

The Salt Lake Tribune

Here's why some Utahns say they don't ride public transportation

Cost, safety concerns and the time it takes to get from one place to another were among the commonly listed reasons

By Kaitlyn Bancroft

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused a lot of declines, but it wasn't necessarily responsible for all of them.

It's no surprise that U.S. ridership on public transportation dropped 81% in April 2020, according to the National Transit Database (158.5 million rides taken vs. 835.1 million rides taken in April 2019).

But even before COVID-19 shut down life as we knew it, people were taking fewer bus and train rides.

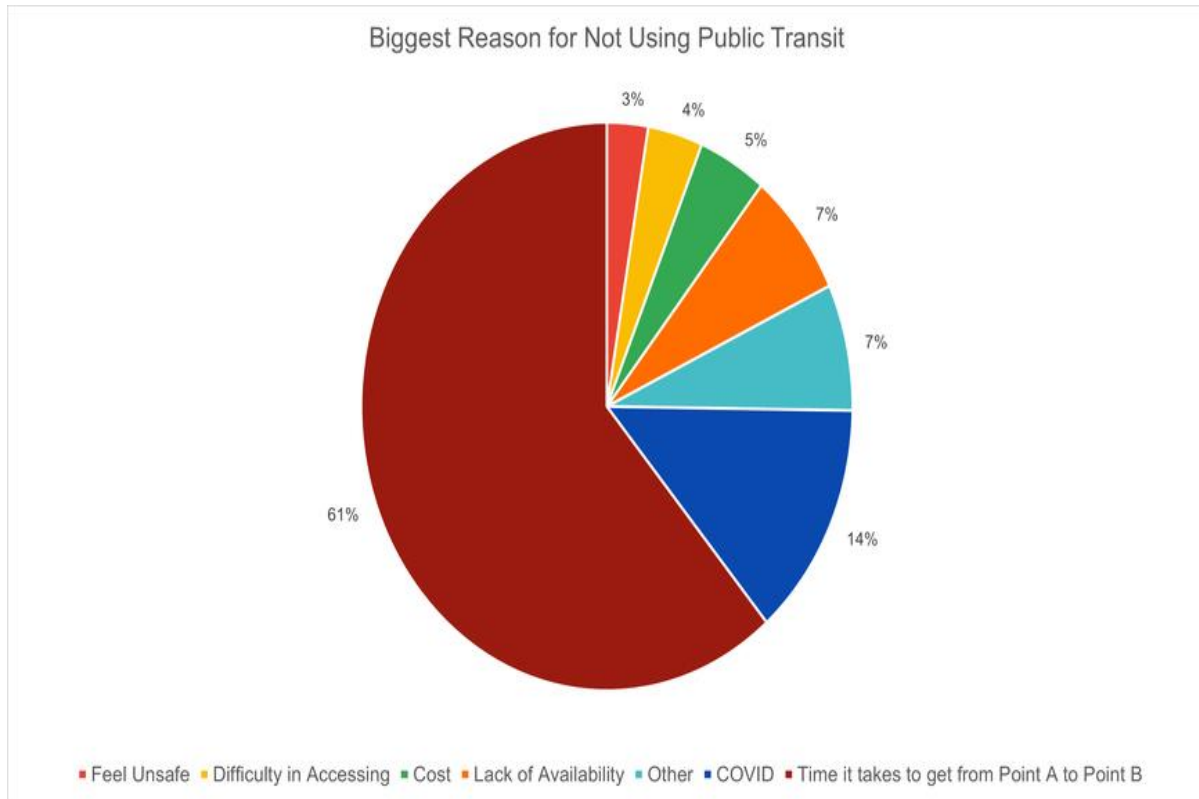
A Cato Institute report states that while public transportation took 13% of Americans to work in 1960, in 2018 it carried just 5%.

Between fiscal years 2014 to 2018, the report continues, national bus ridership dropped 12.2% and rail usage across the country declined by 2.6%.

