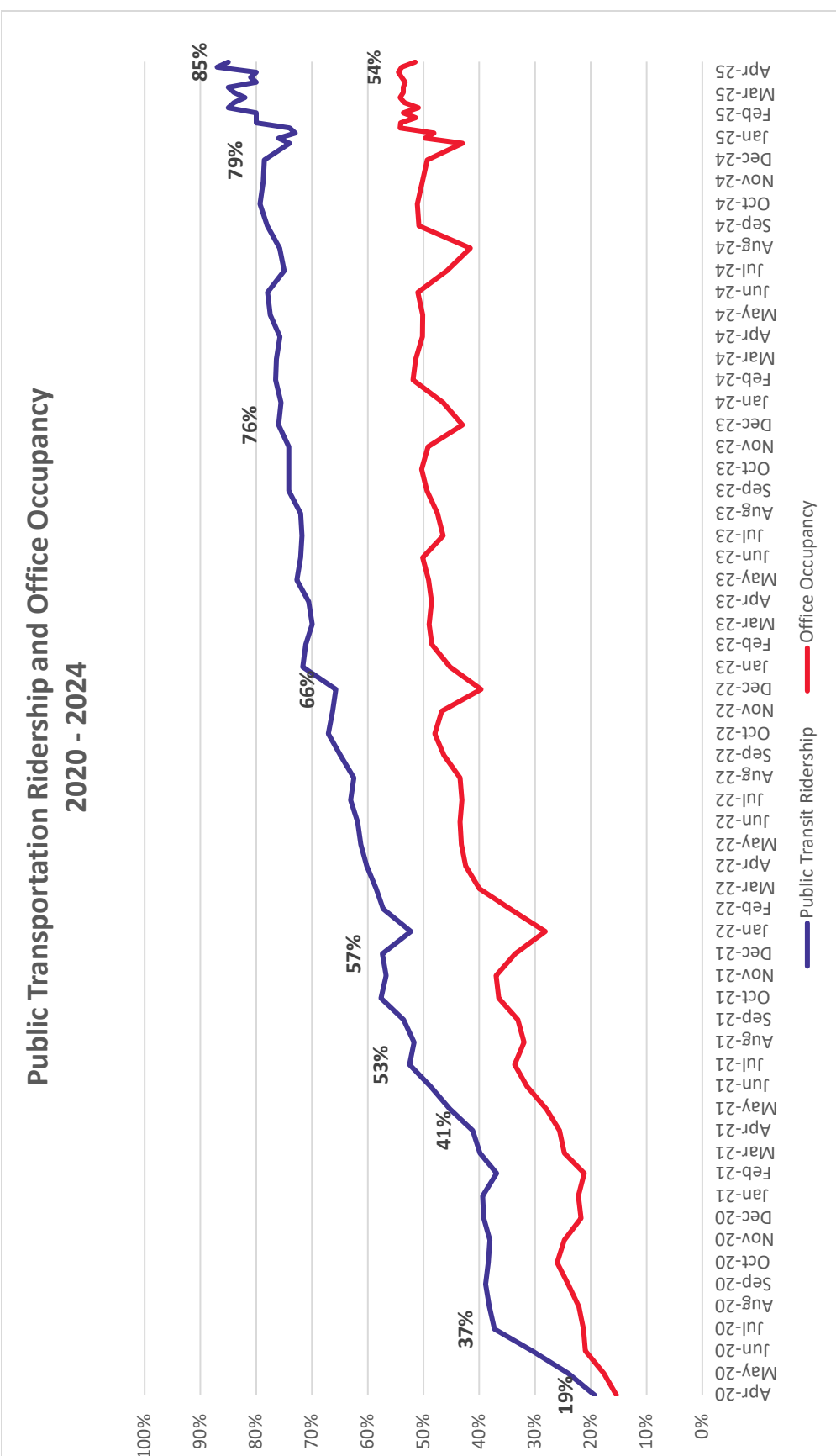
In 2024, riders took 7.7 billion trips, or 491 million more trips on public transportation than in 2023, and ridership returned to 79 percent of 2019 levels in December 2024. In 2025, APTA's Ridership Trends Dashboard finds that U.S. public transportation ridership has fluctuated between 80 and 87 percent of 2019 levels, when comparing the same week in each year. Ridership data from the first months of 2025 indicates that both New York City and Washington, DC, have increased ridership in the first quarter of 2025. Reports have indicated that congestion pricing in lower Manhattan, implemented in January 2025, is driving ridership increases in New York, while return-to-office policies and improved service are driving ridership increases in Washington.

