

## **The missing commuters: Six years after COVID-19, San Francisco's transit system reflects a city still recovering**

The traffic was gone. Sidewalks sat empty. Neighborhoods that normally buzzed with life felt suspended in time.

For Sergio Rivera, walking through San Francisco felt like stepping outside at 3 a.m.

"It was like walking around a place where you know people are — or at least are supposed to be," he said. "You get a sort of eerie feeling."

The 20-year-old Mission District native wasn't describing a night stroll. He was recalling what San Francisco felt like during the pandemic.

Six years later, much of that emptiness has faded. Yet public transportation, particularly into downtown San Francisco, remains one of the clearest indicators of how much recovery still lies ahead.

A [2025 study from the Mineta Transportation Institute](#) found that rail systems such as BART and Caltrain have recovered far more slowly than local bus services, with ridership still below half of pre-pandemic levels. Researchers attributed much of the gap to remote and hybrid work, which reduced the daily flow of commuters into downtown San Francisco.

The consequences extend beyond empty train cars.

Before the pandemic, passenger fares and parking fees [covered nearly 70% of BART's operating costs](#), making it one of the most fare-dependent transit systems in the country. As ridership fell, so did one of the agency's primary sources of revenue.

"BART's biggest strength became its weakness," said David Reinke, a transportation economist and co-author of the study.

Michael Roccaforte, deputy spokesperson for the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA), said some of Muni's busiest crosstown routes have already surpassed pre-pandemic ridership levels, including the 49 Van Ness line.

"We're starting to see a lot of ridership recover on crosstown connections," Roccaforte said.

While Muni Metro light rail ridership increased roughly 20% between April 2025 and April 2026, routes that depend heavily on commuters traveling into the city's core continue to recover more slowly.

"There's obviously a new normal that all of San Francisco is experiencing, but downtown is an area that presents a lot of opportunity for evolution," Roccaforte said.

"San Francisco is a very dynamic city, and over the decades it's constantly reinvented itself."

According to [BART's quarterly service performance review](#), ridership grew nearly 15% between January and March 2026 compared with the same period a year earlier. The system averaged more than 192,000 weekday trips during the quarter, continuing a gradual recovery from pandemic-era lows.

Still, increased ridership has not erased deeper challenges.

While visitors and tourists have returned to San Francisco, downtown office occupancy remains far below pre-pandemic levels. According to [city data](#), office vacancy rates have risen from roughly 5% in 2019 to about 30% in 2026.

"Transit likes a crowd," Reinke said. "The ideal transit market is where you have a central city that attracts people."

Visitors have largely returned to San Francisco, but many of the office workers who once packed trains and buses five days a week have not, leaving transit agencies trying to rebuild ridership in a city that no longer functions quite the way it did before 2020.

But transit's importance extends beyond those who depend on it to get around. Public transportation helps reduce traffic congestion, lower vehicle emissions and connect residents to jobs, schools and medical care.

"It's hugely important," Reinke said. "You can't possibly get all the people to their jobs by car."

For residents such as Lamont Green, the stakes are immediate. Green, 33, does not own a car and relies on transit to travel around the Bay Area.

"I don't drive. I'm very familiar with the BART system," Green said. "If they close that, it's gonna be pretty hectic out here."

Roccaforte said the impact reaches beyond transit riders.

Muni provides more than 500,000 passenger trips each day, helping move workers, students and visitors throughout the city.

"When we have good transportation, there's a lot of room for economic development," he said.

"Anywhere that really connects public transit, really connects people to opportunity."

For Reinke, transit remains one of the clearest measures of the city's recovery.

"San Francisco has gone through ups and downs before," he said, noting that he remembers the polio epidemic and has watched the city recover from major challenges over the decades.

But when asked whether San Francisco has recovered from the pandemic, his answer was simple.

"I'd say not yet."

Six years after COVID-19 emptied San Francisco's streets, the city has regained much of the activity that once defined it. But as transit agencies continue to rebuild ridership and downtown struggles to recover its pre-pandemic workforce, one of the clearest measures of the city's recovery remains unfinished.

For now, Reinke's answer still stands: "Not yet."