



# Beyond Rush Hour: COVID-19 and The Future of Public Transit

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OCTOBER 2021

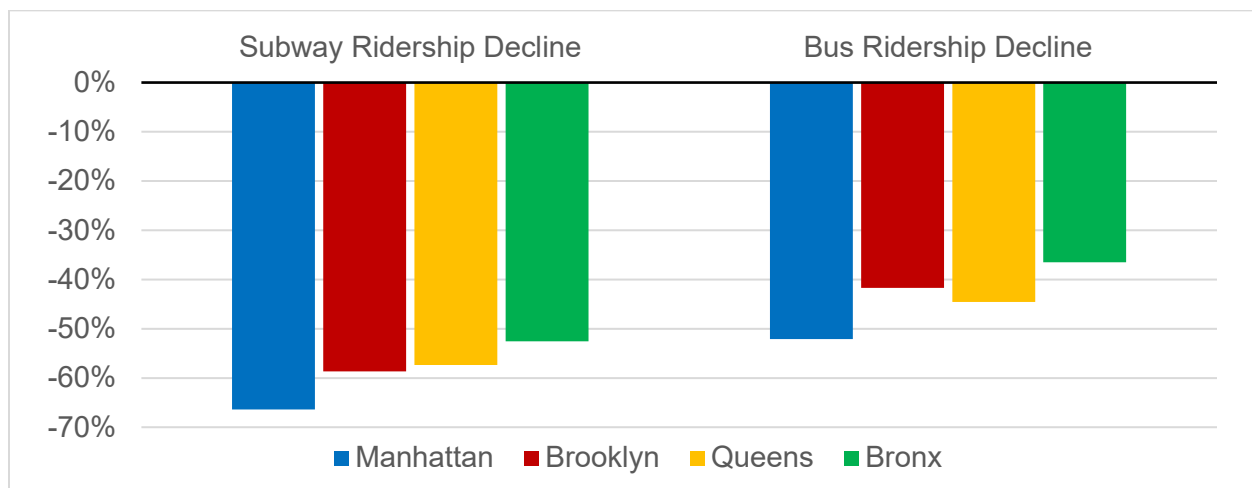
## Beyond Rush Hour: COVID-19 and The Future of Public Transit

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to upend the city’s public transit system. Even as children return to schools and ridership numbers inch upward, typical subway ridership sits at 50 percent below pre-pandemic levels and bus ridership is down 40 percent.<sup>1</sup> As a result, fare revenue on the subway and bus dropped \$2.9 billion from 2019 to 2020 and traffic congestion has strangled neighborhoods throughout the five boroughs.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, the findings suggest that with ridership down dramatically and little expectation that pre-pandemic levels will be achieved anytime soon, the MTA’s long-term reliance on fare box revenues as a principal source of operating revenues needs to be re-evaluated. Moving swiftly to institute congestion pricing for travel around Manhattan, incentivizing large employers to do more to defray commuting costs for their employees—as other states already mandate—and rethinking how the state spends its gas tax dollars are some of the steps that need to be considered in the near-term for the MTA to make the kinds of service improvements necessary to keep pace with the region’s changing economy.