Important Trends

APTA's Quarterly Ridership Report data indicates that ridership recovery has differed based on city size. In general, smaller cities have recovered ridership to a higher level than larger cities. The largest urban areas (population over 2 million) and medium-sized urban areas (population 500,000 to 2 million) have recovered ridership to approximately the same level when compared to 2019. In general, smaller cities tend to serve relatively fewer riders with alternatives such as teleworking. Office return data also suggests that proportionally more workers in smaller cities are working in offices than in larger cities. The data from medium-sized urban areas suggest that those areas have had particular difficulty attracting office workers and workers with more travel options back to transit. Data from APTA's Quarterly Ridership Report indicates that, in Q4 2024, the smallest areas (population under 100,000) had recovered to 88 percent of 2019 ridership levels. Smaller cities (population 100,000 to 500,000) had recovered to 82 percent of 2019 transit ridership levels. The largest and medium-sized urban areas (population over 2 million, and 500,000 to 2 million, respectively) recovered to 78 and 81 percent of 2019 levels, respectively.

National public transit ridership has seen regular increases around September and October of each year. While corroborating data is difficult to find, it is possible that these increases are due to individuals changing schedules and routines around this time of year. The end of summer and the start of the school year may present an opportunity for families to reconsider how they get around, or how many days they choose to work in the office. New students start at colleges and universities across the country in the fall, often representing a large change in routine for those students. These changes in routine have the potential to encourage more public transit use and, in turn, increase ridership.

The following chart details public transportation ridership from April 2020 to May 2025, as well as office occupancy rates in 10 cities for the same time period. Ridership data is from APTA's 2020 - 2024 Quarterly Ridership Reports and APTA's Ridership Trends Dashboard, while office occupancy data is courtesy of Kastle Systems.



Sources:

APTA Quarterly Ridership Reports, April 2020 – December 2024; [APTA Ridership Trends Dashboard January 2025 – May 2025](#).
[Kastle Back to Work Barometer](#), Kastle Systems.

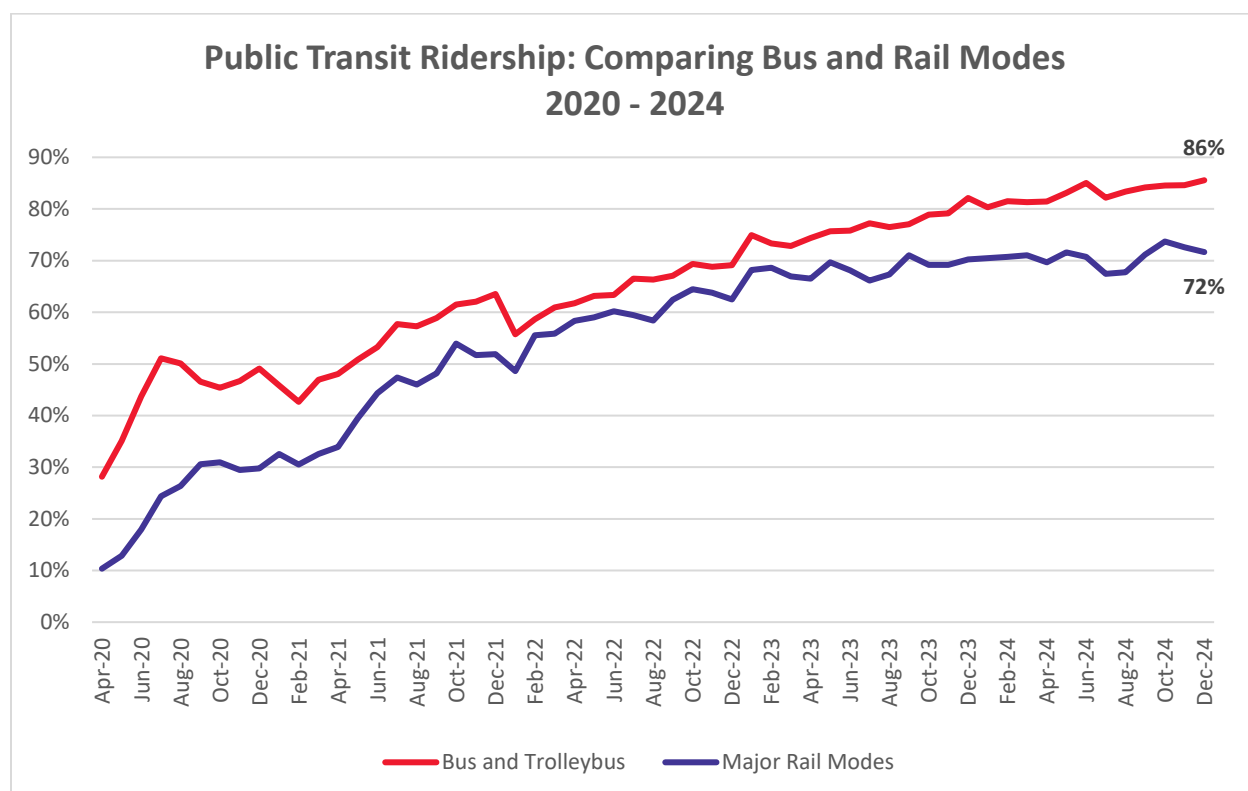
Modal Differences

Although all public transit modes saw significant decreases in ridership because of the COVID-19 pandemic, rail modes (i.e., heavy rail, light rail, streetcar, commuter rail, and hybrid rail) had comparatively larger decreases compared to bus modes. During the early part of the pandemic, rail ridership decreased to 10 percent of pre-pandemic levels in April 2020, while bus ridership decreased to 28 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

