

RIDERS' RECOMMENDATIONS
for the
POST-COVID
COMMUTE

TRI-STATE TRANSPORTATION CAMPAIGN



INTRODUCTION

The new coronavirus pandemic has nearly brought transportation to a screeching halt. As state governors began to institute stay at home orders for all but essential workers, transit agencies around the country began recording staggering declines in ridership. Since the start of the outbreak, the MTA lost 90% of its ridership, NJ Transit lost a whopping 98% of its ridership, and PATH saw 95% of its ridership disappear. As regions, states, and cities begin to reopen, transit agencies are rushing to restore service in line with state reopenings and quickly address the challenges that will arise during their own recovery. An important element of reopening state economies is restoring confidence that ending stay-at-home orders is safe, and transit users will expect that buses, subways, and trains will be safe as well.

To help give elected leaders and transit agencies a sense of what riders will need to feel confident that transit is safe, we asked over one thousand regular transit users in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania what new, rider-focused changes they want to see before they return to transit.

Recognizing the economic and environmental impacts of gridlock and congestion, many cities across the U.S. were implementing or studying traffic-reduction policies in the months before the pandemic began. Now, as other countries are beginning to relax their stay at home restrictions, a concerning trend has arisen in commuters' preferred modes of transportation: a significant number of people are turning to cars for local travel in lieu of transit. Wuhan, for example, has seen an uptick in new vehicle purchases as residents opt to commute via car. Transit agencies' efforts to bring riders back to transit are critical to real economic recovery in our cities. But the trend toward increased car ownership is particularly detrimental not only to cities, but to the bottom line of transit budgets, as transit agencies across the U.S. are heavily reliant on passenger fares, or "the farebox," as a significant fraction of their operations budgets. During the pandemic's peak, agencies saw massive budget shortfalls due to ridership declines and farebox revenue drops. Should that trend continue, transit agencies will be forced to dramatically cut service and raise fares—or may collapse entirely. Increases in car use and resulting emissions also create devastating environmental and public health problems.

While our survey reflects the severe dropoff in transit use, with under ten percent of total respondents reporting that they were actively taking transit during the pandemic, our survey results also show that the vast majority of riders expect to return to transit if agencies take the right precautions, with only eight percent of respondents reporting that they would not return to transit or would only return in the case of a vaccine.

Lastly, many of the percentage of respondents currently riding transit represent essential workers, and many are from communities of color. Without public transit, these workers would not have been able to perform essential work needed to keep society functioning. First-person recommendations from these riders will be particularly vital as transit agencies look to rebuild.

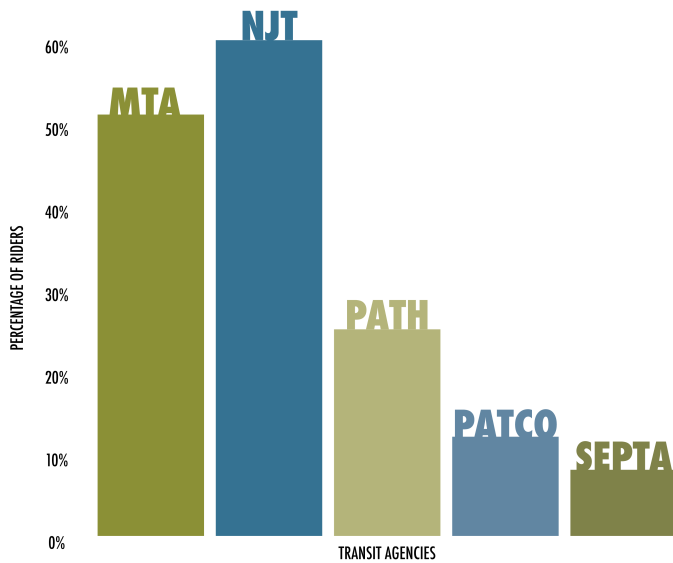


Figure 1 Transit Agencies used by Survey Respondents

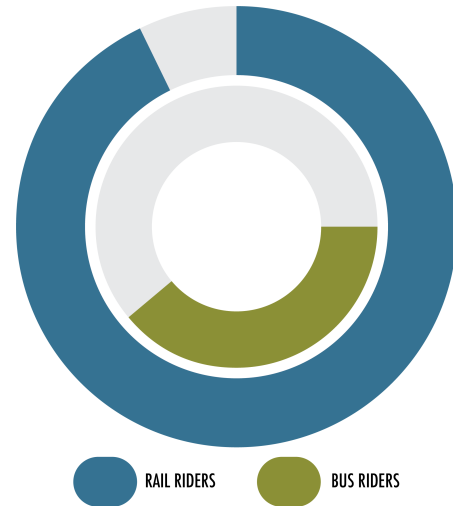


Figure 2 Percentage of Survey Respondents who use Rail and Bus

RESULTS

We disseminated our online survey in May and received over a thousand responses from riders who use Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA), New Jersey Transit, Port Authority Trans-Hudson (PATH), Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA), Port Authority Transit Corporation (PATCO) Speedline, and many other bus and rail services throughout the region. Respondents included those who are still riding public transit during this uncertain time, whom we refer to as **active users** in this report, as well as those who have halted their use of transit as a result of the stay at home mandates, whom we refer to as **non-active users**. Full methodology is below.