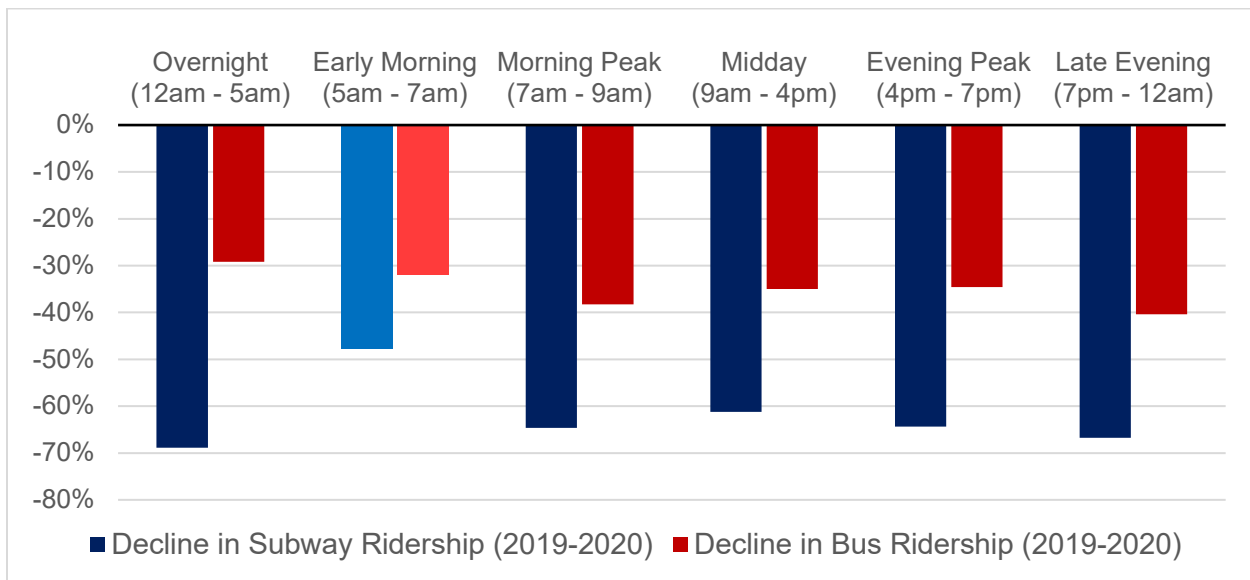
As this report reveals, the drop-offs in subway and bus ridership vary greatly based on geography, mode of travel, day of the week, and time of day. For instance, while subway station ridership was down 66 percent and bus ridership down 52 percent in Manhattan from 2019 to 2020, the respective numbers in the Bronx were a more modest 53 percent and 37 percent (see Chart 1).<sup>3</sup>

**Chart 1: Subway and Bus Ridership decline from 2019 to 2020, by borough**



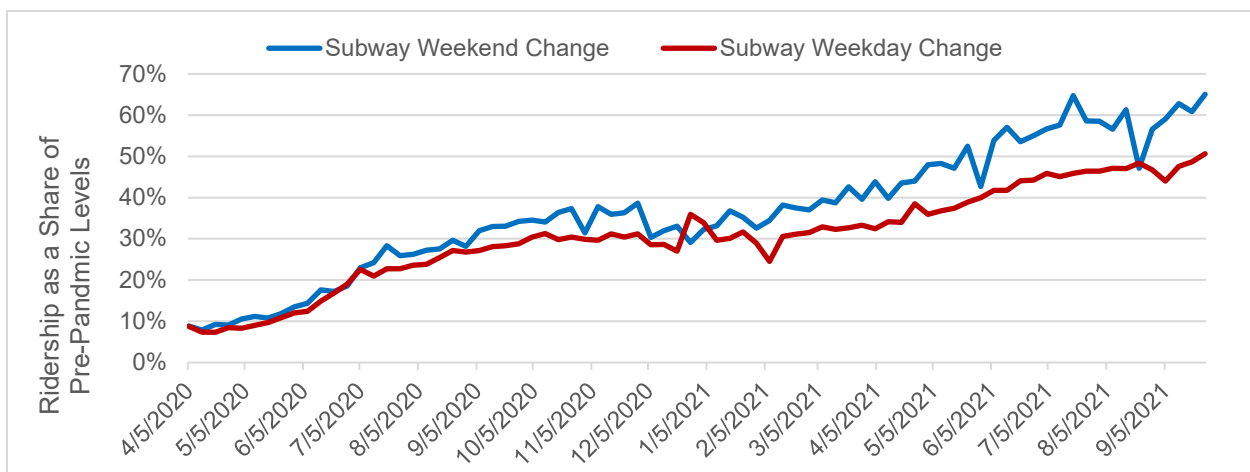
Similarly, the most recent data suggests that there is significant variability in ridership trends depending on time of day. While subway ridership fell by 62 percent in 2020 and bus ridership fell 44 percent, these drops were noticeably smaller in the early morning.<sup>4</sup> For instance, from 5 a.m. to 7 a.m.—when many essential workers have to begin their commutes—the number of riders on the subway was down by 48 percent and on the bus by only percent (see Chart 2).<sup>5</sup>

**Chart 2: Decline in Subway and Bus Ridership from 2019 to 2020, by Time of Day**



And finally, weekend ridership has recovered far faster than weekday ridership, particularly in recent months. While many New Yorkers appear to be foregoing weekday commuting, they continue to rely on the subway on Saturdays and Sundays. Weekend subway ridership is now at 65 percent of pre-pandemic levels, even as weekday ridership hovers at an anemic 51 percent (see Chart 3).<sup>6</sup>

