

Think Uber and Lyft Are Killing Transit? Think Again

A new report by Shared-Use Mobility Center found that peak ridership with transportation network companies generally falls outside of traditional transit operating hours.

BY SKIP DESCANT ([HTTP://WWW.GOVTECH.COM/AUTHORS/SKIP-DESCANT.HTML](http://www.govtech.com/authors/skip-descant.html)) / MAY 18, 2018



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Lyft and Uber are not replacing public transit — nor should they.

These are the findings of a new report by the Shared-Use Mobility Center (<http://sharedusemobilitycenter.org/>), an imprint of the Transit Cooperative Research Program (<http://www.trb.org/Publications/PubsTCRPPProjectReports.aspx>) at the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine.

The study partnered with a transportation network company (TNC) — as Uber and Lyft are known — to gain insight into rider habits, as well as pick-up and drop-off destinations for several U.S. cities. The study, known as *Who's Riding TNCs and What Does It Mean for Public Agencies?*

(<http://onlinepubs.trb.org/onlinepubs/webinars/180515.pdf>), did not disclose which TNC it partnered with.

The report comes as transit agencies nationwide confront ridership declines amid rising car-ownership rates, cheap gas, aging transit systems and service cuts made during the Great Recession. It also comes against a backdrop of increasing familiarity and use of services like Uber and Lyft.

“I think TNCs could definitely be a part of what’s going on. I do not think that they are the whole of the picture,” said Colin Murphy, director of research at the Shared-Use Mobility Center, during a May 15 webinar. “You’re seeing transit ridership drop basically everywhere, across the entire country. In large cities and small cities. In places with robust rail networks, and places with not a whole lot of bus service.”

For the study, researchers were given access to TNC ridership information from Chicago, Washington, D.C., Seattle, Los Angeles and Nashville, Tenn., from May 2016. The team also had access to survey data from the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit Agency (BART), Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), New Jersey Transit and Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA), as well as survey data collected by the Shared-Mobility Center from roughly 10,300 users of transit and TNCs.

For the most part, residents surveyed across the study areas were using public transit to get to and from work.

“But across all of these cities — if you added it up — only about a quarter of the weekly ride volume in TNCs was taking place during rush hour, which is really, really opposite what you would see in normal public transit usage and solo driving,” said Murphy.

Use of services like Uber and Lyft tended to spike on weekends and late in the evenings when transit service tends to be scaled back. Also, most users of ride-hailing apps don't normally need to go very far.

"The trips that we saw were generally short, for the most part. They were pretty concentrated in the core of each of the counties that we were looking at," said Murphy. "Average trips were three miles or less," trips to and from airports being the exception.

Peak ridership with TNCs was Saturday at about 9 p.m. or 10 p.m., the research showed, accounting for 20 to 27 percent of total TNC usage. Usage was highest in Chicago and Washington, D.C., and lowest in Nashville. Also, ride-share usage tended to be widespread across all regions, but relatively infrequent.

Users of services like Uber and Lyft tended to skew young, white and educated, with around 10 percent of top TNC usage ZIP codes including college campuses.

"That said, TNC usage did not appear at all to be an exclusively a white phenomenon," said Murphy.

The findings by the Shared-Use Mobility Center were in line with TNC data collected by the state of Massachusetts (<https://tnc.sites.digital.mass.gov/>), which tracks the usage of these emerging mobility options. The average length of a TNC journey was 4.5 miles in the state, for 15.4 minutes, according to a 2017 report by the Massachusetts Department of Public Utilities.

In 2017, there were roughly 64.8 million trips started in Massachusetts, which may begin to explain why the biggest loser in the new ride-share world is the taxi business. Transit agency surveys found that taxi use declined 33 percent among riders of BART, 6 percent among riders of MARTA and 61 percent among riders of WMATA in the Seattle region.

Public-sector transit agencies and private-sector transportation networks ought to begin thinking creatively about how to grow partnerships, which both grow ridership with transit and prioritize ride-sharing opportunities to reduce traffic congestion, said Sharon Feigon, executive director of the Shared-Use Mobility Center.

Los Angeles Metro has already undertaken steps to possibly partner with companies to provide on-demand, micro-transit service. The agency is contracting with RideCo, NoMad Transit and Transdev to come up with three feasibility studies to show how the project might be structured.

Mid-size transit agencies should think about how to close first-mile, last-mile gaps by possibly partnering with TNCs, said Feigon.

“By finding a way to increase the range of folks who can get to the end of a train line, or the beginning of one, there’s an opportunity to better serve the existing riders, and attract new ones,” Feigon added. “If the only way that the first- and last-mile is being met requires getting an automobile, once you have someone in a single-occupancy vehicle their behavior may be to just continue that for the entire ride. But by combining a TNC approach with transit, there’s some interesting opportunities.”

Smaller transit agencies that may not have very frequent service or high volumes, could use TNCs to fill in service gaps.

“Really it’s a case for looking for unproductive routes, and then getting creative, especially about shared or pooled rides that could occur with TNCs, or other van-type vehicles,” said Feigon.

Ultimately where public transit is gaining riders are in those regions making genuine investments into expanding and improving service, Murphy said.

“If you build it, they will ride,” he remarked.

At the same time, it’s a folly to think TNCs might somehow replace public transit.

“One of the arguments that you often see for not investing in public transit is that TNCs have come along and are going to solve all of our problems, and it’s silly to invest in these big expensive systems when networks of private cars are going to take care of all that,” said Murphy. “And what we’re seeing in our research ... is that transit is still doing what transit does best, which is moving a whole lot of people at rush hour, in the most efficient way. If you’re taking thousands of people out of trains and buses and then putting them — even if it’s two or three of them — into individual cars, that’s just going to be a recipe for absolute gridlock.”



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