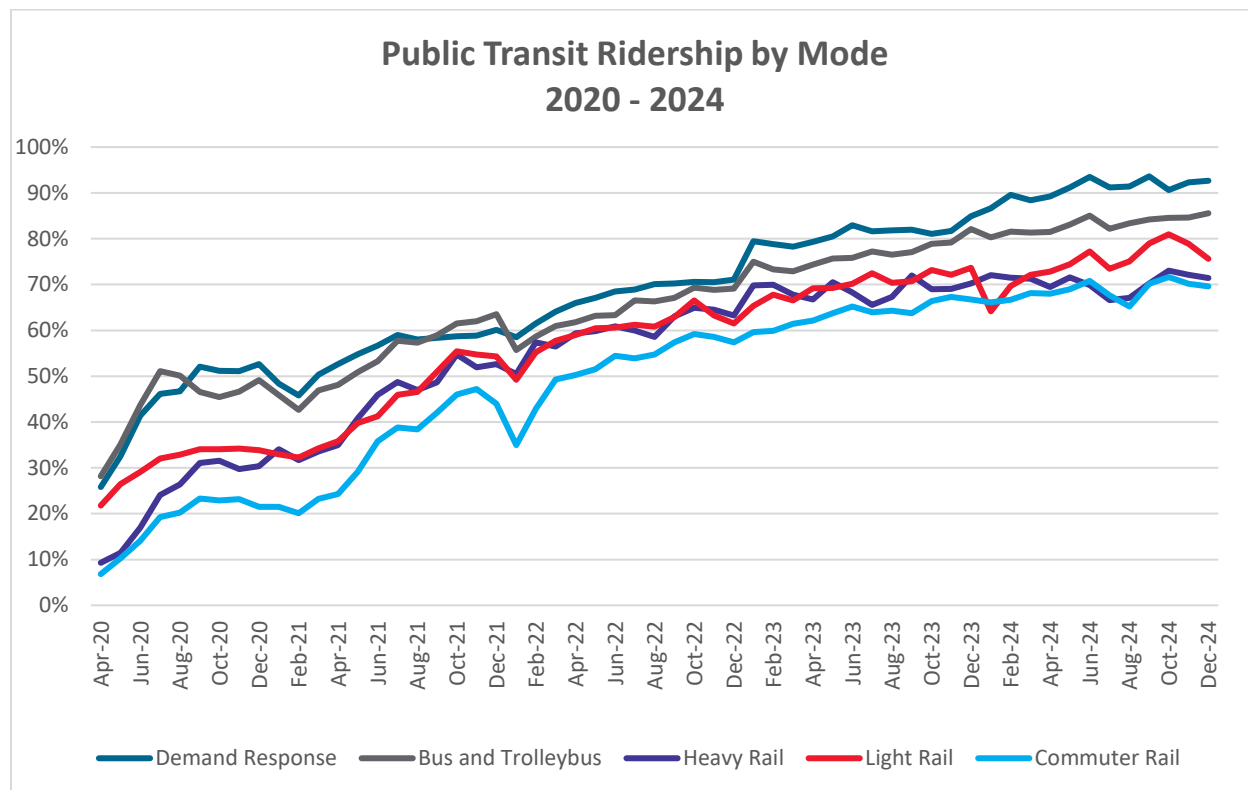
In general, bus modes have been able to retain more riders than rail modes because they generally serve more essential workers, while rail modes serve more office commuters. During and since the pandemic, rail riders have been more likely to have options to work from home.

Bus ridership has seen a relatively steady increase since February 2021. On the other hand, rail ridership more clearly shows the impact of vaccinations and other factors described in the previous section. Rail ridership shows a sustained increase from April to June 2021, and another increase in September and October 2021, coinciding with the wide availability of COVID-19 vaccines, and the post-summer return to offices and school, respectively. All modes show the impact of the Omicron wave in January 2022, although rail ridership recovered more quickly from the Omicron wave than bus ridership.

