



The Bad, Old Normal: Subway Signal Problems Still Delayed Trains During 80% of Morning Rush Hours in the First Half of 2021

Introduction

As subway ridership rises with vaccinations, office work, tourism, and warm weather, riders still endure unreliable commutes. The MTA has moved the needle from the system's modern nadir but progress is imperilled. The percent of morning rush hours scrambled by subway signal problems declined from 92% in 2018 to 78% in 2019 but is back up to 80% for the first half of 2021 and a very troubling 88% for the second quarter, April through June 2021.

When signal problems delay trains, riders miss work, interviews, and other appointments. Delays cause back ups that reverberate throughout the day and crowding that complicates many riders' return to transit. The 1930s technology that underlies our signal system is still failing and must be replaced to deliver the reliable subway New York needs more than ever.

Everyone acknowledges that much more must be done to fix the subway. In 2019, Governor Cuomo and the legislature enacted congestion pricing and the MTA proposed its largest-ever capital program. But tolls have yet to take effect and the capital program's financing has been jeopardized by the pandemic. With signal problems still plaguing transit, both regular riders and people considering getting back on board all want to know: When will the subway be fixed?

The pandemic created the MTA's worst-ever fiscal crisis and inspired the largest-ever federal rescue of public transit. With transportation and infrastructure now atop Congress's agenda, riders are looking to Washington leaders, especially Brooklyn's own transit rider-in-chief, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, to deliver again for the MTA.

Methodology

Even now, millions of New Yorkers rely on the subway to get to work, school, and medical appointments. Service failures cause enormous anxiety, frustration, and sometimes lost wages too. During the first half of 2021, there were 125 non-holiday working days. For each of those days, the Riders Alliance examined MTA service alerts between 6 am and 10 am, archived at mymtaalerts.com/messagearchive.aspx. We counted signal problems, tallying them by month. We also counted them by line for the month of June 2021.

Findings

Of 125 morning rush hours in the first half of 2021, 104-- or 80% -- experienced signal problems that delayed trains. For now at least, the trend is going in the wrong direction, with more signal problems and fewer days without delays, in the second quarter, when 88% of morning rush hour were marred by signal delays. By this measure, not only was Q2 of 2021 signal performance worse than Q1 of this year, it was also worse than the same quarter two years earlier, in 2019.

Conclusions

Subway signal problems are still bad while New York is trying hard to reopen. While 2019 showed improvement over 2018, the most recent three months, with mounting signal delays are a sign of trouble, at among the worst possible times. More than ever, New York needs the modern, reliable, accessible subway system that we have long deserved. We look to our leaders in Governor Cuomo and Senator Schumer to fund meaningful improvements as quickly as possible.



