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TRANSIT

New York City Subway Is Low Risk for Coronavirus Transmission, Study Says

Several academic papers have suggested that transit systems contributed to the virus's spread

A spokeswoman for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority said a new report supported other evidence that riding public transit is safe in the age of Covid-19 'with the proper public health safeguards in place.'

PHOTO: MICHAEL NAGLE/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By Paul Berger

Sept. 29, 2020 10:00 am ET

A study of transit systems world-wide suggests New York City subway and bus riders are at low risk of being infected with the new coronavirus during their commutes.

The report, released Tuesday by a national association of transit agencies, found no correlation between the spread of coronavirus and mass-transit systems. As long as trains and buses are well-ventilated and riders wear masks, public transit is safe, the authors of the report found.

They also found that infection rates are more closely related to prevalence of the virus in a community than the size and density of its transit system.

Several academic papers published during the pandemic suggested that transit systems, such as New York City's often packed subway, contributed to the virus's spread.

The MTA is spending hundreds of millions of dollars cleaning and disinfecting trains, buses and frequently touched surfaces in stations.

PHOTO: JOHN MINCHILLO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Sam Schwartz, whose transit-consulting firm published Tuesday's report for the American Public Transportation Association, said he and his team found that modes of transportation that keep people in the same space over a long period, such as a tour bus or an airplane, could spread the virus. But in spaces where people spend a short period and tend not to talk, risks are low.

The authors, mainly transit and transportation planners, said they had found no correlation between public-transit use and the virus's spread anywhere in the world and suggested that employees were more likely to catch the virus at work than in transit.

"Everything has a risk to it," Mr. Schwartz said in an interview. "But your risks are probably greater at your place of employment or if you are going out to a restaurant."

New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which runs two commuter railroads as well as the city's subway and bus systems, is going to great lengths to reassure riders that transit is safe.

Abbey Collins, a spokeswoman for the state-controlled MTA, said in a statement: "This report adds to the growing body of evidence that mass transit is safe with the proper public health safeguards in place."

The authority is spending hundreds of millions of dollars cleaning and disinfecting trains, buses and frequently touched surfaces in stations. It recently imposed a $50 fine on riders who refuse to wear a face covering.

Jeffrey Harris, who published a paper in April arguing that the subway spread the virus, said those actions hadn't been taken during the early days of the pandemic, which hit New York City in March.

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Dr. Harris, a physician and an emeritus professor at MIT's Department of Economics, said in an email that analyses of Covid-19 cases and location data from smartphones were sufficient to show that the subway spread the virus.

"There is strong evidence that New York City's unique, massive subway system served as a vehicle to propagate the virus rapidly throughout the city's five boroughs within days of arriving from abroad," Mr. Harris said.

Steve N. Chillrud, a research scientist at Columbia University, said that without good contact tracing, in which health officials track the movement of a virus among people, it wasn't possible to say definitively where people caught the virus.

Before the pandemic, the subway carried 5.5 million people on an average weekday. Fear of the virus is hindering the MTA's efforts to attract people back to trains and buses.

Internal surveys taken at firms across the city this summer revealed that mass transit was among the top concerns deterring workers from returning to the office.

While mass transit ridership remains between 50% and 80% below pre-pandemic levels, traffic at the region's major bridges and tunnels is almost back to where it was before the region shut down in the spring, suggesting that some people might have switched from mass transit to cars.

Mr. Schwartz's team reviewed studies on Covid-19 and mass transit around the world, conducted its own data analysis and interviewed public health specialists.

They noted that although transit usage has remained relatively strong in East Asian cities, such as Hong Kong, Seoul and Tokyo, virus transmission there hasn't been linked to ridership, in part because of mask compliance.

"I think the risk is very low and the MTA is doing everything they can," said William N. Rom, a research scientist at New York University's School of Global Public Health, who was interviewed for the report.

Dr. Rom specializes in tuberculosis, which is also transmitted through the air. Dr. Rom said that he had felt comfortable taking trips lasting 15 minutes or less on the subway, bus and Metro-North Railroad during the pandemic while ridership has been low.

He said that a longer trip in a more crowded car or bus might make him more cautious, but that as long as he wore a properly fitted N-95 mask he felt safe.

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Appeared in the September 30, 2020, print edition as 'Subway Is Low Risk for Covid-19, Study Says.'