

We're Desperate': Transit Cuts Felt Deepest in Low-Income Areas

As the pandemic wreaks havoc on public transit systems across the country, experts say it is low-income residents, people of color and essential workers bearing the brunt.

By [Pranshu Verma](#), Aug. 15, 2020

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/15/us/virus-transit-congress.html?smid=em-share>

WASHINGTON — As Nina Red stood under a tree in the New Orleans rain, waiting for two buses that never came, she recalled a feeling of helplessness. Ms. Red, 69, a resident of the city's Algiers neighborhood, does not have a car. The bus, which she has ridden for 43 years, is the cheapest way to get around. But since the coronavirus pandemic hit, she has noticed service take a deep dive.

A six-mile trip to the grocery store, which used to take an hour, sometimes takes close to three. Routine doctor's appointments at 8 a.m. require her to wake up by 5. Many days, buses have skipped her stop without warning. When they do arrive, they are packed, making her worry she is going to be exposed to the coronavirus. "We're desperate," Ms. Red said. "We have no other transportation. If we had an alternative, we would take it."

New Orleans, like most American cities, has seen its transit budget drastically affected during the pandemic. Public transit leaders across the country have issued dire warnings to Congress, saying that the first \$25 billion in aid they received in March is quickly drying up, and they need more — otherwise their systems will go into a ["death spiral."](#)

In return, though, Congress has shown little sign that another stimulus package will pass soon, or even include any of the \$32 billion more in assistance that transit experts say is needed to prevent systems from making more severe cuts to service that could stall the nation's economic recovery.

But as service cuts to the United States' bus, rail and subway systems start to happen, experts say it is the nation's low-income residents, people of color and essential workers bearing the brunt. Many of them feel the congressional gridlock is completely ignoring their plight. "It seems like we're invisible," Ms. Red said, "and they don't care about us."

The pandemic has wreaked havoc on public transit. Ridership on top city systems has declined 70 percent to 90 percent. Sales tax revenue, which fuels many transit agency budgets, has cratered because of a collapsing economy. All told, transit agencies across the country are projected to rack up close to \$40 billion in budget shortfalls, dwarfing the [\\$2 billion loss inflicted](#) by the 2008 financial crisis.

To stay afloat, transit leaders have started to pare back service, which has caused immediate disruption. Many riders are already experiencing longer commute times, more system breakdowns, a lack of social distancing and, in some cases, unexplainable lapses in service.

But the effect is not spread equally, according to data. Minority residents account for 60 percent of all public transit riders, [according to industry experts](#). While over 2.8 million essential workers rely on public transportation to get to work, [expert analysis found](#), [67 percent](#) of those are people of color.

In the early days of the pandemic, [industry analysis](#) also showed white ridership on transit systems dropped drastically, with 22 percent of transit users identifying as white, compared with 40 percent normally. Black ridership, which normally accounts for 24 percent of transit users, increased to nearly 38 percent.

“The wealthy have lots of choices,” said Beth Osborne, the director of Transportation for America, an advocacy group. “People with enough money can choose to opt out for a while. That’s quite a luxury.”

Experts say the ability for higher-income and white-collar workers to work remotely or use a car at higher rates than low-income and minority residents highlights another systemic inequity made glaringly obvious during the pandemic.

Two [economic studies](#) have found Black people could be dying at [nearly double the rate](#) of white people from the coronavirus, in part because of their heavier reliance on public transportation.

For essential workers like Mosi Tibbs, 26, who lives just outside Pittsburgh, the inequality is glaring during his daily bus trip to his job at Trader Joe’s. Mr. Tibbs, who is Black and the main breadwinner for his household, has noticed buses on his route coming less frequently, or much later than normal. When they do arrive, they are usually packed and filled with riders who are not wearing their masks.

He has considered buying a car because he does not want to risk being late to his job and losing it, or contracting the virus and giving it to his wife, who has Celiac disease. But it is just not affordable right now. “I’m upset I have to make that type of decision,” Mr. Tibbs said. “I have to choose between financial stability, and the health of myself and my wife.”

The plight of public transportation riders has drawn attention on Capitol Hill, but not in ways that have produced hope for transit riders across the country. In May, House lawmakers passed a coronavirus aid package that would dedicate an additional \$15 billion in funding to transportation agencies. It stalled in the Republican-led Senate.

The White House and top congressional Democrats are still at a standstill over the next relief package. The Senate has gone home for its August recess, with no indication that a deal is imminent. The White House’s \$1 trillion proposal does not include any emergency relief for public transit.

The omission has caused uproar among lawmakers. In late July, 110 representatives in the House [signed a letter](#) urging congressional leadership to include \$32 billion in emergency funding for public transportation agencies in any future aid measure.

Last week, Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the minority leader, said Democrats had heard the warnings from public transit leaders and were imploring their Republican colleagues to ensure funding is included. “This is when government is needed,” he said. “Jump-starting our economy means getting people back to work safely, and that means mass transit: fully operational, fully funded mass transit.”

Senator Mitch McConnell, Republican of Kentucky and the majority leader, did not respond to a request for comment.

Transit leaders have signaled that the cuts they are making to service are only the start, and the real pain will be felt in the coming months. Bigger city systems will see the first round of coronavirus aid dry up [in the next few months](#), while midsize cities expected to see the worst next year.

Nearly one-third of public transit agencies are furloughing employees or are planning furloughs, [according to the American Public Transportation Association](#). A third of agencies are also delaying capital projects that were meant to upgrade transit systems and reduce the risk of accidents.

Reduced revenue from fares and sales tax subsidies have meant cities like San Francisco have cut half their bus lines. In New Orleans, where 14 percent of its transit workers have tested positive for the virus, fare revenue has dropped by 45 percent. Chicago expects up to a \$1.5 billion budgetary shortfall into next year.

If additional aid from Congress does not come through, transit systems could plunge into a [transit death spiral](#), where cuts to service and delayed upgrades make public transit a less convenient option for the public. That, in turn, prompts further drops in ridership, causing spiraling revenue loss and service cuts until a network eventually collapses.

Transit advocates say if that happens, it could slow the nation’s path to economic recovery by cutting off a main way for workers who rely on public transit to get to work.

And while congressional leadership remains at an impasse over the next round of coronavirus aid and how much more support to give transit agencies, those outside Washington said it was simply another sign of how federal lawmakers were out of touch with the struggles facing everyday Americans.

“It’s not their problem,” Ms. Red said. “Their families and friends have everything they need. They don’t look at us.”