Throughout 2022, both bus and rail modes saw a steady increase in ridership compared to 2019, adding almost 13 percent across all modes. Bus ridership was at 69 percent of 2019 levels in December 2022, and rail ridership recovered to 62 percent of 2019 levels. **In 2023 and 2024, bus ridership grew by 17 percentage points to 86 percent of 2019 levels, while rail ridership grew by 10 percentage points relative to 2019, ending the year at 72 percent.**



Considering individual modes, demand response has recovered the most ridership, reaching 93 percent of pre-pandemic levels in December 2024. Bus ridership grew to 86 percent of pre-pandemic levels in the same period. Heavy and light rail are at 71 and 76 percent of 2019 ridership levels, respectively, and commuter rail is currently at 70 percent of pre-pandemic levels as of December.



Comparison to Travel on Roads and Streets

Travel on other modes, like vehicle travel on roads and streets, has only recently eclipsed pre-pandemic levels. According to the Federal Highway Administration's Traffic Volume Trends report,⁵ travel on U.S. roads and streets in 2024 was higher than 2019 levels by one-half of one percent.

What Leads to Ridership Success

APTA's *On the Horizon: Planning for Post-Pandemic Travel* report collected best practices on transit ridership successes. Agencies that were successful in retaining ridership made sure to consistently communicate with the public, keeping them abreast of changes to public transit service; conduct reinforcing social media campaigns; and monitor customer feedback. They thought proactively about service, focusing on essential workers and key customer groups. These agencies also emphasized rider and employee safety. Sanitation measures implemented by many transit agencies with more routine cleaning protected riders and provided greater feelings of safety. They worked to develop effective

⁵ https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policyinformation/travel_monitoring/tvt.cfm

cleaning protocols for vehicles and stations and worked with labor representatives to develop protocols to keep employees safe and healthy.

Rebuilding post-COVID provides a unique opportunity for reinvestment and agencies stand to increase ridership and achieve other goals. Investing in transit operations to better support hourly, late-night, and early-morning workers who rely on public transit would further service goals by providing transit choices for at-risk residents. With these investments, public transit agencies can regain lost ridership and support the larger community.

Real estate investment in central-city areas, in partnership with transit agencies, will potentially further support increased ridership. Development of affordable and market-priced housing in proximity to transit routes will serve to benefit all community residents, including transit riders. Community outreach programs for transit agencies are vital: transit agencies need feedback to know how to best serve their customers and communities. With improved community engagement, strategic identification of residents' needs can be achieved more efficiently.

How Can Public Transit Agencies Adapt to the Future

Key changes in operations and planning can help public transit agencies adapt to the future. APTA's *On the Horizon* report organizes these key changes into four overarching themes:

- Institutionalize Best Practices from the COVID-19 Period;
- Plan and Operate More Effectively;
- Leverage Opportunities to Expand Ridership; and
- Keep Abreast of Changing Trends.

For more information, please see APTA's report, [On the Horizon: Planning for Post-Pandemic Travel](#).

About the APTA Ridership Trends Dashboard with Transit app

Estimated ridership values in the APTA Ridership Trends Dashboard are modeled based on measures of Transit app usage to provide a current measure of demand for public transit. Estimated ridership values for each week are extrapolated values from the most recent quarterly actual ridership figures reported by transit agencies. These estimates represent the percent difference between actual pre-pandemic ridership and estimated ridership for a given period during the pandemic, and do not represent actual reported ridership counts from agencies.

Transit app usage is attributed to a particular transit agency if that agency's service appears as a nearby option for the user when they open the app, or if a user taps on a line operated by a particular transit agency. Surveys of Transit app users since the onset of the pandemic have shown that the app's user demographics generally match those of public transit riders overall, both compared to other common survey methods and available U.S. Census data.

Sources

APTA Ridership Report: <https://www.apta.com/research-technical-resources/transit-statistics/ridership-report/>

APTA Ridership Trends Dashboard: <https://transitapp.com/apta>

On the Horizon: Planning for Post-Pandemic Travel: <https://www.apta.com/research-technical-resources/research-reports/on-the-horizon-planning-for-post-pandemic-travel/>

The American Public Transportation Association (APTA)

The American Public Transportation Association is a nonprofit international association of more than 1,600 public- and private-sector organizations that represents a \$79 billion industry that directly employs more than 430,000 people and supports millions of private-sector jobs. APTA is the only association in North America that represents all modes of public transportation. APTA members serve the public interest by providing safe, efficient, and economical transit services and products.

Authors

Jared Bonina
Policy Analyst
Policy Development and Research
202.496.4854 | jbbonina@apta.com

Matthew Dickens
Senior Director,
Policy Development and Research
202.496.4817 | mdickens@apta.com

For General Information

Ward W. McCarragher, Vice President
Government Affairs and Advocacy
202.819.4895 | wmccarragher@apta.com

APTA Vision Statement

APTA leads public transportation in a new mobility era,
advocating to connect and build thriving communities
