

# Bureau of Transportation Statistics: Data to Help Our Communities and Economy Thrive

## *Priorities for the 2021-2025 Administration and 117<sup>th</sup> Congress*

The Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) is the principal federal statistical agency that tells us how, how sustainably, and how safely people and commodities move within the United States and across our borders. BTS also tells us how transportation contributes and enables the nation's economy. Its key products include statistics on freight, economic trends, spatial accessibility and availability of transportation services, airline performance, and precursor accident and safety data.

BTS needs—

- Urgent attention to its short- and long-term budget shortfalls
- Re-installment of its Advisory Council on Transportation Statistics
- Technical staff
- Independence from political and other undue external influence

### **Mission, Scope, and Products**

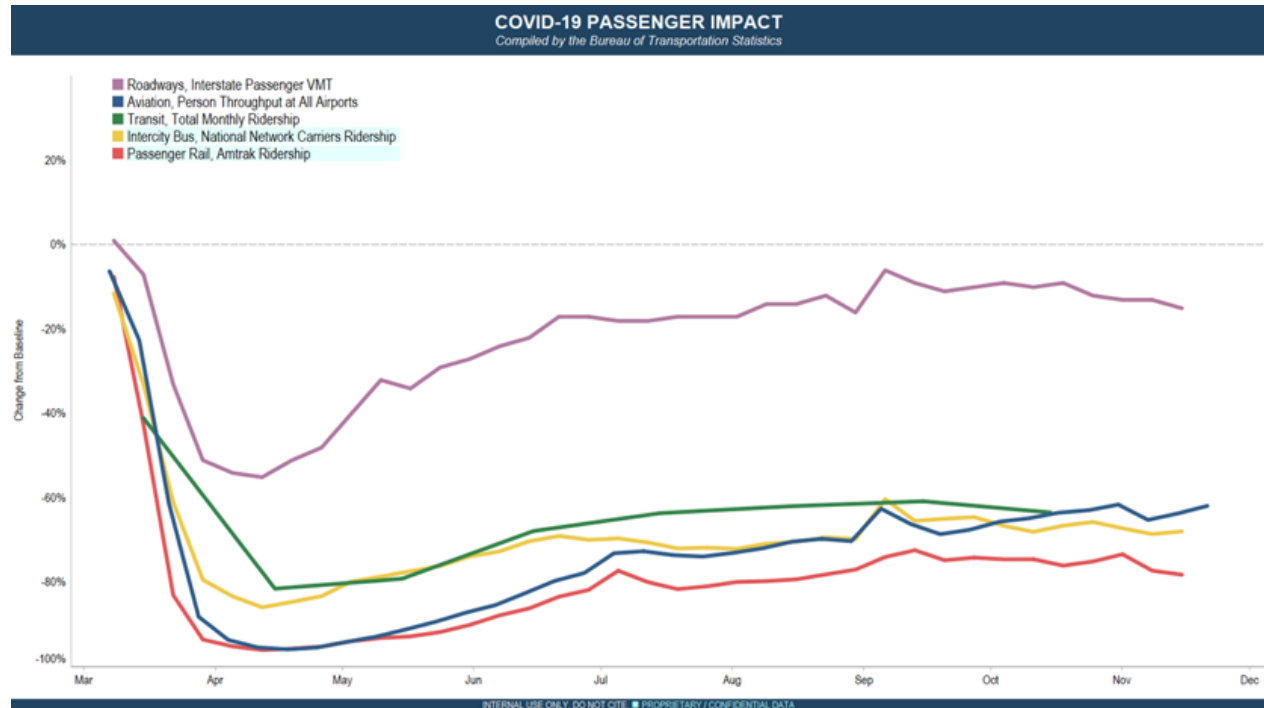
The Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS) in the Department of Transportation (DOT) provides objective, reliable, and trustworthy statistics to strengthen our nation's transportation system through affordable, sustainable, safe, and efficient movement of people and goods. BTS also operates the National Transportation Library where transportation data and information are curated, preserved and made accessible. The agency's key products are:

- Airline Traffic, Finance, and Performance
- Domestic and International Freight
- Transportation Geospatial Data
- Border Crossing Traffic
- Transportation Economic Trends
- Demand on Transportation Services
- Accident Precursor and Safety Data

### **Opportunity: More statistics that are objective, timely and local**

Policymakers and the American people increasingly seek more data to inform their decisions. They want the data more frequently, at smaller geographic scale, and more quickly. They are also confronted with an ever-increasing amount of data from an expanding number of public and private sources. The BTS is the trusted entity naturally positioned to put transportation data in context and turn it into actionable information for policymaker and the public so that they better understand how people and products move in their community. However, although the BTS has provided objective, reliable transportation statistics since its inception in 1991, it lacks the resources to meet the challenges of harnessing the avalanche of available data as well as the rising demand for more timely and location-specific statistics, needed by local, state and federal decisionmakers.

