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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0h2223jp>

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### **Publication Date**

2021-07-21

### **DOI**

10.17610/T6CK57

July 2022

# Incentivizing a Post-Pandemic Shift to Commuter Rail



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## Issue

Metrolink, a commuter rail agency operated by the Southern California Regional Rail Authority (SCRRA), is one of the busiest public transportation providers in Southern California. As the pandemic continues, Metrolink ridership has been slow to recover. In February 2022, Metrolink reported 282,483 passenger boardings, only 28% of pre-pandemic ridership levels recorded in February 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has left future travel to work behavior uncertain; most office employees have not yet returned to commuting five days per week. This uncertainty underscores the precarious future of American commuter rail, with existing rail service narrowly focused on connecting suburbs to downtown employment centers.

Metrolink has an opportunity to appeal to new potential riders and leverage changes in commute behavior to create more sustainable habits by convincing people who currently drive alone to try transit. However, the relative dearth of recent research on the motivations for commuter rail ridership and the need for pandemic and post-pandemic travel commute and traveler data highlight an important question: What factors motivate travelers to switch from driving alone to riding commuter rail?

## Study Approach

To answer this question, the researcher conducted a literature review to establish an overview of the existing commuter rail ridership market, build a conceptual framework for encouraging mode shift, and discuss

applying behavioral-science based research to mode shift interventions. Two surveys collected data on riders' travel behavior and perceptions of commuter rail. These surveys were conducted in December 2021 and January 2022, receiving 1,628 responses that included both current and potential Metrolink riders. Analyses of these survey data offer insights on the travel behavior of existing and potential Metrolink riders and the criteria they consider important when choosing whether to ride commuter rail. Finally, the researcher conducted a review of five other commuter rail agencies' websites and marketing materials, including Caltrain (San Francisco), BART (San Francisco), Long Island Railroad (New York), NJ Transit (Newark), and Metra (Chicago) to gain an understanding of how other agencies view the post-pandemic future of commuter rail and forecasts for ridership recovery.

## Research Findings

Research focused on how to incentivize mode shift through a behavioral science perspective has provided ideas that broadly fall into three categories: "try transit" exposure programs; technologies such as gamification-based apps or trip-planning tools that provide information and rewards for transit usage; and targeted marketing campaigns to attract new riders.

In these surveys, low-income households, older riders, lapsed riders, people who have never used Metrolink, and riders mostly interested in leisure trips had higher engagement and interest in Metrolink. The factors that most influenced existing and potential riders to choose



Image Source: Metrolink (2022)

commuter rail included safety, convenient train schedules, cleanliness onboard trains, and on-time performance. Metrolink riders also expressed the need for increased access to real-time information, more transit connections at stations, and more affordable fare options.

Other commuter rail agencies such as Caltrain, BART, Long Island Railroad, NJ Transit, and Metra all have found similar ridership trends and offer ideas for service improvement, marketing campaigns, and mode shift incentives that Metrolink should consider.

## Recommendations

The recommendations fall into three priority areas:

- 1. Improving riders’ Metrolink experience and persuading potential riders to switch to Metrolink.** Future actions under this goal include: diversifying fare offerings to accommodate less predictable Metrolink demand, particularly for riders who do not want to commit to a fixed pass or to use Metrolink for work trips; supporting expanded fare discounts for youth, seniors, and low-income riders to encourage more frequent trips; and addressing the concerns of existing riders and people hesitant to try transit — particularly due to COVID and security concerns — and improving their access to information.



Owen, E. (2022). Try Transit! Lessons Learned From Metrolink Riders to Incentivize a Post-Pandemic Mode Shift to Commuter Rail (UCLA, Master’s capstone). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4x04003s>.

- 2. Develop low-risk ways for people unfamiliar with transit to experience Metrolink and reward permanent mode shift.** Exposing people to Metrolink could occur through periodic “try Metrolink” pilots, a permanent program through the existing Corporate Partner Program, or through a rider referral program. New technologies could also improve trip planning capability and provide rewards for choosing non-automotive modes of transportation. Additionally, promoting fun, well-known destinations, such as through a formal “Rail to Trails” program could also incentivize ridership.
- 3. Expand outreach efforts and community partnerships to attract new ridership.** Metrolink marketing efforts should aim to convince riders to adopt new habits using strategies such as anecdotes about time and cost savings to riders, personalized ads, and promoting the return to transit as a “welcome back” celebration. Furthermore, strengthening community relationships by establishing formal partnerships with local transportation management associations (TMAs) and universities are another way for Metrolink to make connections within the community and be recognized as a household staple in California.