

Interpreting Metrobus Tap and No-Tap Data

Metrobus measures bus ridership using sensors on each door called Automatic Passenger Counters (APCs). The farebox collects data about customers who tap a SmarTrip card, pay in cash, or use one of a small number of other special fare payment mechanisms (e.g. showing ID to get the free Montgomery County senior fare on designated routes). To measure fare compliance, Metro compares the total ridership counted by the APC system to the number of people who paid a fare as recorded by the fare system. The difference is referred to as “no-tap” ridership.

No-tap rates and the context of bus fare payment have changed in the past several years. In 2019, the no-tap rate was about 29 percent and has grown to about 71 percent in the first half of 2025. Some of the factors influencing this trend include:

- Metrobus and local bus operators suspended fare collection during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, from late March 2020. Prior to the pandemic, most bus systems in the region charged the same base fare, and local operators increased fares when Metro did. DC Circulator fares were \$1, as was Prince George’s County TheBus.
- Fare collection was re-instated at different times across the region with Metrobus starting in early January 2021. As fare collection restarted, fare differences across the region grew.
- Currently, Metrobus, Fairfax Connector, and ART charge a base fare of \$2.25.
- In September 2021, DASH went fare-free.
- Montgomery County RideOn became fare free in June 2025. Between resuming fare collection in August 2022 and moving to fare-free in June 2025, the base fare was \$1, with free fares for seniors, youth, and those with disabilities.
- Prince George’s County Transit has a fare of \$1.00, with free fares for seniors, youth, and those with disabilities. As part of the Better Bus Network launch, the County announced they would be fare free, but it is not clear when that will be implemented.
- In late 2022, the DC Council passed a law to make Metrobus free within DC; however, implementation was delayed indefinitely. The news coverage of the bill and related debate resulted in further confusion about whether customers are expected to pay a fare on Metrobus.

Industry research shows that customers evade fares for a variety of reasons, including lack of awareness, lack of ability to pay, perceived lack of enforcement, and social pressure. For those without the means to pay, Metro continues to increase and improve programs available to help customers who need assistance with fares. These include programs in several jurisdictions to provide free bus fares to students, such as the DC Kids Ride Free Program. Metro Lift, an income-qualified program for SNAP recipients, launched in June 2023 and has enrolled more than 13,000 customers.

7/9/2025

Metro replaced its outdated fare collection equipment on-board all bus vehicles in the summer of 2024, and began significant messaging and fare enforcement efforts in the late fall of that year. Metrobuses now also display “Fare Required” on digital screens. These efforts are ongoing.