

Public Transit Ridership Continues to Decline

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Despite [suggestions](#) that ridership on the nation's public transportation systems is beginning to grow again, available evidence suggests this optimism is premature. According to [data](#) from the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), 2018 marked the fourth straight year of declining ridership, falling by about 2.5% from the year before. Total ridership on transit buses and rail systems, including commuter rail services, and ferries in 2018 was below 10 billion for the first time since 2005. More recent [quarterly data](#) from APTA show that second-quarter ridership in 2019 was higher than in 2018, but the level for the first six months of the year, including both first- and second-quarter ridership, was lower in 2019 than in 2018.

The extent of the nationwide decline in ridership has been obscured by trends in the New York City region, where approximately 40% of national ridership occurs. Between 2008 and 2018, nationwide ridership declined by 6%. But if the New York City region is excluded, nationwide ridership declined by 9% over this period (**Figure 1**). Overall in 2018, there were about 600 million fewer transit trips taken than in 2008. This decline in ridership occurred at the same time the [U.S. population](#) grew by about 23 million people, from 304 million in 2008 to 327 million in 2018.

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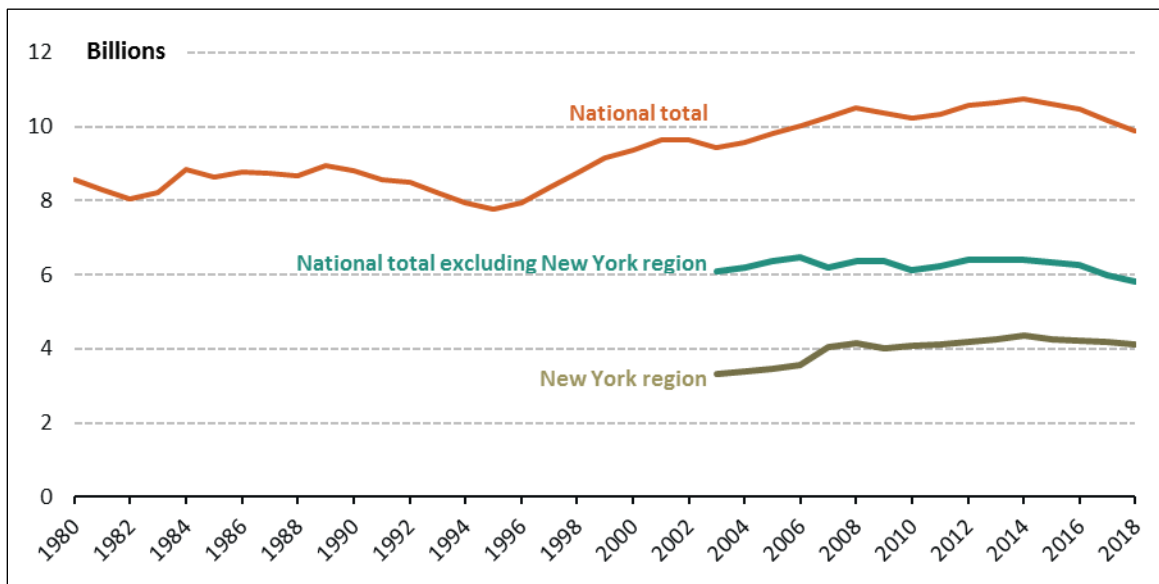
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Figure I. Annual Public Transportation Ridership, 1980-2018

Unlinked Trips



Source: American Public Transportation Association, *Public Transportation Fact Book*; American Public Transportation Association, *Transit Ridership Report*.

Note: An unlinked trip is counted each time a passenger boards a transit vehicle.

One newspaper [report](#) based on the APTA data notes that 2019 second-quarter growth was driven by subway ridership in New York and Washington, DC. In both places, second-quarter ridership was about 3% higher in 2019 than in 2018, and the increase of 17.4 million trips on the New York subway alone was larger than the national increase of 11.5 million trips. However, while ridership on the Washington Metro was about 2% higher in the first six months of 2019 compared with the first six months of 2018, ridership on the New York City subway was about 1% lower over this period. Although data are not yet available, third-quarter ridership on the Washington Metro is likely to have suffered due to the [shutdown](#) of six stations for rebuilding.

There are no comprehensive explanations for the decline in national transit ridership. National trends in public transportation ridership are not necessarily reflected at the local level; thus, different areas may have different reasons for growth or decline. But at the national level, the two factors that most affect public transportation ridership are competitive factors and the supply of transit service. Several competitive factors, notably the relatively [low price of gasoline](#) over the past few years and the growing [popularity of bikeshare, scooters, and ridesourcing](#) services, appear to have reduced transit ridership. [Ridesourcing](#) is a digital platform, such as those offered by Uber and Lyft, used to supply or “source” rides from a pool of drivers. The amount of transit service supplied has generally grown over time, along with government investment, but average fares have risen faster than inflation, possibly deterring riders.

The [future of public transportation ridership](#) in the short to medium term is likely to depend on population growth, the public funding commitment to supplying transit, and factors that make driving more or less attractive, such as the price of parking, the extent of highway congestion, and the implementation of fuel taxes, tolls, and mileage-based user fees. Over the long term, ridership is also likely to depend on the introduction of autonomous vehicle technology, although that timing is uncertain. Fleets of driverless taxis that can be hailed with a smartphone, a plausible scenario, could be much cheaper than taxis and ridesourcing are today. Widespread deployment of driverless taxis could reduce transit ridership, unless restrictions or fees make them an expensive alternative.

Two major federal transit policies related to these issues are the general funding of public transportation, distributed mainly by formula, and the discretionary funding of new large capital projects such as rail and bus rapid transit systems through the Capital Investment Grants (CIG) Program, also known as New Starts. One option to encourage higher ridership without raising funding would be to tie the distribution of federal formula funds to the amount of ridership or fare revenue. At present, the [funding formulas](#) are more closely related to population, population density, and the amount of service provided than to the amount of service consumed. If the most consequential uncertainty for transit ridership is the introduction of autonomous vehicles, federal funding might focus on buses, which last about 10 years, and not new rail systems that last 30 years or more. Another option would be to redirect CIG funding from building new rail systems and lines to refurbishing rail transit in the large and dense cities where rail transit currently carries large numbers of riders.

Congress may consider options to address public transit ridership trends as it weighs reauthorization of federal surface transportation programs. The current authorization expires at the end of FY2020.

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