

# Bus Ridership Dwindles As Subway Gains

By Andrew Grossman, Wall Street Journal

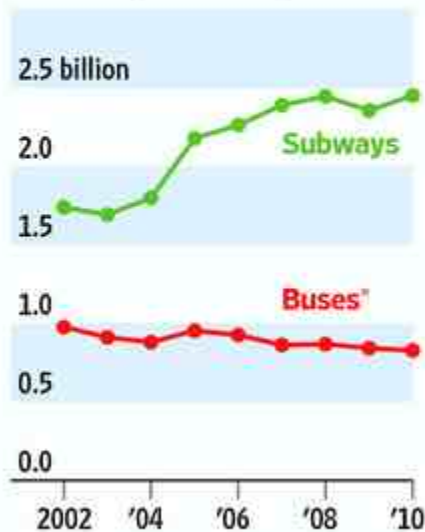
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Fewer people are riding New York City buses even as more hop on the subways.

The nation's largest municipal bus system has endured a slow slide in ridership since 2005. It was down another 1.7% last year despite a sharp drop in the city's jobless rate.

## Changing Lanes

Number of trips riders took on New York public transportation



°New York City Transit only  
Source: Federal Transit Administration

Explanations for the ridership drop are as tangled as a Queens bus map. Not even the Metropolitan Transportation Authority has a clear handle on what's causing it.

But it appears that a mix of factors, including the city's uneven economy and unprecedented service cuts, all play a role.

Bus riders tend to be less affluent than subway riders, and the economic problems of the past three years have had a bigger impact on working-class New Yorkers in outer boroughs who depend on buses.

On top of that, the MTA eliminated or cut service on dozens of bus routes last summer. Finally, congestion means many buses crawl along at walking speed during rush hour.

None of that completely explains the prolonged drop in bus ridership. There were 13.2% fewer trips on New York City Transit buses in 2010 than there were in 2005. Subway ridership rose 12.6% during the same period

"We don't know exactly why, but we're seeing a decline in the inner portions of the boroughs," said Kevin Ortiz, an MTA spokesman.

"One thing that is contributing to that is traffic congestion," Mr. Ortiz said. "The buses just are not traveling at optimal speeds. Other than that, we can't really pinpoint why ridership is declining on portions of these routes."

Some of the decline is by design. When the MTA eliminated dozens of bus routes last summer to save money, it focused on places where buses ran along subway lines. The B39, for example, used to run over the Williamsburg Bridge—right next to the J, M and Z trains.

The authority also reduced the frequency of certain bus routes. At the same time, subways have gotten some high-profile improvements, such as digital clocks that tell straphangers when the next train is coming.

Sandra Williams takes her car and the subway as much as possible. But Ms. Williams didn't have access to a car Wednesday, so the speech therapist and actress found herself waiting for the B16 bus at the corner of Caton Avenue and Ocean Parkway.

"You have to wait so long to get on a bus and it's not dependable. I'd definitely rather be on a train than waiting for this bus," Ms. Williams said.

Another factor: Buses are breaking down more often. MTA data show the average distance a bus travels before it needs repair has been decreasing as the bus fleet ages.

To help fix the problem, the authority's board voted Wednesday to spend nearly \$350 million to buy 578 new buses.

Then there's a city economy in which some neighborhoods are thriving while others struggle. That's one of the causes MTA Chairman Jay Walder pointed to when asked about the decline Wednesday.

"Some of it may also have to do with the ways in which the economic recovery is taking hold and the ridership in different parts of the city," he said.

Neighborhood farthest from subway routes have some of the city's worst joblessness, according to data compiled by the James Parrott of the Fiscal Policy Institute, a liberal-leaning think tank.

In places such as Flatlands and East Flatbush in southern Brooklyn, which have subway lines only at their edges, the unemployment rate was around 13% in the third quarter of 2010, Mr. Parrott said. People without jobs have fewer reasons to travel. Meanwhile, they have to pay more for trips they do take since the fare went up at the end of 2010.

Closer to the city and to the subways in neighborhoods in western Brooklyn and northwest Queens, the jobless rate dipped to 8%, according to Mr. Parrott's data.

On the Upper East and Upper West sides of Manhattan, unemployment is below 5%.

—Amber Benham contributed to this article.