

## AMERICANS ARE ABANDONING PUBLIC TRANSIT—BUT DON'T BLAME UBER

<https://www.wired.com/story/transit-center-census-americans-public-transportation/>



A new report found that American bus ridership fell by 5 percent between 2016 and 2017. The country's seven largest transit systems—Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, New York, and Washington, DC—all lost riders that year, too.

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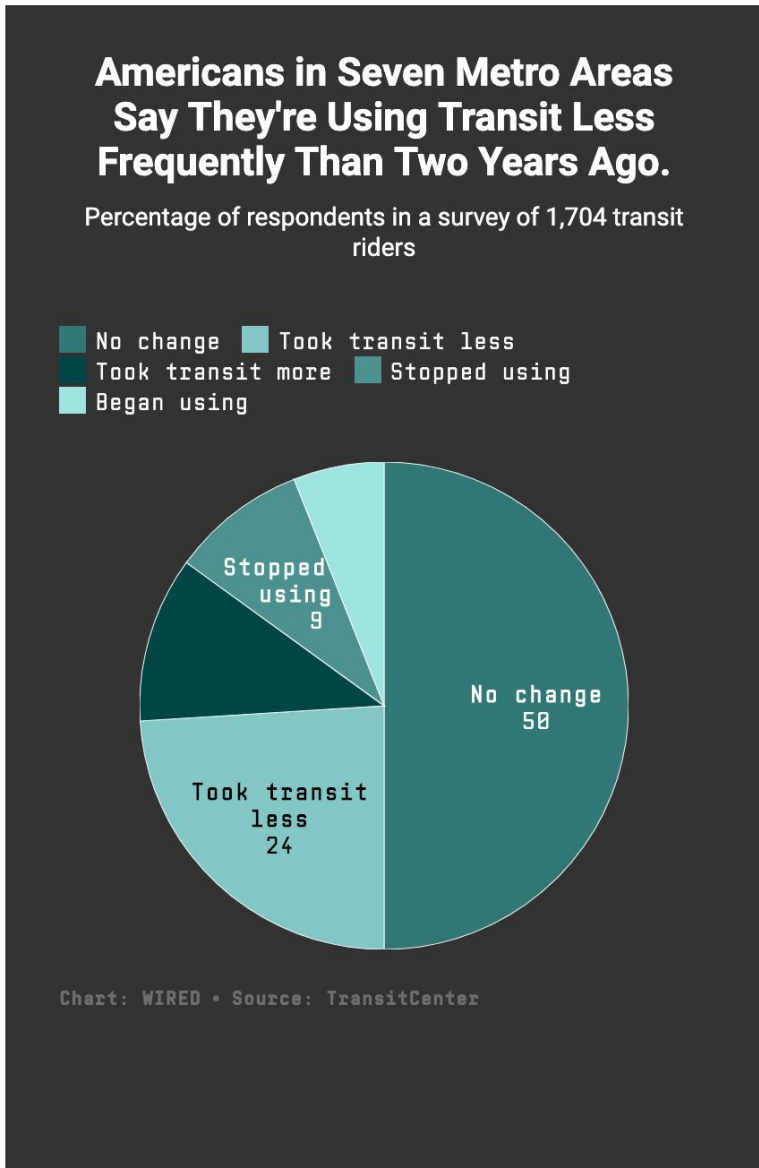
IN PHILADELPHIA, A small group of [transit riders](#) sat down to talk about what sucks about the bus. “What is it about the bus?” the interviewer said, and they were off.

“They got to stop at every corner,” one rider said. “That’s going to be an inconvenience if you are trying to get someplace fast.”

“They don’t come,” said another. “Like, you will just wait at the corner and they don’t come. And sometimes the bus will come but it will just go right by you, so you have to wait for the next one. It happens way too much for me.”

If you’ve ever depended on the bus to get to work or school or really anywhere, those complaints might sound familiar. But according to a [new report](#) from transportation

research and advocacy organization TransitCenter, riders are even less enthused about public transit than they were two years ago. The group’s biennial census of transit riders convened six focus groups (including the Philadelphia one) and solicited survey results from more than 1,700 riders in the New York, Chicago, Denver, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Seattle metro areas.



Today, many regions have [cheap gas](#), [easy-come auto loans](#), Uber, Lyft, and now a new breed of bike- and scooter-share. So transit users aren’t riding like they used to.

The survey found that nearly a quarter of riders have decreased their transit use, 15 percent of those going from using transit “all the time” to being “occasional” riders. Nine

percent have abandoned transit all together. Those results appear to comport with other local and national research on transit ridership, which has found that American bus ridership alone fell by 5 percent between 2016 and 2017. The country's seven largest transit systems—Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, Philadelphia, New York, and Washington, DC—all lost riders in that period.

Where are those former all-purpose riders going? The TransitCenter results point to a growing consensus among transportation experts and researchers: Americans are getting even more into cars. More survey respondents said they had full-time car access today than did two years ago, 54 percent compared with 43 percent. Similarly, the number of respondents who said they didn't have access to a car decreased, from 27 percent to 21 percent.

And while Uber and Lyft have grabbed headlines for [convincing people to abandon transit](#) in big cities like New York and Chicago, the TransitCenter says that the effects of those services are limited to just a few dense, urban places. "The broader issue is clearing space for your transit to get through congestion, and most of that congestion is from private cars, not [ride-hail]," says Ben Fried, the group's communications head. "Cities need to make transit fast, affordable, convenient." Truly attractive transit has to do that better than private cars.

Transportation advocates argue that the creeping shift from transit to private vehicles isn't good for cities. It's not space-efficient: Per passenger, a bus carrying 40 people takes up far less room on the road than a person driving themselves to work, as 76 percent of Americans do. Nor is it equitable: Private cars are expensive, and lifting off the pedal of transit investment in favor of car infrastructure leaves lower-income people to suffer with crowded commutes and infrequent service. Then there's a climate argument: Buses and trains are more emission-friendly than single-occupancy cars. Meeting regions' climate goals [demands cities get better about transit](#).

Still, there's plenty of hope for transit, because only 9 percent of surveyed riders abandoned transit all together. "While people are taking transit less often, they're not completely cutting transit out of their lives," says Mary Buchanan, a TransitCenter researcher. "They're hanging onto transit for every now and then."

That might mean there is an opportunity to convince those riders to get back on the bus or train or light-rail car. Survey respondents who reduced their transit use said their number one transit wish is more frequent service, followed by safer, and then more predictable, trips.

Making that happen is no small order, but some places have pulled it off. Seattle, for example, plans to invest \$53 billion in light rail, and in 2014 the city passed a 0.1 percent sales tax to support its bus system. Its ridership (and particularly bus ridership!) [is up](#). Oh, and [traffic is down](#). And the TransitCenter survey respondents in Seattle cited improvements as a reason they took transit more often.

It's elementary, really: Cities just need to build systems where riding the bus is more relaxing and convenient than hopping in your car.