

# Global Pandemic Hits the Streets of Hampton Roads

HAMPTON ROADS SPECIAL REPORT  
APRIL 2020



Traffic volumes have decreased significantly over the past few weeks as COVID-19 continues to spread across the nation. On March 30th, Governor Northam enacted a stay-at-home order and announced the closure of all non-essential business across the Commonwealth. The travel impacts of the events surrounding the pandemic are confirmed in an HRPDC and HRTPO staff analysis of the traffic and transit volumes around the region.

Figure 1 shows daily volumes at the five tunnels in Hampton Roads – the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel (HRBT), the Downtown Tunnel, the Monitor Merrimac Memorial Bridge Tunnel (MMMBT), the Midtown Tunnel, and the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel (CBBT). As we can infer from the figure, there has been a significant decrease in number of vehicles reported at each of the five facilities. The largest percentage decrease was at the CBBT (45.6%) from 59,187 vehicles in the first week of March to 32,174 vehicles in the last week of March. The lowest percentage decrease, on the other hand, was at the Downtown Tunnel (35.7%), from 509,084 vehicles in the first week of March to 327,105 vehicles in the last week of March.

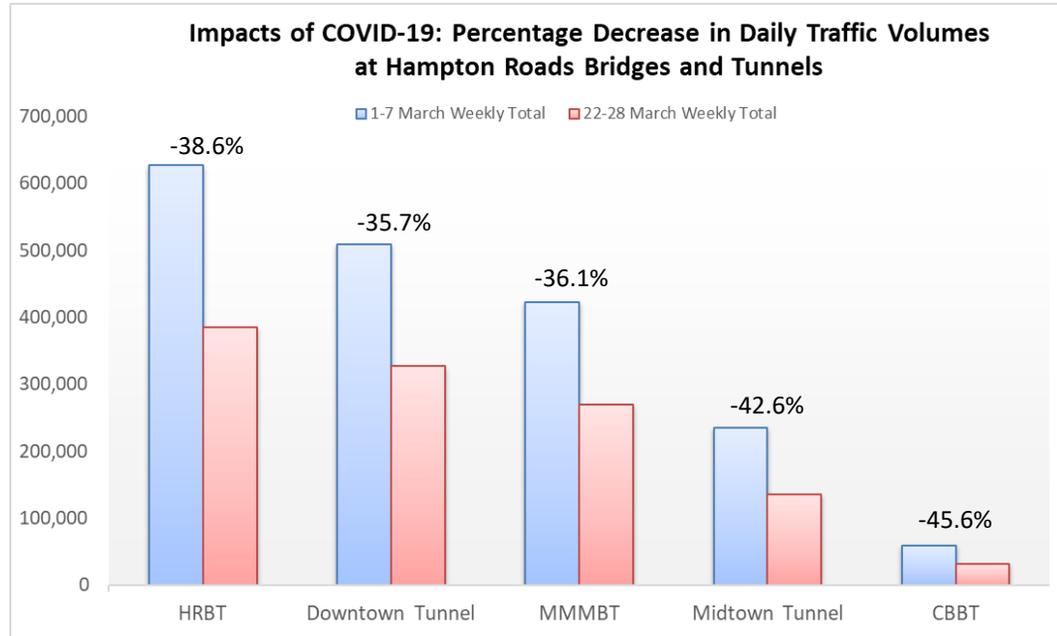


Figure 1. Source: Virginia Department of Transportation, Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, HRTPO