Riders, both active and non-active, offered a range of responses on what measures they expect agencies to take to make transit safe for everyday use. Responses from the vast majority of riders fell into three primary categories of concern: cleanliness, frequency of service, and masks and social distancing. Each of these categories relates to riders' actual and perceived safety from transmission of the coronavirus.

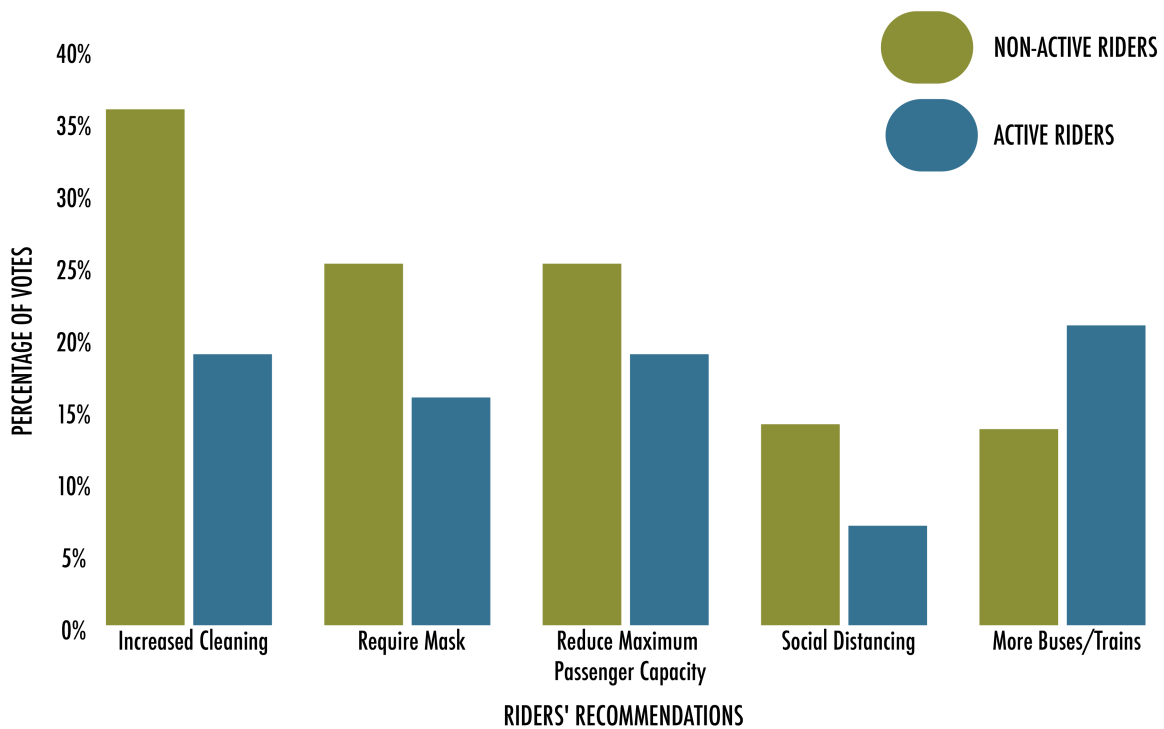


Figure 3 Percentage of Votes Per Rider Recommendations

CLEANLINESS

By far the top recommendation from non-active riders was bus, train, and station cleanliness, with over 35 percent of non-active riders responding that improved sanitation and cleaning procedures will make them feel more comfortable in returning to ride public transit. These riders noted that the frequency of cleaning is critical to establish trust in their safety and subsequent comfort with using transit, with many respondents calling for cleaning vehicles at the end of every run. Meanwhile, 19 percent of active riders echoed the call for greater cleanliness. While still a common response, the disparity between the two groups suggests that perhaps active riders are seeing the results of increased cleanings and are prioritizing other interventions accordingly.

Riders' requests for greater cleanings should be seen as a positive sign for transit agencies, which have been quick to respond at the start of the pandemic by improving cleaning processes. While the latest public health recommendations indicate that transmission of the novel coronaviruses from surfaces is less frequent than initially reported, transit agencies should continue their enhanced cleaning procedures and explore new cleaning and sanitization processes. As transit agencies undertake increased cleaning procedures, however, agencies must also continue to provide reliable service in the interim. While the MTA has shut down subway service between the hours of 1 AM - 5 AM to do proper cleaning, they have provided replacement bus service for riders during the pandemic, and will surely need to return the subways to regular 24-hour service as ridership increases.

REDUCED PASSENGER VOLUMES AND INCREASED FREQUENCY OF TRANSIT

Both non-active and active riders highlighted the need for higher service frequency to complement a reduction in maximum passenger capacity on buses and trains and at stations. Among active riders, the desire for more frequency was the most common response, at 21 percent. Nearly 14 percent of non-active riders called for greater frequency.

