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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/71d6h5r7>

Authors

Wasserman, Jacob L
Taylor, Brian D.
Blumenberg, Evelyn
et al.

Publication Date

2020-02-01

DOI

10.17610/T64G6D

February 2020

The Bay Area is Losing Transit Ridership — But Transit Commuting is Growing

Jacob Wasserman, Brian D. Taylor, Evelyn Blumenberg, Mark Garrett

Introduction

Public transit ridership has been slipping nationally and in California since 2014. The San Francisco Bay Area, with the highest share of transit trips in the state, had until recently resisted those trends, especially compared to Greater Los Angeles. However, despite a booming economy, in 2017 and 2018, the region lost over 27 million annual transit boardings, over 5 percent of all transit trips. Transit patronage in 2019 was back to where it was in 2008. Excluding the two largest operators, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation

Agency (Muni) and Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), regional ridership is less than 90 percent of where it was a decade ago. All the while, transit use has become much more commute-focused. The average number of trips to and from work by transit rose by over two-thirds, while non-work transit trips fell slightly. Researchers at the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies examined both of these trends in a report on Bay Area transit ridership for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission. Key findings from that study are summarized below.

Figure 1.

Delayed Ridership Losses in the Bay Area, Particularly on BART and Muni
(Data Source: FTA, 2019)

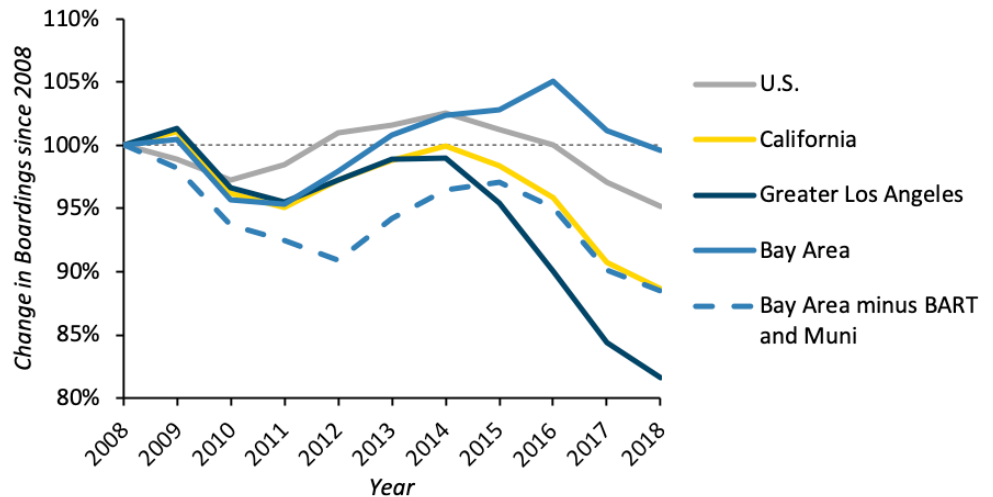
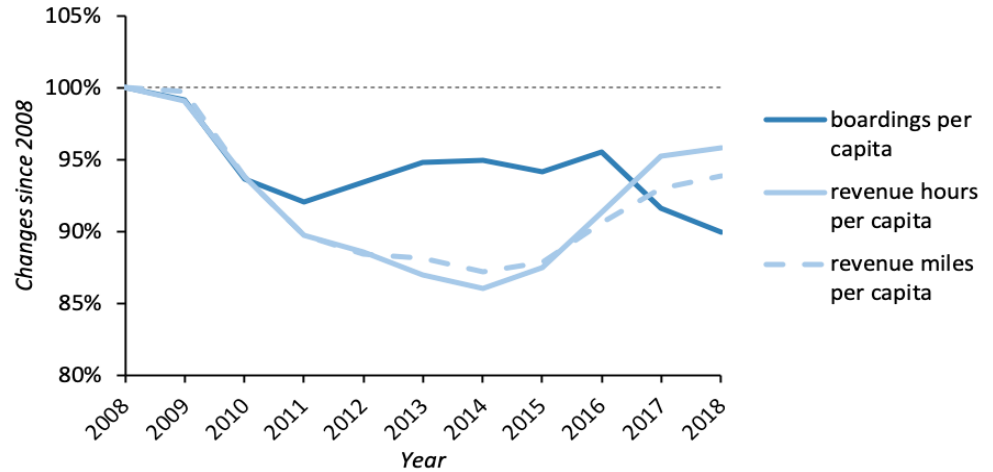


Figure 2.

Bay Area Boardings per Capita versus Service per Capita
(Data Source: FTA, 2019 and U.S. Census Bureau, 2011, 2019)



Key Research Findings

Bay Area transit ridership fundamentals have been faltering for some time. Even before the recent dip in total ridership, individual transit use was edging downward — falling from 72 annual trips per Bay Area resident in 2008 to just 65 in 2018 — but growing population hid this problem. Moreover, patronage on many small- and medium-sized Bay Area transit operators had been stagnating or falling for years, but high ridership on Muni and especially BART propped up ridership regionwide.

Rail service has fared better than buses. Across operators, rail ridership (especially heavy rail like BART) has increased over the past decade (before the recent dip), but bus patronage has declined. Buses are logging more hours in service, in part because bus speeds are down, probably due to worsening traffic congestion. Added service hours needed to crawl through traffic are not buying better bus service.

Service is up and patronage is down. While transit providers reduced their service at the start of the Great Recession as ridership began falling, since 2014 most systems have been adding hours and mileage, in some cases substantially. But just as service supply is on the rise, ridership has again

begun to fall. The Bay Area has, therefore, avoided a spiral of service cuts and ridership losses, as happened in other metro areas, but instead faces the perhaps more vexing issue of increased service carrying fewer riders.

