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Pope Francis Scares Away NYC Commuters

Many riders of trains and buses decided to stay home to avoid the crowds

Penn Station was relatively empty Friday morning as the pope visited other spots in the city. *PHOTO: RAMSAY DE GIVE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDREW TANGEL AND JILLIAN KRAMER**

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Pope Francis is drawing big crowds in New York City, but the pontiff is apparently scaring away some commuters.

Transit agencies reported lighter-than-usual rail and bus ridership and automobile traffic into Manhattan early Friday, the pope's only full day in the city.

NJ Transit's commuter rail system saw about 50% lighter ridership than normal as of late Friday afternoon, a spokeswoman said, citing figures for the entire system including lines connecting to Manhattan.

NJ Transit bus ridership was off about 20%, as was its Hudson-Bergen Light Rail ridership, the spokeswoman said.

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Foot traffic at New York Penn Station seemed thinner than usual during the Friday morning rush hour, as some trains pulled into the station with empty seats.

"We anticipated a huge crowd," said John Krzeminski, 63 years old, who traveled from Philadelphia into New York City for a business meeting. "In fact, we almost canceled our meeting because of the pope's visit. But the station doesn't seem to be any busier than normal."

"Friday is normally our busiest day," said Hudson Booksellers manager Muhammad Ahmad. But today is slower than last Friday. Hopefully it will pick up by this evening."

The city's two other major commuter train services, the Long Island Rail Road and Metro-North Railroad, also reported fewer-than-typical passengers into their major Manhattan hubs.

New York City subway and bus ridership appeared lighter than usual Friday morning, but that was likely to change later in the day, a Metropolitan Transportation Authority spokesman said.

Indeed, after Pope Francis' motorcade drove through Central Park, the MTA said the subway's D express line would be making local stops between 59th and 125th streets due to overcrowding along Central Park West.

The PATH train's ridership also appeared lighter Friday morning, said a spokesman for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which operates the service between both states.

Penn Station is a hub for two subway arteries, Amtrak, NJ Transit and the LIRR. It neighbors Madison Square Garden, where Pope Francis is set to preside over a Mass at 6 p.m., usually the heart of the Friday evening commute time.

"The workers from New Jersey stayed home—working remotely or going to the gym," Mitchell Moss, director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy & Management at New York University, said in an email. "It is a Friday so others came in and are heading home early to avoid crowds coming to the Mass and the security perimeter surrounding Penn Station."

Eastbound automobile traffic across the Port Authority's tunnels and bridges from 6 a.m. to noon Friday was 14% lighter than traffic for a typical September Friday, the Port Authority spokesman said. The authority's crossings include the Holland and Lincoln tunnels, as well as the George Washington Bridge and links to Staten Island.

The LIRR's morning ridership into Penn station was down 21% compared with a typical Friday, another MTA spokesman said.

Ridership to the railroad's Atlantic Terminal in Brooklyn was meanwhile up 36%, the spokesman said, noting the authority suggested riders use that terminal to connect with the city's subway and avoid Penn Station crowding.

The Metro-North Railroad's morning rush-hour ridership to Grand Central Terminal was down 23%, the spokesman said.

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