



May Transit Ridership Down 81 Percent

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The nation's transit systems carried 81 percent fewer riders in May, 2020 than in May, 2019, according to [data](#) posted yesterday by the Federal Transit Administration. This drop is almost as great as the [84 percent decline](#) reported for April.

Rail was hardest hit, with an 89 percent fall in ridership, while buses lost 74 percent of riders. For the year to date, nationwide ridership is down 41 percent, with rail losing 44 percent and bus 38 percent.

The biggest declines were in urban areas that see the most transit ridership: New York lost 90 percent of its riders, Washington 89 percent, Philadelphia 88 percent, and Boston and San Francisco-Oakland 85 percent. Falldowns were smallest in urban areas such as San Antonio (-45%) and Las Vegas (-54%) where transit plays a relatively insignificant role in the region's transportation.

One reason for these differences is that places like New York and San Francisco were most impacted by strict stay-at-home orders. But another is that regions with high transit ridership have a lot of middle-class riders who are now working at home or taking advantage of the reduced congestion by driving for trips they might otherwise have made by transit, while regions with low transit ridership serve mainly working class riders who don't have such options.

As usual, I have posted an [enhanced version](#) of the FTA's data in a 12.6-MB Excel spreadsheet. FTA's raw monthly data are in cells A1:HV2184. Columns HW through IO have annual totals from 2002 through 2020. Column IP shows May 2020 numbers as a percent of May 2019 numbers while column IQ shows year 2020 to date numbers as a percent of January through May 2019 numbers.

Rows 2185 through 2206 show totals by modes such as commuter bus and light rail. Row 2209 shows the percentage of total nationwide ridership that takes place in the New York urban area; this peaked at 44.5 percent in 2019 but is down to 41 percent in 2020.

Rows 2211 through 3210 show totals by transit agency while rows 3221 through 3422 show totals for each of the nation's 200 largest urban areas. I've made these enhancements on both the UPT (unlinked passenger trips) and VRM (vehicle-revenue miles) worksheets so users can compare changes in service levels with changes in ridership.

Update: The Federal Highway Administration released May traffic volumes today, revealing that nationwide driving is down 25 percent from May 2019. That's a significant recovery from April, when driving was down 40 percent.

The release also includes traffic volumes by state for rural (page 4), urban (page 5), and total (page 6). Urban driving, for example, is down by 41 percent in Hawaii but only 15 percent in Arkansas. As I've previously noted, the pandemic is showing that motor vehicles and highways are much more resilient than transit.

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