**Chart 3: Weekend Ridership has recovered much faster than Weekday Ridership on the Subway**

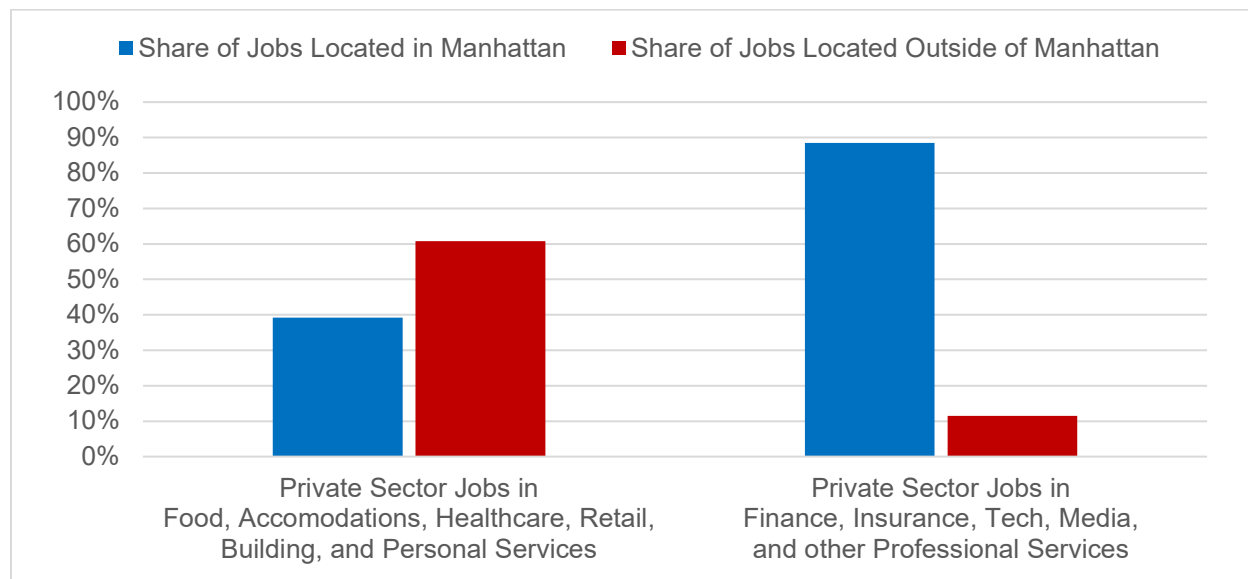


## Public Transit is No Longer Serving Today’s Riders

Though these variations by geography, time of day, and transit mode may appear independent, they are closely intertwined with residential and occupational patterns. In fact, the vast majority of frontline workers live outside of Manhattan. So too do those working in restaurants, bars, hotels, and retail stores that are rarely able to perform their jobs remotely. New Yorkers working in these service, shift work, face-to-face industries generally do not abide by the standard 9am–5pm, Monday-to-Friday schedule and will often live *and* work in the non-Manhattan boroughs. These scattered commuting arrangements rarely conform to the hub-and-spoke subway system, requiring long, slow, early-morning, meandering bus rides to get to work, as well as off-peak subway trips with several transfers.

In total, 61 percent of New York City jobs in shift work, service industries—like food, accommodations, healthcare, retail, building, and personal services—that generally require face-to-face contact and daily commuting, are located outside of Manhattan. By contrast, among those industries that are well suited for remote and hybrid work—including finance, insurance, tech, media, and other professional service—89 percent of jobs are located in Manhattan (see Chart 4). Likewise, over 40 percent of those working in white collar industries live in Manhattan, compared to just 16 percent of those in shift work, service industries.<sup>7</sup>

**Chart 4: Share of Office and Service Sector Jobs located in Manhattan and the Boroughs**



And while those working in the service industries earned an average salary of just \$50,468 in 2020, those in finance, insurance, tech, media, and other professional services averaged \$217,898.<sup>8</sup> If the latter shifts to a remote or hybrid work arrangement and the former continues to commute daily, we will increasingly have a public transit system that primarily serves lower-

income New Yorkers – a disparity that is fairly common in other American cities, but has largely been avoided in New York City.

Ultimately, these changes brought on by the pandemic present the following challenges: How does the MTA manage declining farebox revenues and better serve ridership that is disproportionately lower income, lives deeper into the non-Manhattan boroughs, and is more dependent on off-peak and bus service?

