



APTA Public Transportation Ridership Update

Key Takeaways

1. New variants of COVID-19, telework policies, and the related emergency stay-at-home orders have had a significant negative impact on ridership on public transportation in the United States beginning in March of 2020
2. After falling to 20 percent of pre-pandemic levels in April 2020, ridership has recovered to slightly more than 60 percent of pre-pandemic levels.
3. Success in ridership recovery has been dependent on external factors, such as the makeup of local economies, and also factors like service delivery and reliability.
4. As we saw during the pandemic, public transportation continues to provide mobility to essential workers which has helped to support ridership for the past two years.

National Ridership Picture

The COVID-19 pandemic had an immediate and significant impact on public transportation ridership. Ridership declines began in mid-March 2020, coinciding with stay-at-home emergency orders in many cities and states across the country. Ridership declined to a low point of 10 to 40 percent of pre-pandemic levels in many cities. Since then, ridership has recovered at varying rates depending on the city and transit mode.

The structure and makeup of local economies impact the degree of ridership decline. Technology-focused economies with an existing and prominent work-from-home culture have 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.

After a rapid decline in March and April 2020 to 19 percent of pre-pandemic levels, public transit ridership recovered quickly in May and June to approximately 37 percent of pre-pandemic ridership, as of July 2020. National transit ridership remained at about that level through the rest of 2020 and into 2021, rising to 42 percent of pre-pandemic levels as of 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 2021 to 53 percent in July 2021. During this time, data indicated that more people were returning to offices and starting to increase other types of outside-the-home activities as well.

Another surge in ridership growth occurred in September and October 2021. Many college transit systems reported significant gains in fall and winter 2021 as students returned to campus. More employees returned to their offices during this time, though the uptake was tempered by the surge in COVID-19 cases due to the Delta variant.

Ridership remained steady through December 2021, when it stood at 58 percent of pre-pandemic ridership. Toward the end of December 2021, 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 agencies reported difficulty with service reliability because of the number of operators, mechanics, and other transit workers required to stay at home due to COVID cases. Ridership dropped to 49 percent of pre-pandemic levels in the first weeks of January 2022.

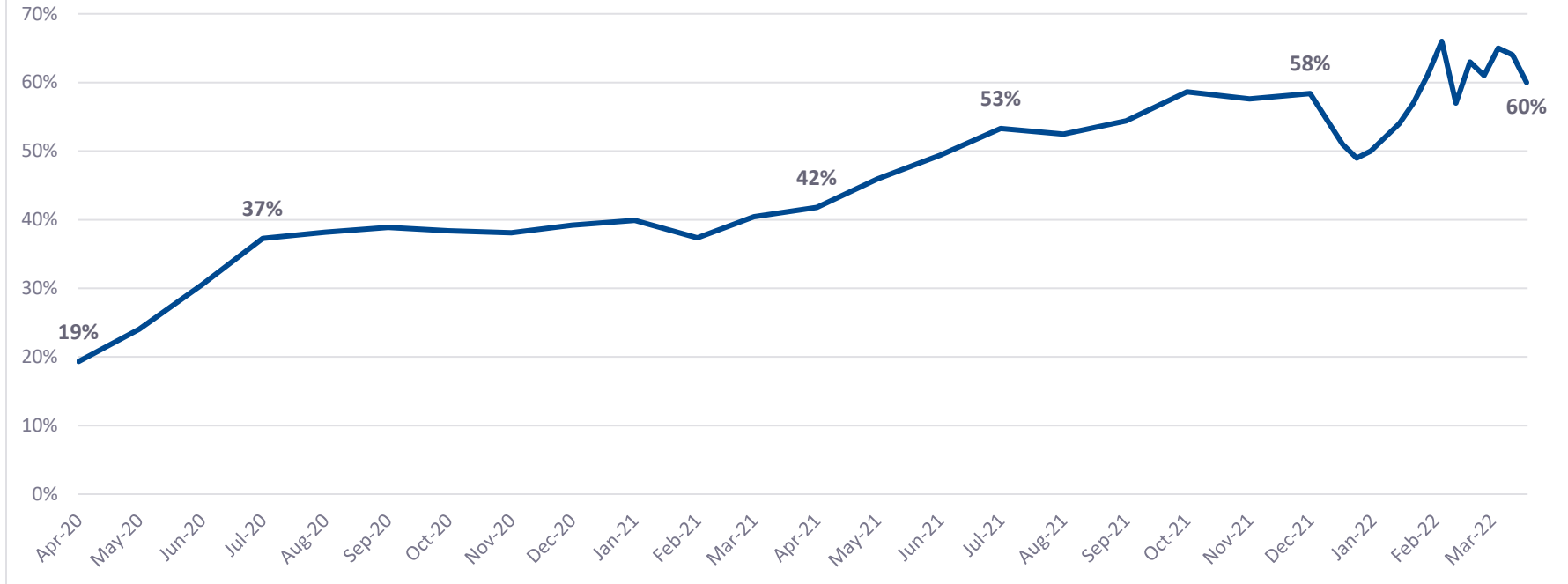
As the Omicron wave subsided, public transportation ridership has begun to rise again. From mid-February 2022 to April 2022, national public transit ridership is approximately 60 to 65 percent of pre-pandemic levels.

