

# A CHANGING REGION

## Regional COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic and the response to it impacted the way we live, work and play in the region—and we are still feeling those impacts today. When SCAG’s Regional Council adopted Connect SoCal 2020 for all purposes in September 2020, following the May 2020 adoption for federal transportation conformity only, they affirmed aligning Plan implementation with pandemic recovery and identified emerging trends to be monitored alongside future planning, like Connect SoCal 2024. The following are the key disruptions to the region that SCAG has been tracking since 2020. SCAG monitored these elements alongside Plan development to apply relevant updates to our inputs and assumptions. These changes and challenges are continuing to evolve.

**Housing crisis:** The COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding economic fallout exacerbated the housing crisis and, for communities of color, widened the economic gap. While early concerns focused on the stalling of housing construction, the more immediate crisis became employment loss—particularly for low-income households—that resulted in a growing number of households falling behind on their mortgage or rent. To minimize this, local, state and federal policymakers prioritized urgent pandemic needs and responses, such as mortgage-relief policies and foreclosure and eviction moratoria. While this had a beneficial impact on households at risk for displacement, it shifted housing priorities away from those that increased housing supply.<sup>2</sup>

**Demographic shifts:** The region’s population growth was already slowing during the 2010s due to lower fertility rates and more out-migration than in-migration. The pandemic response provided additional shocks—a near-zero level of foreign immigration, fewer births and excess deaths from the pandemic itself. While these shocks appear to be dissipating substantially, the region’s population declined between 2019 and 2023.

**Goods movement:** Supply chains were disrupted on a global scale, leading to severe bottlenecks at ports and cascading bottleneck and congestion issues further across the entire goods movement system—from railyards to industrial warehouses and distribution centers.

**Transit ridership:** While vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and congestion have returned to pre-pandemic levels, transit/rail ridership has rebounded unevenly. These transit/rail ridership declines have resulted in reduced farebox recovery and impacts to operations budgets—and there is widespread concern that transit/rail operators are fast approaching a fiscal cliff. Many transit operators remain uncertain of the longer-term future, particularly if remote working remains a norm for discretionary riders who tend to take rail. Some returning riders are apprehensive about their safety and security as they resume using transit/rail services.

**Active transportation:** During the pandemic, the region saw an increased use of active transportation (i.e., bicycling [including via e-bikes], walking, rolling, etc.). Bicycling and walking were regarded as reliable and resilient options because they enabled physical distancing and carried a low risk of contracting or spreading COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> The increase in bicycling was reflected in the higher demand for bicycles and in bicycle sales figures. According to market research company NPD Group, sales of bicycles between April 2020 and April 2021 were up by 57 percent in the United States.<sup>4</sup> Numerous communities reconsidered how public space was allocated, and several prioritized opening up streets to bicyclists and pedestrians to make it easier to physically distance from others while traveling to essential businesses and engaging in recreation.<sup>5</sup> However, at the start of the pandemic, most dockless, shared micromobility providers temporarily withdrew from the public space.

**Tele-everything:** Relying on remote work and school (e-learning) as primary ways to physically distance exposed the region’s digital divide of those who have access to reliable internet and those who do not. The internet, computers and smartphones have provided unprecedented access to information and have helped transform our relationship to transportation. Although many residents have benefited from these advancements, a significant portion of the population