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Fewer people ventured to Downtown and OTR last year, data shows



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Key Points

- Economic activity in downtown Cincinnati and Over-the-Rhine appears to have decreased, according to an analysis of eight metrics.
- Traffic data, sales tax numbers, and public transit usage all suggest fewer people visited the urban core in 2025 compared to 2024.
- Many residents and business owners believe a negative perception of crime, particularly among suburbanites, is a key factor for the decline.
- Other potential causes include the closure of the First Financial Center for renovations and a nationwide trend of reduced consumer spending.

Perception can shape reality when it comes to safety in downtown Cincinnati.

Following a crime spike and several high-profile incidents last year, eight indicators suggest economic activity took a hit within Cincinnati's urban core.

An Enquirer analysis of the metrics, which include traffic congestion data from key thoroughfares, sales tax numbers and transportation statistics, indicates fewer people frequented Downtown and Over-the-Rhine compared to 2024.

The numbers don't answer why that might be.

Many residents, business owners and community leaders who spoke with The Enquirer suggested it could be due to how people, particularly local suburbanites, perceive crime.

However, it could also reflect other local factors, such as the city's convention center being closed for renovations, or the economy at large, in which people are spending less money nationwide.

The data adds more context to two perennial questions surrounding downtown Cincinnati. Is it growing? And do people feel safe?

Fewer people on Downtown, OTR roads, traffic data shows

Downtown and Over-the-Rhine boast a vibrant culinary, arts and nightlife scene. And while many businesses are patronized by the neighborhoods' residents, they also rely on visitors.

Traffic data analysis prepared by Amsterdam-based HERE Technologies shows the scene may have had less of a draw in the summer of 2025 than the year before.

Kyle Jackson, principal data scientist at the firm, compared the speed traffic moved along a sample of main thoroughfares in the urban core neighborhoods on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays to the summer before.

Jackson said people moved along these roads significantly faster at 6 p.m. during the evening rush and then from 6 p.m. to midnight. The data shows there was less congestion on these roads, meaning there were fewer people.

"Evening rush hour traffic in downtown Cincinnati was noticeably less congested in summer 2025 than in summer 2024, with some roadways showing traffic speeds 11% faster in 2025 compared to 2024," Jackson said. "The trend was consistent, with every roadway tested showing faster speeds in 2025 compared to 2024."

The firm's analytics are derived from the aggregation of hundreds of anonymized data sources, including vehicle telematics data, hardware device probe data, official government data feeds and crowdsourced data.

The roads sampled have key draws for downtown visitors: Fountain Square, the Vine Street business district in Over-the-Rhine and riverside attractions such as The Banks and sports arenas. They are also the places where police upped resources by adding foot patrols and more units.

The city's transportation department said between 2024 and 2025, there were no full road closures on Fifth, Main and Vine Streets for construction, only lane closures.

‘We’re down.’ Restaurants felt drop in traffic

Anthony Sitek, whose Crown Restaurant Group family of eateries includes Marigold, Losanti and Five Kitchen & Bar, said he felt the drop in traffic this past summer.

"We're down. We were up until May, but when June hit, it was terrible," Sitek said. "It's almost like we're Florida in the summer."

Sales got so bad that Sitek said he decided to rebrand Five Kitchen & Bar to widen its appeal and make the price point more approachable.

Other transportation statistics show a mixed bag for urban core traffic in 2025 when compared to 2024:

- Fewer people boarded buses in Downtown and Over-the-Rhine in 2025, according to Metro data. Weekday ridership saw a 4.8% average reduction, Saturdays saw a 6.4% reduction and Sunday's an 8.7% reduction.
- 6% fewer people rode Cincinnati's free streetcar in 2025 that loops the urban core, according to city data.
- Bucking the trend, the number of people parking at top Downtown garages managed by the Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation, commonly known as 3CDC, was 8.75% higher in all of 2025. The garages measured include the Fountain Square, Foundry, Fifth & Race and Fourth & Race garages. On average, there were over 200 more people parking in those facilities each day.