The chart on the next page details ridership from April 2020 to April 2022, based on APTA's 2020 and 2021 Ridership Reports and APTA's Ridership Trends Dashboard.

Public Transportation Ridership, April 2020-April 2022

Percent of Same Period in 2019

Source: APTA Ridership Report Data through December 2021, APTA Ridership Trends Dashboard January-April 2022

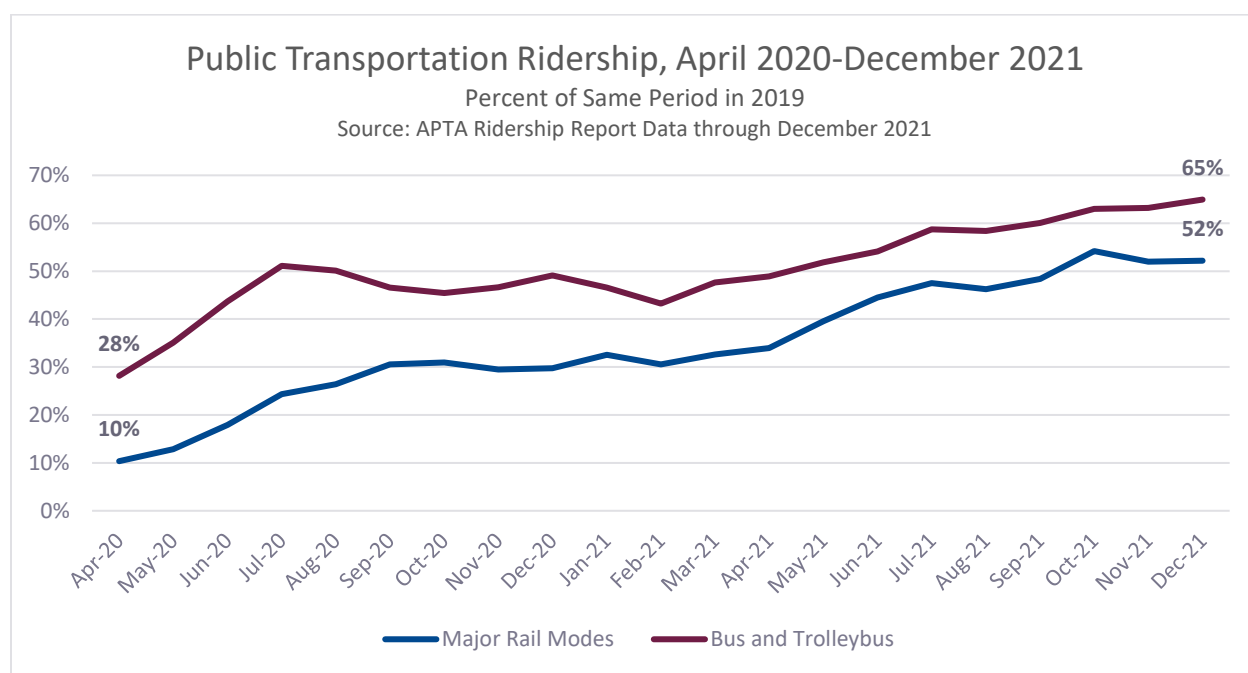


Modal Differences

Although all public transit modes saw significant decreases in ridership, 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 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, respectively.



What Leads to Ridership Success

APTA's *On the Horizon: Planning for Post-Pandemic Travel* report collected best practices from transit agencies through surveys and interviews. Agencies that were successful in retaining ridership made sure to consistently communicate with the public, keeping them abreast of changes to public transit service, reinforcing social media campaigns, and monitoring customer feedback. They thought proactively about service, focusing on essential workers and social equity, communities of color, and low-income families. These agencies also emphasized rider and employee safety. They worked to develop effective cleaning protocols for vehicles and stations, and worked with union partners to develop protocols to keep employees safe and healthy.

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 in Prioritizing Social Equity;
- 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](#).

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 (APTA) is a nonprofit international association of 1,500 public- and private-sector organizations which represent a \$80 billion industry that directly employs 448,000 people and supports millions of private-sector jobs. APTA members are engaged in the areas of bus, paratransit, light rail, commuter rail, subways, waterborne services, and intercity and high-speed passenger rail. This includes: transit systems; planning, design, construction, and finance firms; product and service providers; academic institutions; transit associations and state departments of transportation. 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

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APTA Vision Statement

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