



Circulate San Diego

233 A Street, Suite 206

San Diego, CA 92101

Tel: (619) 544-9255

Fax: (619) 531-9255

www.circulatesd.org

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

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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).¹ [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.^{2 3}

However, transit is sustaining essential workers' ability to get to [essential jobs, including in health care](#) during this crisis.⁴ 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](#).^{5 6}

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.

¹ COVID-19 Updates, San Diego Metropolitan Transit System, (accessed on April 16, 2020) available at <https://www.sdmts.com/schedules-real-time/covid-19-updates>.

² "San Diego MTS sees continued increase in transit ridership," Mass Transit, February 12, 2020, available at <https://www.masstransitmag.com/bus/press-release/21125306/mts-metropolitan-transit-system-san-diego-san-diego-mts-sees-continued-increase-in-transit-ridership>.

³ San Diego Metropolitan Transit System, Twitter Post, April 9, 2020, available at <https://twitter.com/sdmts/status/1248356500474478592>.

⁴ Jarrett Walker, "In a Pandemic, We're All Transit Dependent," CityLab, April 7, 2020, available at <https://www.citylab.com/perspective/2020/04/coronavirus-public-transit-subway-bus-ridership-revenue/609556>.

⁵ U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, IPUMS USA, available at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa>.

⁶ "Transit is Essential: 2.8 Million U.S. Essential Workers Ride Transit to Jobs," TransitCenter, March 24, 2020, available at <https://transitcenter.org/2-8-million-u-s-essential-workers-ride-transit-to-their-jobs>.

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.⁷ 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.⁸

San Diego Metropolitan Area Over-All Data	
Essential, Transit Commute	15,694
Transit Commuters, All	45,252
% of Transit Commute, Essential	35%

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

Some essential San Diego-area industries are particularly reliant on transit for their survival. These figures are attached to this report as Appendix B.⁹ 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.^{10 11}

⁷ Categories of Essential Critical Infrastructure Workers, State of California Public Health Officer, March 22, 2020, available at <https://covid19.ca.gov/img/EssentialCriticalInfrastructureWorkers.pdf>.

⁸ Appendix A is available online at <http://www.circulatesd.org/essentialtransit>.

⁹ Appendix B is available online at <http://www.circulatesd.org/essentialtransit>.

¹⁰ Heart Disease Facts, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, available at <https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/facts.htm>.

¹¹ Dara K. Lee Lewis, MD, “How does cardiovascular disease increase the risk of severe illness and death from COVID-19?” Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, April 2, 2020, available at <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/how-does-cardiovascular-disease-increase-the-risk-of-severe-illness-and-death-from-covid-19-2020040219401>.

- 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](#).¹² NCTD's ridership decline since the COVID-19 crisis began is more steep, carrying only 27 percent of usual riders.¹³ This drop is significantly smaller compared to [New York City](#), which has suffered a 92 percent decline in subway ridership.¹⁴ 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.^{15 16 17} The ACS data (see Appendix A) and other trends suggest a myriad of reasons for this:

¹² Agenda Item 10 (COVID-19 Financial Impact Update), pg. 48, San Diego Metropolitan Transit System, April 16, 2020, available at https://www.sdmts.com/sites/default/files/2020-04-16_board_agenda_and_materials.pdf.

¹³ COVID-19 Fact Sheet, North County Transit District, March 31, 2020, available at <https://gonctd.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/NCTD-COVID-19-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

¹⁴ Mary Frost, "New York City subway ridership down 92 percent due to coronavirus," Brooklyn Daily, April 8, 2020, available at <https://brooklyneagle.com/articles/2020/04/08/new-york-city-subway-ridership-down-92-percent-due-to-coronavirus>.

¹⁵ Justin George, "For many 'essential workers,' public transit is a fearful ride they take," The Washington Post, April 11, 2020, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/trafficandcommuting/for-many-essential-workers-public-transit-is-a-fearful-ride-they-must-take/2020/04/11/8dec874a-79ad-11ea-a130-df573469f094_story.html.

¹⁶ Brad Plumer and Nadja Popovich, "Traffic and Pollution Plummet as U.S. Cities Shut Down for Coronavirus," The New York Times, March 22, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/22/climate/coronavirus-usa-traffic.html>.

¹⁷ Brittany Chang, "The 'Limbo dance' of oil prices due to the coronavirus may send the national average to \$1.30 per gallon—here's why," Business Insider, April 4, 2020, available at <https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-gas-prices-dropping-covid-19-russia-saudia-arabia-2020-4>.

- 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.^{18 19 20 21} 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](#).²² During COVID-19, MTS and NCTD have [clearly communicated similar procedures](#) to the public.²³

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

¹⁸ Temporary Service Reductions Effective April 12, 2020, MTS Rider Alert, San Diego Metropolitan Transit System, available at https://www.sdmts.com/sites/default/files/attachments/servicereductions_april2020_final_reader.pdf.

¹⁹ Coronavirus (COVID-19) Developments and Response, North County Transit District, accessed on April 17, 2020, available at <https://gonctd.com/coronavirus>.

²⁰ COVID-19 Muni Core Service Plan, San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, accessed on April 17, 2020, available at <https://www.sfmta.com/travel-updates/covid-19-muni-core-service-plan>.

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>.

²² MTS Cleaning Procedures to Limit Spread of Coronavirus, Public Health, San Diego Metropolitan Transit System, accessed on April 17, 2020, available at <https://www.sdmts.com/rider-info/public-health>.

²³ Coronavirus (COVID-19) Developments and Response, North County Transit District, accessed on April 17, 2020, available at <https://gonctd.com/coronavirus>.

transit service.²⁴ 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.](#)²⁵

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.



²⁴ Joshua Emerson Smith, “MTS abandons November ballot measure to expand transit, citing coronavirus pandemic,” San Diego Union-Tribune, April 16, 2020, available at <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/transportation/story/2020-04-16/mts-abandons-november-ballot-measure-to-expand-transit-citing-coronavirus-pandemic>.

²⁵ Scott Lewis and Andrew Keatts, “Politics Report: MTS May Drop Push for Transit Tax,” Voice of San Diego, April 11, 2020, available at <https://www.voiceofsandiego.org/topics/politics/politics-report-mts-considers-fate-of-november-transit-tax>.