



Maybe Transit Isn't Surging After All



<http://www.theatlanticcities.com/commute/2014/03/maybe-transit-isnt-surging-after-all/8702/>

When the 2013 transit ridership numbers were reported as a "record" earlier this month — [here](#), [there](#), and [everywhere](#) — a friend who seldom remarks on public transportation wrote me confused. He found it odd that the American Public Transportation Association was celebrating 10.65 billion transit rides as the most since 1956. Shouldn't it be upset that over a period when the country added roughly 150 million people, transit ridership went up zero percent?

The point was well taken. It demanded some qualification: any transit trends since the mid-20th century must be understood in the context of policies that have favored driving and suburban development, in which case the recent figures, if nothing else, were heading in the desired direction. But, yeah, well taken.

With respect to APTA, which is after all an open advocate, the new numbers are indeed misleading. Case in point: [its press release](#) mentions that ridership is up 37 percent and has outpaced population growth since 1995. But why 1995? Why an 18-year benchmark? Well, probably because transit

ridership took a big dip that year — from 7.95 billion trips to 7.76 billion, via [APTA's own figures](#) — which makes any subsequent rise seem more impressive.

Statistics are often in the eye of the beholder, but these seem especially flawed. Late last week, in a [Washington Post op-ed](#), transport scholars David King, Michael Manville, and Michael Smart called the numbers "deceptive" and the interpretation that transit is surging "wrong." They point out that when U.S. population growth is taken into account, the rate of annual transit use has stagnated over the years.

The *Post* didn't allow much room for numerical explanation, but Smart tells *Cities* to look closer at a statistic of transit trips per week. From 1920 to 1960 that figure was more than 1 trip per person per week. In 1975, with the U.S. population of 216 million taking 7.2 billion transit trips, it dipped to .64 trips per person per week. In 2013, with the population at 316 million and trips at 10.65 billion, it was about the same. Here's a telling chart provided by Smart ([click through](#) to the original for a zoom option):



The lesson that King, Manville, and Smart are trying to impart is not that transit is dead — rather, that presenting misleading ridership numbers hurts the ability of transit advocates to actually advocate for transit. Above all, they argue, the narrative that transit is surging distracts from the real mobility challenge facing U.S. cities: "driving is too cheap." They write:

Charging the right price for driving would give drivers a better-performing system, both by reducing congestion and raising revenue to help repair roads. It would help communities and the planet by reducing pollution. And, not least, it would help public transportation by leveling the playing field between transit and private vehicles. Increased subsidies for public transportation have

neither reduced driving nor increased transit use. But ending subsidies to driving probably would do both.

This is a point we've made [time](#) and [again](#) of late at *Cities*. Incentivizing transit use will only go so far without disincentivizing car use. It's also why — despite our great interest in the [future of transportation](#) — we caution against getting [too caught up in futuristic transportation](#). Many of the tools to ease the mobility problems facing cities can be found right here in the present.

None of this is to dismiss the new ridership figures entirely. Again, the overall trends are in the right direction, and there are plenty of bright spots in the field. King, Manville, and Smart write that transit declined in absolute terms in 2013 outside of New York's MTA. But it's worth noting that many other systems across the country saw [impressive ridership increases](#): the Los Angeles MTA (up 2 percent to 478 million annual trips), Denver RTD (up 2.6 percent to 87.8 million), Houston Metro (up 2.8 percent to 84 million), Salt Lake City UTA (up 3 percent to 44 million). Systems across the country are also seeing big spikes in [off-peak and weekend trips](#) — the places with the most potential for growth. As important as it is to keep a proper national perspective, it's equally crucial to study when and where transit is working.

And the practical truth is that good public transit must be in place *before* metro areas can realistically think about making it more expensive to drive. There's a reason New York might become the first American city [to adopt road pricing](#) — it has great transit. Road pricing is always going to be hard to sell public officials, whose constituents see the policy as a new tax; without strong transit alternatives, it would be an impossible one.