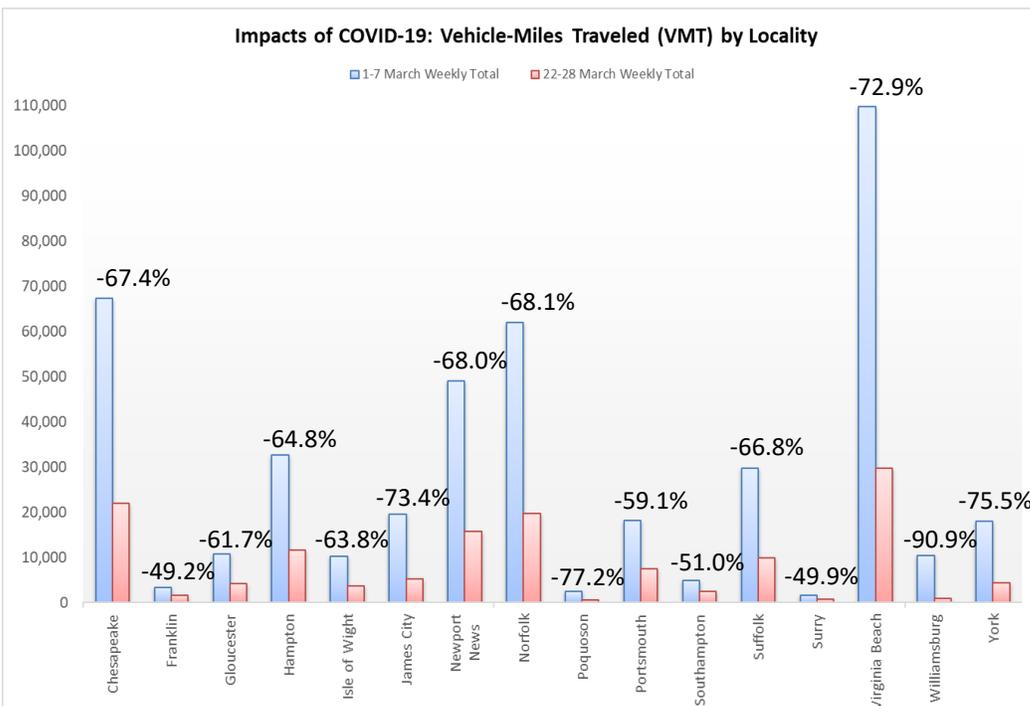


Figure 2. Source: Streetlight Data, HRTPO

Staff also analyzed daily Vehicle-Miles Traveled (VMT) data produced by Streetlight Data. The change in regional travel in terms of VMT for each of the 16 localities in Hampton Roads for the first week of March (March 1-7) and last week of March (March 22-28) is shown in Figure 2.

Regionwide, there was a 69% decrease in travel from the first week of March to the last week of March. The highest decrease in VMT was seen in Williamsburg (90.9%), followed by York County (75.5%), James City County (73.4%), and Virginia Beach (72.9%). These are also the localities that have experienced the highest number of confirmed COVID-19 cases.

Public transportation ridership also decreased throughout Hampton Roads due to the impacts of COVID-19, although not as much as the decrease in regional roadway travel. There were 220,740 riders on Hampton Roads Transit (HRT) bus, light rail, and ferry services during the first week of March (March 1-7). By the last week of March (March 22-28), ridership decreased to 118,714, a 46% decrease from the first week of March.

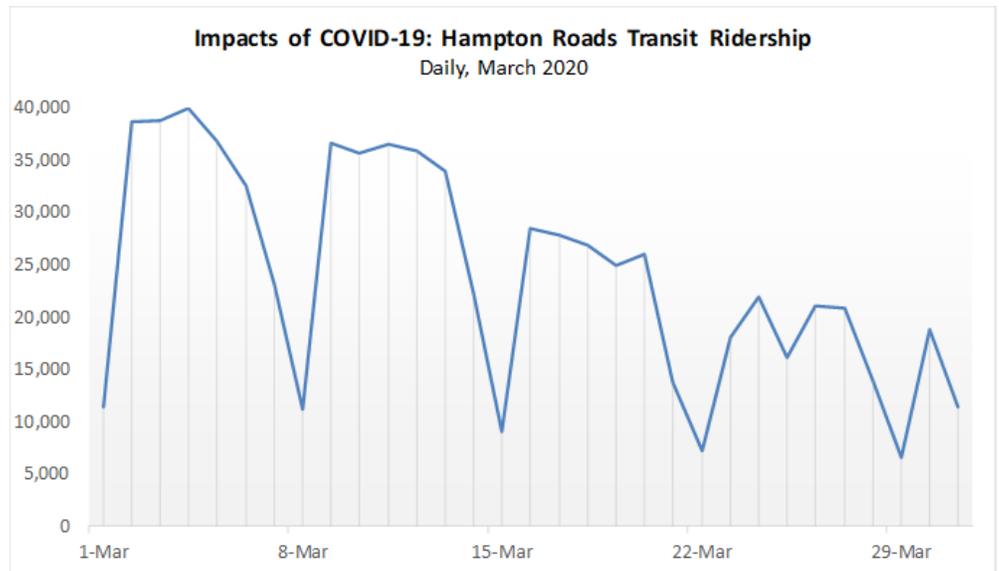


Figure 3. Source: Hampton Roads Transit, HRTPO

While congestion-free highways in Hampton Roads might sound like a dream come true, fewer drivers on the roads casts an ominous shadow on the region’s economy.

As a direct result of various directives to avoid further spread of the coronavirus, many businesses have closed their doors or reduced operations, causing millions to lose their jobs across the nation. Initial unemployment claims data – or the number of new jobless claims filed by individuals seeking to receive unemployment benefits – has been making headlines across the country. For the past three weeks, initial unemployment claims in the United States have been at record highs, with a total of over 16.7 million people recently unemployed. Here in Hampton Roads, the trend is equally alarming and is depicted in Figure 4.