Transit use in the Bay Area is increasingly concentrated in the peak hours and peak directions, particularly into and out of downtown San Francisco. Commute-oriented rail and bus services have either grown their ridership or at least held their own better than off-peak services. For example, transbay BART trips accounted for 43 percent of the *entire region’s* ridership growth from 2012 to 2015. The steepest transit ridership losses have come at off-peak times, on weekends, in non-commute directions, and on outlying lines. The region’s three most clearly commute-oriented operators — Caltrain, BART, and Golden Gate Transit — have witnessed the most severe peaking problems.

Transit travelers are increasingly non-traditional riders. In general, poor people, people living in households with few or no private automobiles, and recent immigrants are especially likely to ride public transit. And while high-propensity transit riders still make a plurality of Bay Area transit trips, most of the growth in Bay Area transit use over the past decade has come from so-called *choice riders*. This group — who tend to have the highest incomes, have

Figure 3.

Transbay BART Trips Accounted for Much of the Bay Area's Overall Ridership Growth since 2012
(Data Source: BART, 2019 and FTA, 2019)

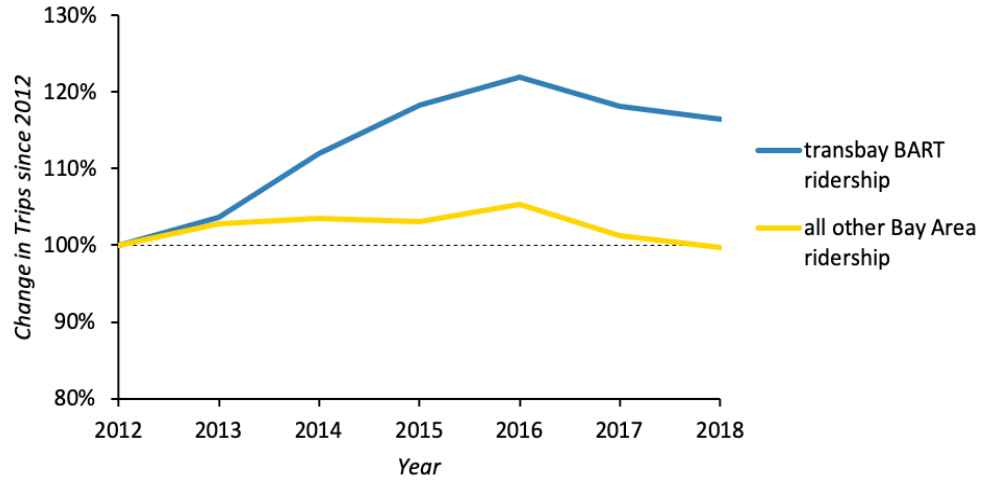
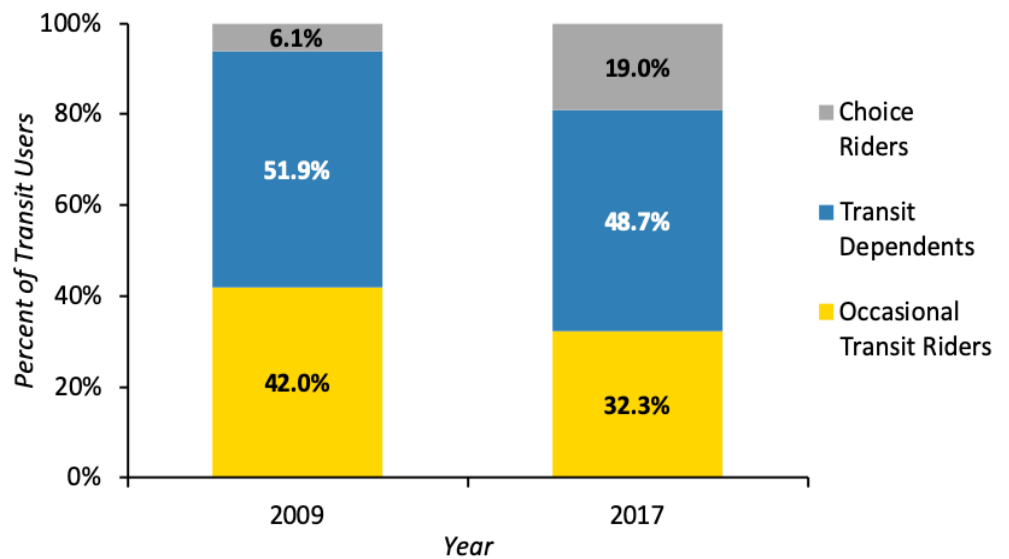


Figure 4.

The Changing Make-up of Transit Ridership in the Central Bay Area Counties*
(Data Source: FHWA, 2009, 2017)



*The Central Bay Area Counties include Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, SF, and San Mateo counties.

the most personal vehicles available, and take the longest transit trips — tripled their share of Bay Area transit trips between 2009 and 2017. Meanwhile, the relative shares of *occasional transit riders*, who use transit to supplement other primary modes, and *transit dependents*, low-income riders with few or no cars, both declined. Thus, Bay Area transit increasingly is becoming a commute-oriented rather than a social-safety-net-focused mobility service.

For a review of possible explanations for these changes in Bay Area transit ridership and what might be done about them, see our policy briefs entitled “Why is Bay Area Transit Ridership Falling?” and “What Can Be Done About Falling Transit Ridership in the Bay Area?”

Figure Data Sources

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This policy brief is drawn from the UCLA Institute of Transportation Studies report “What’s Behind Recent Transit Ridership Trends in the Bay Area?” To access this report and additional policy briefs on UCLA ITS transit trends research, go to www.its.ucla.edu. This project was funded by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the UC ITS Statewide Transportation Research Program, and the California Department of Transportation.