Meeting this challenge is absolutely essential for the future of New York City. If the MTA is not able to reprioritize its service, reform its fare policies, retain existing ridership, and woo new riders, the City will soon be choked in traffic and the ramifications for economic activity, air quality, GHG emissions, traffic deaths, and livability will be dire. Moreover, the City needs to be *reducing* street space in the near-term to enable more space for green infrastructure, for wider sidewalks, for more rational garbage collection, for public bathrooms, for playgrounds, for Barcelona-style superblocks, and much more. To do so, we will need a robust and affordable public transit system in place.

## Recommendations

### 1. New York City Employers Need to Step Up

In 1991, the Washington State Legislature passed the Commute Trip Reduction law to improve air quality, reduce traffic congestion, and reduce fuel consumption in cities and counties throughout the state. The law required all worksites with 100 or more employees to survey employees, submit a biennial commute trip reduction plan, and incentivize commuting trips via bus, train, biking, and other sustainable modes.

Amended several times over the last decades, the law has had an impressive impact. As of 2017, 83 percent of large worksites (and 54 percent of smaller worksites) in Seattle subsidize employee transportation.<sup>9</sup> These efforts have been aided by local transit agencies, which developed a comprehensive transportation pass program for employers – the ORCA Business Passport and the ORCA Business Choice.

New York State should pass a similar law and the City and MTA should work together to engage five borough employers. Special emphasis should be paid to hospitals, hotels, and other large employers outside of Manhattan to encourage them to provide monthly MetroCards for their employees and even subsidize increased bus service—as a number of Seattle employers currently do.

To assist and participate in these efforts, the City should create an inter-agency task force to reduce car dependency within New York City and increase public transit ridership. This should include an explicit mandate to reduce car commuting among city employees within every agency as well as a comprehensive plan—spearheaded by the Department of Transportation, Small

Business Services, Department of Cultural Affairs, the Mayor’s Office of Nightlife, NYC & Company and other agencies—to reduce driving among business owners, employees, customers, and tourists.

Small Business Services, in particular, should play a more active role in assisting the DOT with outreach for street improvements like bus lanes, shelters, bulb outs, and plazas along major commercial corridors. They can help allay concerns regarding bus infrastructure improvements and even provide free MetroCards for business owners and employees who are concerned about losing parking access.

## **2. Congress Must Pass the “Stronger Communities through Better Transit” Act**

The federal government must step up and support subway, bus, and commuter rail service throughout the country – especially as farebox revenues fall and deficits soar. This is not the time to allow transit service to decline and leave nurses, grocery store clerks, waiters, janitors, and security guards waiting in the cold for buses and trains that rarely arrive. Instead, Congress must pass the Stronger Communities through Better Transit Act, providing direct grants for public transit operating expenses.

As it stands, federal transit agencies are largely restricted to capital funding and grants cannot be used towards more frequent and reliable transit service. These restrictions have always been misguided and, given the lasting impact of the pandemic on remote work and ridership, have become particularly egregious. The funding allotted through the Stronger Communities through Better Transit Act would provide approximately \$3 billion to the MTA each year and cover anticipated farebox losses in the coming years.

## **3. Flip and increase the gas tax within the 12-county Metropolitan Commuting Transit District to better fund public transit.**

With global warming accelerating and public transit ridership plummeting, now is the time for the State to reform its gas taxes, which today funnels only about a third of its proceeds to public transit, while sinking the rest into roads, bridges and maintaining outdated highways. Within the 12 county “metropolitan commuter transportation district,” gas taxes should be rebalanced so that roughly two-thirds of the revenue is devoted to public transit. Additionally, the State should raise the gas tax within the district in order to increase revenues and encourage mass transit.

## **4. Implement the “New York City in Six” service plan, so that all subway routes and high-ridership bus routes arrive at least every six minutes throughout the day, seven days a week**

To ensure adequate social distancing on trains and buses and to match the largely off-peak, non-Manhattan commuting patterns of those who cannot work remotely, the MTA should increase

subway, bus, and commuter rail frequencies all day, every day. Each subway line and the 100 highest ridership bus routes should run at a minimum of every six minutes throughout the day, seven days a week.

This will represent a marked improvement to New York City Transit's current standards, which allow a minimum of ten minute frequencies on the subway during the midday and 12 minutes on the evenings and weekends. High-ridership bus routes, meanwhile, can arrive as infrequently as every 30 minutes in the early morning, afternoon, and weekends. These bus and subway standards are entirely inappropriate for the needs of New York City commuters and actively discourage ridership.