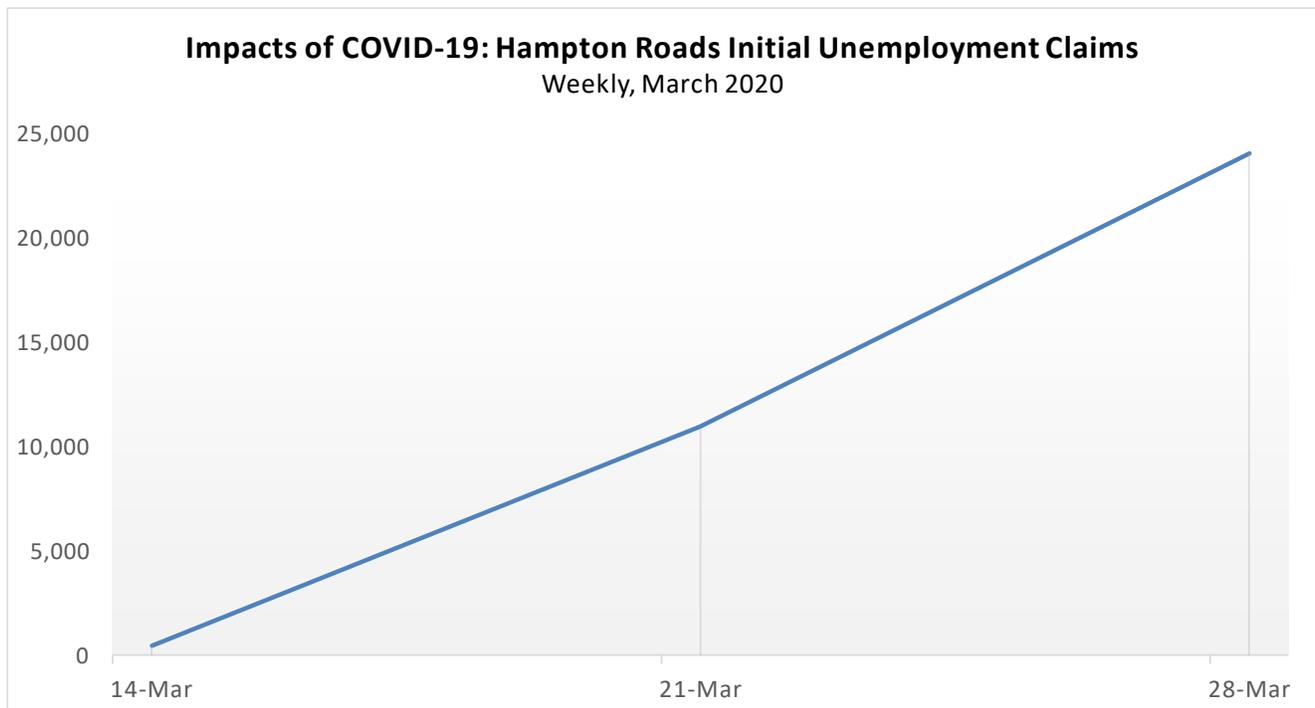


Figure 4. Source: Virginia Employment Commission, HRPDC.

Since travel is restricted – depicted both via the Governor’s mandate and actualized in data on traffic reductions, the region’s hospitality industry has suffered tremendously. For the week ending March 28, revenue per available room (RevPAR) in the United States decreased by 80.3%. For the same week in Hampton Roads, group occupancy is down almost 100%, reflecting the mandate to ban large meetings and conferences. Transient occupancy is down 88% due



Source: Virginia Department of Transportation Flickr

to travel restrictions and cancelled vacations. A bright spot for the region is that hotel occupancy in Hampton Roads is the highest of the top 25 markets, just under 30% (compared to 66.3% for the same week last year), indicating that the declines in the region’s hospitality industry are a little better off than competitor regions. There are a few possible explanations for this, two of the most influential being the high number of active-duty military and federal contractors that work in the region, as well as the Port of Virginia and the large amount of trucking activity that occurs in Hampton Roads.

Bridge and tunnel traffic isn’t the only indicator of the transportation industry in Hampton Roads. The Port of Virginia is also experiencing impacts from the coronavirus, with drops in cargo volume in February and March anticipated to continue through April before rebounding later in the Spring and through Summer. The Port continues to show its importance to the transportation industry in Hampton Roads through the new COVID-19 Critical Cargo Initiative, which identifies critical import cargo moving across Virginia needed in the effort to fight coronavirus (like personal protective equipment for the medical industry, test kits, hand sanitizer, and more) and prioritizes getting the critical container moving to its destination as fast as possible.

As the nation continues to manage the spread of the virus, those in Washington DC are discussing a new stimulus bill in addition to the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security, or CARES, Act. Last week, injecting money into infrastructure improvements was a topic of discussion, but has since lost steam. HRPDC and HRTPO staff will continue to monitor not only the impacts of coronavirus on life in Hampton Roads, but keep a close eye on opportunities that may arise during the recovery.