The desire for higher frequency dovetails with requests for reduced maximum passenger capacity to accommodate physical distancing, which is a core recommendation of the Centers for Disease Control. In fact, 20 percent of active riders and 25 percent of non-active riders echoed those recommendations, responding that a reduction in maximum passenger capacity would make them feel safer while riding public transit. One rider captured the sentiment with the following response: “More frequent service to alleviate rush-hour crowding.”

Without an improvement in frequency, riders are left to decide whether to ride a bus or train that may be close to capacity or seek another mode of transportation. A reduction in headway times will allow riders to continue to maintain physical distance while riding, which is critically important as riders begin to return to transit as shutdowns end: increases in bus and train frequency will need to be paired with reductions in passenger capacity to continue to combat the spread of the virus.

FACE COVERINGS & SOCIAL DISTANCING

Both current and non-active riders want to see increased compliance with face covering requirements, showing broad awareness among riders that face coverings help combat the spread of COVID-19. Studies show that this is especially true in enclosed spaces, such as trains and buses, and many countries in Asia that have face covering compliance in the high 90th percentile have very low rates of COVID even as ridership on transit has remained relatively stable.

While 25 percent of non-active riders indicated that requiring masks will make them feel more comfortable returning to riding transit, and 16 percent of active riders agreed, compliance will have to be much higher than 25 percent to ensure it is an effective strategy against the spread of COVID-19. Fortunately, many state governments have already signed executive orders requiring face masks on public transit, including in New York and New Jersey. It is critical that transit agencies without state mandates require masks for all riders and that all agencies communicate this requirement clearly and repeatedly as ridership begins to rebound.

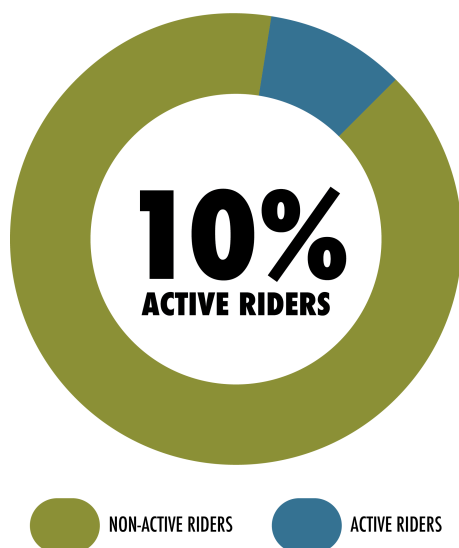


Figure 4 Percentage of Survey Respondents who are Active Riders

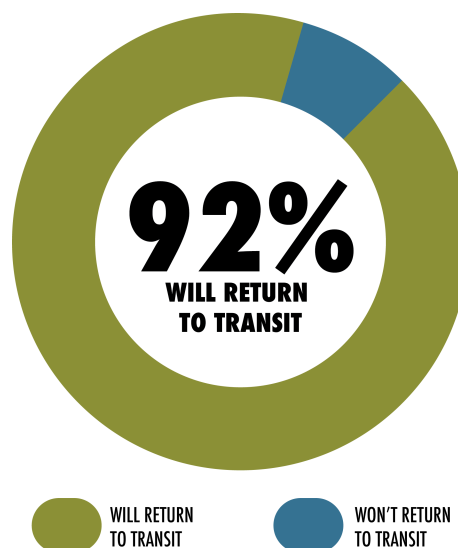


Figure 5 Percentage of Survey Respondents who say they will return to Public Transit Post-COVID-19

POST-COVID

Above all, our survey findings illustrate that riders are aware of efforts to combat the spread of the virus and have plenty of valuable suggestions to help transit agencies redesign their ridership experience to accommodate the post-pandemic “normal.” Some transit agencies have already implemented many of these recommendations, including requiring riders to wear face coverings, upgrading their cleaning procedures, and cleaning more regularly. Moreover, agencies have been providing adaptive schedules to accommodate essential workers. Combining this with a reduction in passenger capacity and increasing frequency of service can allow transit agencies to provide reliable service as well as create the opportunity for riders to distance themselves as people return to their commute.

Unfortunately, encouraging riders to return is but one piece to the puzzle, and transit agencies cannot accomplish this feat alone. To successfully implement and maintain these changes, agencies will require additional funding from state and federal governments. The financial burden of these practices will compound as time progresses and ridership returns. The CARES Act served as a great starting point for transit agencies at the start of the pandemic, but with low ridership projected for much of 2020, continued federal aid in subsequent stimulus packages will be necessary to ensure transit continues to function.

METHODOLOGY

Tri-State Transportation Campaign developed this survey to ask riders directly what they need to feel safe on public transit or return to riding transit as restrictions ease. Our survey asked riders what mode of transit they use, what agency or agencies they rely on, and allowed them to write in their preferred safety measures. Our online survey received 1,074 survey responses, including 108 riders who are currently still riding public transit. While there is an overlap of which systems riders use, over 50% of respondents use some form of MTA bus or rail service, 60% of riders use some form of NJ Transit service, about 24% of riders use the PATH system, and about 10% of respondents use some form of SEPTA and or PATCO service. Additionally, while there is an overlap of which mode riders use, across all modes of transportation, 93% of respondents were rail riders (including commuter rail, subway, and light rail) and about 39% were bus riders.