Under the "New York City in Six" plan, trains and high-ridership buses would still arrive every two, three, four, and five minutes during high-demand periods, but would *never* be spaced more than six minutes apart from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. on weekdays and from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. on the weekend, as is so often the case today.

Given that the median income of bus (\$30,374) and off-peak subway commuters (\$37,048) is far lower than car (\$47,132) and peak subway (\$50,783) commuters, the "New York City in Six" plan will have important ramifications for a more equitable, accessible, and upwardly mobile city.

## **5. Stop squandering our vast commuter rail network.**

Flushing, Jamaica, Queens Village, East New York, East Harlem, Melrose, Tremont. While these neighborhoods may be scattered across Queens, Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan they share many things in common. First, they are home to more frontline workers than nearly any neighborhoods in New York City. Second, they each have LIRR and Metro-North stations that provide high-quality transit service, but are almost entirely unused due to prohibitively high fares.<sup>10</sup>

Now is the time to tear down this commuter rail paywall and dramatically improve transit access and equity. With suburban, white collar commuters likely to work from home for the immediate future, there is a distinct opportunity to open up the 41 Metro-North and LIRR stations located within the five boroughs. Moving forward, the fare for all in-city trips should be reduced to the price of a MetroCard and transfers between commuter rail, subway, and bus should be free. Free transfers should also be extended to suburban commuters and trains should run at a minimum of every 15 minutes all day, every day, seven days a week around the city hub.

## **6. The New York City Department of Transportation should add 35 miles of Dedicated Bus Lanes and Busways each year.**

The introduction of the 14<sup>th</sup> Street busway represented a paradigm shift in New York City public transit and a strong foundation for future improvements. And while the City has begun to build on this progress and introduce busways throughout the five boroughs, its buildout has thus far proved far too modest, failed to coordinate with the MTA, and has not done enough to focus on the growing number of intra-borough commuters. To rectify this oversight, the Department of

Transportation should add 35 miles of bus-only corridors and dedicated, protected bus lanes each year to reduce crowding and alleviate pressure on the subway system.

This can be quickly achieved by targeting one-way avenues in Manhattan and throughout the five boroughs. One-way streets encourage speeding and provide little benefit for access, safety, and intuitiveness. Many should be converted back to two-way travel with one avenue set aside for car traffic and the parallel avenue exclusive for buses and bikes.

## **7. Improve Transit Access by Increasing Affordable Housing Production near existing Stations and Expanding the Subway System**

In the coming years, as more rush-hour, remote-work commuters continue to work from home, our focus should shift from maximizing *capacity* at rush hour to maximizing *access* to the subway for those who cannot work from home. This can be achieved by increasing the amount of affordable housing *near existing stations* and by building out and extending rail lines.

First, the City should rezone and subsidize the development of deeply affordable housing around subway stations in residential areas with less than 5,000 daily riders. This can simultaneously address New York City's twin challenges of affordable housing and rail access. It is also *much more* affordable than building out the subway system.

Secondly, extending the subway down Utica Avenue in Brooklyn and rebuilding the Nostrand Junction must be a longer-term priorities. This would vastly improve connectivity for working New Yorkers and communities of color outside of Manhattan. These projects should be co-funded by the State and City.

## **8. The MTA should reopen closed subway station entrances to improve access and speed up commute times**

Across the MTA's 472 subway stations, more than one hundred have at least one street-level entrance that has been permanently closed. More than 60 percent of these stations are located outside of Manhattan, restricting public transit access in the outer boroughs.

The MTA should create a five-year plan to reopen all of these entrances by 2027. In doing so, the MTA will speed up access to subway platforms for thousands of New Yorkers and shave minutes off their daily commutes.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> MTA. "Day-by-day ridership numbers." <https://new.mta.info/coronavirus/ridership>

<sup>2</sup> MTA. "Adopted Budget: February Financial Plan," 2020 and 2021.

<sup>3</sup> MTA. "Subway and bus ridership for 2020." <https://new.mta.info/agency/new-york-city-transit/subway-bus-ridership-2020>

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Hourly ridership data provided by the MTA.

<sup>6</sup> MTA. "Day-by-day ridership numbers." <https://new.mta.info/coronavirus/ridership>

<sup>7</sup> United State Department of Labor, "Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages," 2020.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.commuteseattle.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ORCA-for-Downtown-Seattle-Employers-1.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/new-york-citys-frontline-workers/>