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Falling Transit Ridership in Southern California

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Falling Transit Ridership in Southern California

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RESEARCH TOPIC

Despite heavy investments in public transportation over the past 15 years, including Measure M approved by Los Angeles County voters in 2016, transit ridership in Southern California is declining. From 2012 to 2016, the state of California lost 62.2 million annual transit rides.

During this same period, the six-county Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) region lost 72 million annual rides, or 120 percent of the state's total losses (see Figure 1). Yet many communities around the region are banking on more transit use to address problems of congestion and climate change.

With such political support and policy stakes invested in transit, why is ridership falling? UCLA researchers explored a variety of data sources related to transportation and travel behavior in the SCAG region to better understand the reasons behind this trend. Their findings can help inform policymakers and transportation planners on how best to address declining transit ridership.

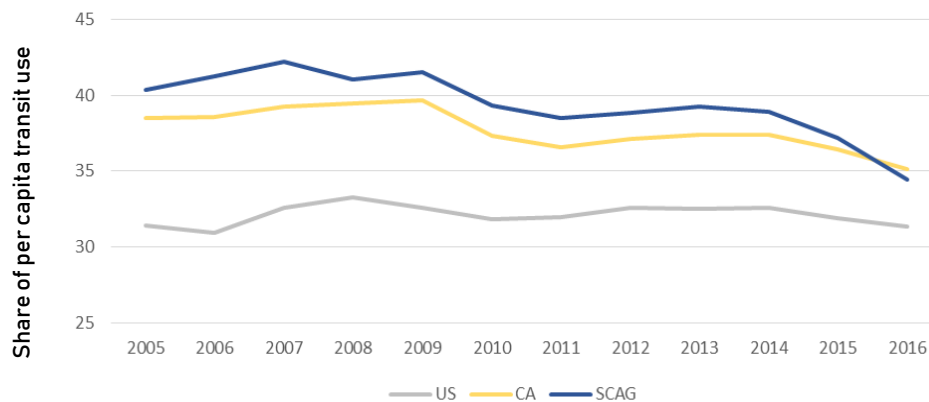


Fig. 1: Transit use per capita has decreased in California since 2009.

Source: National Transit Database (2000-2016)

MAIN FINDINGS

Increased private vehicle ownership can likely explain much of the transit ridership decline in Southern California. Between 2000 and 2015, households in the SCAG region dramatically increased their levels of vehicle ownership, from 1.7 to 2.4 vehicles per household.

Vehicle ownership has grown fastest among subgroups that have historically been most likely to use transit. The increase in vehicle ownership has been driven by low-income and foreign-born households who previously did not, largely for economic reasons, have access to cars. (see Fig 2).

	Share Households With No Vehicles	
	All SCAG Population	Foreign Born Population
2000	10.2%	14.1%
2010	7.7%	9.4%
2015	7.1%	8.2%
Pct Change	-30%	-42%

Fig. 2: Vehicle ownership among foreign born households has increased in the SCAG region from 2000 to 2015.

Fuel prices, service changes, and rideshare use are not the likely drivers of transit ridership decline. Other potential causes do not strongly correlate with the fall of transit ridership in Southern California, unlike the spike in vehicle ownership among heavy transit users.

Californians who rarely ride transit represent great untapped potential. If every fourth person in Southern California who rarely or never rides transit replaced a single driving trip with a transit trip once every two weeks, annual ridership would grow by 96 million.

STUDY APPROACH

Researchers drew on a variety of sources including the U.S. Census, state and national travel diary data, gas price and economic data from the Energy Information Agency and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as well as rider surveys conducted by regional transit operators. Researchers then sorted this data into two categories of reasons for falling ridership: Factors that transit operators can generally control (quantity and quality of service, safety, and fares) and factors they cannot (employment, fuel prices, transportation network companies, neighborhood change and migration, and vehicle ownership).

Changes in Household Vehicle Ownership, Major SCAG Population Centers, 2000-2015

	Los Angeles County			Orange County			All SCAG		
	2000	2010	2015	2000	2010	2015	2000	2010	2015
Vehicles Per Household	1.6	2.3	2.3	1.9	2.5	2.5	1.7	2.4	2.4
Share HHs No Vehicles	12.6%	9.5%	9.7%	5.8%	4.7%	4.8%	10.1%	7.4%	7.6%
Share HHs 3+ Vehicles	16.0%	20.5%	20.1%	20.5%	25.0%	25.0%	17.9%	23.3%	22.8%

Source: US Census and ACS Summary File Data

Fig. 3: Vehicles per household has increased in the SCAG region from 2000 to 2015.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Transit agencies should expand their target market. The majority of people in Southern California rarely or never use transit. Based on current trends, public transportation's core ridership could dramatically shrink in the near future. Rather than try to recapture these riders, transit agencies should convince "choice riders" to occasionally take transit instead of driving.

Transit agencies and planners should focus on ridership factors within their control. Car ownership, the leading factor in ridership decline, is outside the control of transit agencies. But agencies can increase the quality of service to make transit more appealing to choice riders. The future of public transit will be shaped less by the mobility needs of people without cars and more by policy decisions that encourage car owners to increase their occasional transit trips.

Source: Manville, M., Taylor, B.D., Blumenberg, E. (2018) *Falling Transit Ridership in California and Southern California*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies.

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