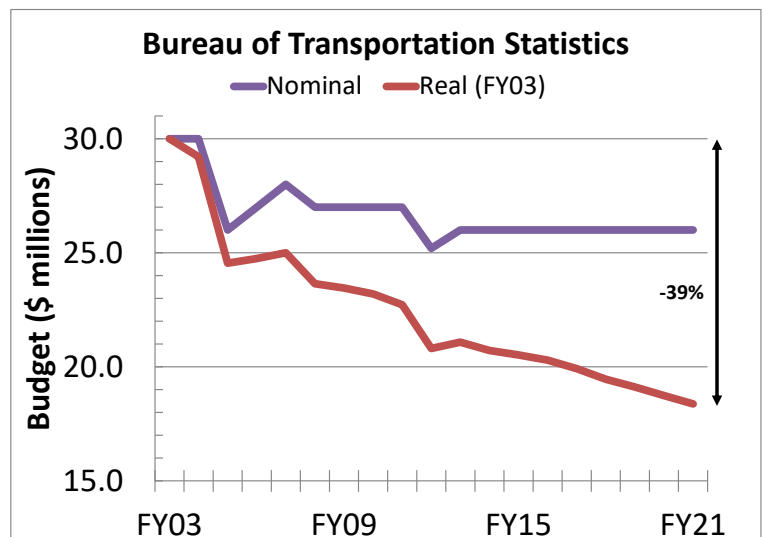
BTS' response to the COVID-19 pandemic provides a glimpse of the ways more investment in the BTS would benefit the economy as well as local, state, and federal policymakers. In spring 2020, BTS started providing daily and weekly statistics that serve as an early indicator of how the pandemic impacts transportation demand and services.



Federal interest in evidence-based policymaking is also escalating, most notably with the 2019 enactment of the bipartisan Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act. The “Evidence Act” focused on the role and responsibilities of the federal statistical agencies, in particular, directing the BTS Director as DOT’s statistical official.

## Challenges

- BTS faces a budget shortfall expected to reach several million dollars in FY2021. BTS has lost 39% of its purchasing power since 2003, which taxes its ability to meet critical missions and to maintain ongoing programs. One impact has been the discontinuation of fundamental and benchmark data programs, forcing decisions to be made based on decades old data.
- The agency faces a serious shortage of full-time equivalent staff (FTE) allotment to maintain internal capacity and to keep pace with advancements in statistical science, limiting BTS ability to leverage big data and be innovative.



- Because of both the budgeting and staffing constraints, BTS is hamstrung to meet the opportunities, needs, and demands outlined above, and faces particular challenges whenever additional needs or alternative opportunities are presented, including but not limited to:
  - developing new data programs to capture emerging transportation trends, such as eCommerce, drone delivery, green transportation, and autonomous transportation;
  - understanding the new normal on passenger and freight movement post-COVID-19 to better inform investment and operational decisions;
  - maintaining fundamental and benchmark data programs to avoid stale data; and
  - expanding on data sharing and linkages that could make existing data more complete and useful.

## Priorities

- **Support additional investments** to BTS' statistics budget so that BTS can tackle the emerging needs and take advantage of the opportunities addressed in challenges above.
- **Address staffing shortfalls** by allowing the BTS Director to hire more FTEs with training in statistical science by expanding the FTE cap to its previous level.
- **Uphold BTS authority** in place over the development of objective and reliable data, budget allocation, hiring, publications, and information technology.
- **Reestablish BTS Advisory Council on Transportation Statistics (ACTS)**. ACTS was created with the establishment of BTS in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 to advise BTS Director. It was terminated by the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018. Such advisory committees facilitate statistical agencies receiving external expertise and communicating with data users.
- **Facilitate more direct access of the BTS Director to the Secretary of Transportation** to serve as the Secretary's senior advisor on statistics and data.
- **Improve BTS' communications with Congress** to ensure Congress' data needs are well served by BTS.

## Supporting Organizations

American Highway Users Alliance  
 American Statistical Association  
 Consortium of Social Science Associations  
 Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics

## Resources

- [\*Principles and Practices for a Federal Statistical Agency: Sixth Edition\*](#). National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2017.

For other federal statistical agency priorities, please visit <https://www.amstat.org/ASA/Science-Policy-and-Advocacy/home.aspx#resources> or <https://copafs.org/activities-initiatives/>. For any questions on these documents, or to have your organization added as an endorsing or supporting organization, please contact Steve Pierson ([pierson@amstat.org](mailto:pierson@amstat.org)) or Paul Schroeder ([paul.schroeder@copafs.org](mailto:paul.schroeder@copafs.org)).