



Transit Watch: **Public Transit in Crisis**



September 3, 2020

The Guardian

Public transit faces 'death spiral' without \$32B injection from Congress

People of color and those on low incomes likely to be hit hardest as transport systems struggle with effects of pandemic

America faces a mobility crisis that will have “profound” implications – especially for those on low incomes and people of color – if Congress does not step in to fill the nation’s \$32B public transport funding gap, experts have warned.

Looming public transport cuts caused by the pandemic could have far-ranging repercussions, including on people’s ability to vote in November, and inflict damage to services that will take years to recover from.

It comes after public transport use dropped by as much as 90% across the country as a result of the pandemic, almost obliterating fare revenue. Many systems have also lost sales tax. Congress provided \$25B funding in April as part of the CARES Act, but for many financially struggling systems that help is already running out. Transport leaders have requested a further \$32B, but currently there is no package in place, which is expected to lead to significant cuts.

Beth Osborne, director of the advocacy group Transportation for America, said: “The implications for folks who have no choice but to take transit, are losing transit as a reliable and frequent option, it can be profound in so many ways.”

She added: “You cut transit, it impacts low-income populations and we know that that is made up of a very large share of people of color. So it’s a very direct line.”

The majority of people who use public transport in the US, 60%, are people of color, according to a 2017 report by the American Public Transport Association (APTA). Just under a quarter are African American. Osborne said as the economic impact of the pandemic continues to hit, loss of unemployment benefit, evictions and inability to pay for vehicles could lead to growing numbers of people depending on public transport. “So you’re actually looking at a rising population of transit-dependent people at the same time as you’re looking at cutting transit service,” she said.

Coronavirus has “exacerbated” a mobility crisis that was already under way in the US, said Alex Engel, a spokesman for National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO).

“We already had a mobility crisis where communities of color, older people, lower-income people already had much more trouble reaching access and opportunities. Unfortunately what we’re seeing now is that these communities are being even more impacted,” he added. “They have the highest infection rate, they have the highest reliance on transit, they’re

the most likely to be essential workers, they're the most likely to need to go to get medical care."

Funding from the relief package has already [run out](#) in New York, and San Francisco has cut over half its [bus lines](#). Engel predicted that "a dozen or more cities" will also run dry by the end of the year.

The resulting situation from the cancelled services is referred to a "transit death spiral" – where cuts lead to raised fares and in turn fewer people using public transport.

Jamaine Gooding, an urban planner and bus organizing fellow for Active Transportation Alliance, has seen public transport use in Chicago plunge since the pandemic hit. But he said for those that depend on it, particularly people from black and Latino communities, it has become slower, less reliable and there are fears over Covid-19 safety.

"Even though ridership has dipped, there are a lot of people, thousands of people, still relying on taking the bus to work, to the grocery store, to doctor's appointments, just getting around the city still."

If services are cut, he said it would have a huge impact on vulnerable communities, workers and disabled people – preventing people from getting to work on time and reducing trust during a pandemic. Voting experts said any cuts to public transport could also have a significant impact on people's ability to get to the polls in November – especially on top of existing potential barriers such as the pandemic, unemployment and confusion over postal voting.

Sophia Lin Lakin, deputy director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) voting rights project, said public transport cuts will have a "disproportionate effect" on people of color getting to the polls.

"Traditionally communities of color, and particularly black voters, have put a premium on voting in person. I imagine that will continue to hold true, even in the midst of the pandemic to a certain extent," she said.

"What also is true is that when we've looked at the socioeconomic data on who has access to cars and who is relying on public transit to get from place to place – including to the polling locations that aren't for example walkable – that it's disproportionately voters of color who rely on such types of public transportation."

She wants to see early voting options across the country, access to absentee and mail voting, widespread drop boxes, as many polling stations open as possible and following a precinct-based model so that voters do not have to travel far from home.

Dr Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, director of the Centre for Information and Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (Circle) at Tufts University, said for many young people, especially those from marginalized communities, not being able to use public transport to vote could be a "deal breaker" on election day. Pre-pandemic, Circle [analysis](#) found that 29% of youth who registered but did not vote in 2016 cited transport as a reason for not voting and 15% said it was a major factor.

Kawashima-Ginsberg said public transport problems are more likely to pose an issue for Democratic voters, who "tend to come from younger, more people of color, economically disadvantaged communities."

She fears people will realize too late that their nearby drop-off site or polling location is closed and that public transport isn't available.

"Those are plenty [of reasons] for anybody to give up on voting. And that's I guess how voter suppression works. But that's the fear, that there's going to be so many barriers that seem alone not so crazy but together seems sort of impossible, that they may end up not voting."

For more information, please contact the California Transit Association at COVID-19@caltransit.org.

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