In urban areas with populations of less than 1 million and those with a population of more than 5 million, rides on public transportation decreased by 7.2%. Areas in the middle, with a population between 1-5 million, saw the most significant drop of 12.5%.

The Cato Institute report lists a number of reasons for this decline, from expense and time issues to the simple fact that nearly everyone has a car.

The Salt Lake Tribune recently asked readers why they choose not to ride public transportation.



(Luke Peterson) Salt Lake Tribune readers recently answered a survey asking why choose to not take public transportation.

The survey received 111 responses. Respondents listed a variety of concerns, from COVID-19 (named by 15 people) to feeling unsafe (named by three).

But by far the most commonly cited problem — listed by 68 respondents — was the time it takes to get from one point to another.

Here’s what a few readers had to say.

Time

Orem resident Sandra Zeigler said for her kids to ride the three miles to their high school via public transportation, they’d have to transfer three times and walk almost a mile.

It would be faster for them to simply walk the whole three miles, she said.

“Why would people use public transit when it doesn’t get them where they need to go, and doesn’t get them there in any sort of timely manner?” Zeigler said. “Invest in the infrastructure of the system. Have it get to places people need to get to, and in a timely manner.”

Zach Cochran, who also lives in Orem, said service isn’t frequent enough and doesn’t always run near work or home.

For instance, he said it's a long walk or ride to a bus stop, and then it still takes several transfers to get anywhere.

"It's literally a choice between a 15 minute drive and a 90 minute adventure on the bus," Cochran said.

COVID-19

The next highest category was COVID-19 concerns.

Melodee Parks, who lives in Bountiful, said there's no consistency in mask wearing on public transportation.

She was a regular bus rider before COVID-19, and gave it another try this year, "but stopped because I was so uncomfortable riding in such close proximity to unmasked riders," Parks said.

Salt Lake City resident Claire Kempa echoed Parks, writing that she's felt unsafe riding public transportation since the Omicron surge and since other passengers seem unwilling to wear masks.

"I feel unsafe being around the Utah population who won't take common sense precautions to protect themselves and others," she said. "Unfortunately, I don't know what can be done to change this."

Safety

Several respondents also listed safety concerns as reasons they don't take public transportation.

Draper resident Sydnie Brewster wrote that she knows friends who have been groped and assaulted on TRAX, and that she's been verbally harassed by men almost every time she's ridden by herself in the past year.

"I always feel like I have to go with someone else. I hate that because I'm an independent person and like to do things on my own," Brewster said.

Elizabeth Sunderman in Salt Lake City also listed TRAX as the type of public transportation she feels most unsafe on.

She used to ride TRAX frequently, she said, but the last time she went, other passengers were talking about stealing bicycles.

"They were loud and rude and I worried for my safety," she wrote.

Cost

Although most survey respondents didn't mention cost among their top reasons for not taking public transportation, several wrote about their financial concerns.

Current fares are listed on the UTA website as follows for adults, with senior and student/youth prices offered at lower rates:

- Local buses, TRAX and streetcars: \$2.50 one way; \$5 for the day; \$85 for the month
- Express buses: \$5 one way
- FrontRunner: \$2.50 one-way base fare; \$5 roundtrip base fare; \$.60 for each additional stop

Bruno Gonzalez in Layton said he took the Frontrunner when he had free access to it as a student, and he rode during Free Fare February, but now he can't afford the \$170 a month it would cost him to keep riding.

UTA's monthly pass is \$170 a month for adults, according to its website, and includes FrontRunner, buses, TRAX and streetcars.

"That's more than what I spend on gas," he said.

Draper resident Melarie Wheat added that even though her five kids love riding TRAX, she almost never takes them because it costs \$5 a child, plus \$5 for herself.

Most places have free parking, she said, and even when they don't, parking typically doesn't cost her \$30.

If kids under 12 could ride public transportation free, she'd use it more often, Wheat added.