Essential Transit

How essential workers in the San Diego region continue to rely on transit while responding to COVID-19

April 23, 2020

Authored by Andy Furillo, Colin Parent, and Maya Rosas
Even in the time of COVID-19, many of San Diego’s essential workers rely on public transportation. Our trains and buses are helping our region survive today’s pandemic.

COVID-19 is testing all of society, including those involved in mobility and urban planning. The disease has infected employees who operate the transit systems, including five Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) bus operators (as of April 20th). Hard-earned ridership has plunged practically overnight, with agencies forced to tell many to stay away amidst this virus’s attack on our health and well-being.

However, transit is sustaining essential workers’ ability to get to essential jobs, including in health care during this crisis. Nationally, 2.8 million people who work in industries deemed essential in our battle against coronavirus commute daily by transit. This is more than a third of total riders during normal times, according to an analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) data by the national advocacy organization TransitCenter.

Circulate San Diego utilized data provided by TransitCenter to crunch these numbers for the San Diego region. These figures show just how vital MTS and North County Transit District (NCTD) are for getting us through this pandemic.


According to the 2018 ACS data, nearly 16,000 essential workers in the San Diego region commute to work on the region’s buses, trains, and ferries every day. This comprises 35 percent of those who normally commute aboard MTS and NCTD vehicles. These figures are represented in the table below, and attached to this report as Appendix A.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>San Diego Metropolitan Area Over-All Data</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essential, Transit Commute</td>
<td>15,694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transit Commuters, All</td>
<td>45,252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Transit Commute, Essential</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Select Essential Industries</th>
<th>Transit Commuters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hospital</td>
<td>1,338</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor’s offices, home health, outpatient (not hospitals)</td>
<td>619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assisted care, psychiatric facilities</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grocery store, convenience &amp; pharmacy</td>
<td>1,340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services</td>
<td>902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice, public safety, waste management, elected officials</td>
<td>3,204</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some essential San Diego-area industries are particularly reliant on transit for their survival. These figures are attached to this report as Appendix B. For example, the ACS data indicates that:

- Nearly 13 percent of San Diego’s cardiovascular technologists and technicians commute to work on transit. The heart diseases these professionals treat remain the U.S.’s leading cause of death and are among the underlying conditions that exacerbate COVID-19.

---


8 Appendix A is available online at [http://www.circulatesd.org/essentialtransit](http://www.circulatesd.org/essentialtransit).

9 Appendix B is available online at [http://www.circulatesd.org/essentialtransit](http://www.circulatesd.org/essentialtransit).


Creating excellent mobility choices and vibrant, healthy neighborhoods.

- More than **2,000 food preparation workers**—almost 12 percent—ride transit to their jobs. Though many of these people face unemployment as eateries have shut down due to pandemic restrictions, those still reporting to work are essential to keep San Diego fed.

- Nearly **2,500 janitors and building cleaners**, including the people responsible for disinfecting essential offices, access their workplaces on buses or trains.

- Over **30 percent of the highway maintenance workers** protecting automobile drivers’ safety rely on transit every day.

MTS has experienced a ridership decline. MTS buses are still carrying 30 percent of usual ridership, while the trolley continues with 40 percent. NCTD’s ridership decline since the COVID-19 crisis began is more steep, carrying only 27 percent of usual riders. This drop is significantly smaller compared to New York City, which has suffered a 92 percent decline in subway ridership. The relatively smaller decline in San Diego may signify that a greater share of San Diego’s usual transit riders are essential workers during the COVID-19 crisis.

Considering that 35 percent of normal MTS and NCTD riders are essential workers and transit ridership remains 30 to 40 percent of usual ridership, transit remains crucial for many essential riders. This is despite concerns that coronavirus could spread on shared vehicles, as well as lighter traffic congestion and low fuel prices that have currently alleviated some of the downsides of driving. The ACS data (see Appendix A) and other trends suggest a myriad of reasons for this:

---


• 25 percent of the region’s essential transit riders do not own automobiles. For these riders, taking a car to an essential job is not an option. Car-based taxis and ride-hailing are oftentimes not a financially accessible choice, since they are more expensive than buses and trains. Small vehicles used for ride-hailing also do not offer the space for operator-passenger physical distancing available in larger transit vehicles.

• 14 percent of the San Diego region’s essential transit riders live at or below the federal poverty line. This adds to the evidence that fare affordability is an important factor for riders choosing transit.

• Nearly 60 percent of the essential transit riders report commuting outside of rush hour, which suggests that avoiding road congestion is not their main regular reason for choosing transit.

During the pandemic, the San Diego region sustained a substantial portion of its rail and bus service relative to other major California and U.S. metro areas. This has allowed for less crowded vehicles and better onboard physical distancing.

In response to a local Hepatitis A outbreak in 2017, San Diego’s transit agencies developed experience with stringent antiviral sanitation procedures. During COVID-19, MTS and NCTD have clearly communicated similar procedures to the public.

The data in this report covers only essential work commute trips. It does not include information for how the transit system is used by riders for other essential trips like seeking medical care or purchasing groceries. Certainly transit is also being used for those trips as well.

Despite the substantial and welcome efforts by MTS and NCTD to sustain essential mobility, both agencies face significant uncertainty due to COVID-19. MTS tabled a proposed ballot measure to expand

21 “Metro to further reduce service hours starting Monday: Rail to close at 9 p.m. nightly, Bus service ends at 11 p.m.” Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, April 3, 2020, available at https://www.wmata.com/about/news/Pandemic-service-schedule.cfm.
transit service. Funding to support the existing system is also in jeopardy, as fare-box revenue has substantially declined. Fortunately, federal recovery funds from the CARES Act provide an important temporary backstop.

To ensure essential San Diego industries can persevere and provide essential services to all San Diegans, officials must continue to keep transit as a priority for our region’s transportation network. Furthermore, Congress should continue rescue efforts to ensure that transit remains viable for our essential workers.

About Circulate San Diego

Circulate San Diego is a regional nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing mobility and making the region a better place to move, work, learn, and play. Our work focuses on creating great mobility choices, more walkable and bikeable neighborhoods, and land uses that promote sustainable growth. For more information, visit www.circulatesd.org.