Most of Sitek’s restaurants have grown to rely on evening and weekend visitors.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work was rare. Now, nearly a third of workdays nationwide are performed remotely, thinning the predictable lunch rush Sitek said he would rely on during the week.

3CDC says its parking garage data suggests increased in-person work within the urban core, as well as increased demand for some of the restaurants near the garages.

Not all Downtown businesses are feeling the squeeze.

Mike Stankovich, who owns Mid City Restaurant on Court Street and Longfellow bar in Over-the-Rhine, said his establishments did not see much of a drop-off. He credits this to his

clientele: regulars.

"The regulars see past it," Stankovich said. "At Longfellow, we have a crew of regulars in their 60s who have lived Downtown forever. When crime's brought up around them, the first response is, 'Well, I'm not out at 2 a.m. I know how to carry myself.'"

Countywide spending grew, but Banks revenue dropped

Across Hamilton County, sales tax revenue grew faster than the national inflation rate, but a local segment of spending saw a sharp drop.

The county reported 6% greater sales tax revenue through October when compared with the same period the year before, according to state tax data. Nationwide inflation was about 2.6%.

The state does not report sales tax on a municipal level. However, The Banks charges an additional 1% amenity fee on food and beverage purchases, providing insight into a segment of Downtown spending.

Amenity fee dollars collected at The Banks were down each month through September 2025 and 11% year-over-year, according to data from The Banks Community Authority.

Even when accounting for the closure of Hyde, a cocktail bar, in early July 2025, the average amenity fees collected by each business were still down 7% for the year. The sharpest drop was by 22% in April.

After a mid-April shooting at The Banks, age restrictions and additional security measures were put into place through the summer. Patrons were required to present a 21+ ID after 10 p.m.

Tracy Schwegmann, leasing agent representative for the Banks Community Authority, said a lot can cause fluctuations in business at The Banks. Whether the Cincinnati Bengals make the playoffs or the Heritage Bank Center hosts popular performers one year, for instance, affects how many people come to The Banks, she said.

Those factors also impact urban-core businesses, like Doug Burns' Cincinnati vintage apparel shop near Findlay Market.

Burns, owner of Riverside Inkery, said a decision for the storefront lies ahead with less people coming in over the past year.

"We're holding on for a good summer and hoping the Bengals are good," Burns said. "It seems like every other week something is closing. I try and keep a hopeful mindset but we're bracing through it."

Crime on the mind in 2025

Last summer began with the high-profile killing of an Over-the-Rhine gym owner, followed by a viral brawl on Fourth Street in July. And in October, two back-to-back shootings in the heart of the city near Fountain Square continued to put pressure on city officials to act.

The business community largely praised officials taking action, but expressed concerns about the consequences of continued high-profile crime.

Tourism to the city appears to have been undeterred, according to Visit Cincy's recent impact report. This comes even with the convention center's closure and a nationwide tourism slump.

The regional tourism group reported exceeding its goal for the number of room nights booked at hotels, generating more than $155 million in direct economic impact.

So, who's apparently avoiding coming Downtown? Many people are pointing their fingers at those living outside the I-275 loop.

"It's my sense that [bad perception] comes from people that live in the suburbs, that maybe come Downtown once a month or every six months," City Councilman Jeff Cramerding said. "But that's not to make it any less important because many of our Downtown businesses rely on those people."

Cramerding says a reputation of Downtown and Over-the-Rhine lingers in many people's minds.

Jerry and Mary Kay Wiesenhahn, longtime residents of Anderson Township, wanted a walkable community in their retirement. They moved Downtown in 2019 and said they are excited about where the city is going, despite some people's perspective otherwise.

“The same people who don’t want to come Downtown never did,” said Jerry Wiesenhahn, 65. “We need the city to change the people’s perspective in the suburbs.”

City stats show there was a summer crime spike in the urban core, mostly driven by property crime.

Police continue to battle car break-ins, which they attribute to people looking to steal guns.

Sarah Dworak, who owns Sudova and Babushka Pierogi at Findlay Market, recalled an evening where several customers came back in after finishing their dinner to report their cars had been broken into.

Sitek says this kind of crime, along with quality-of-life issues like excessive noise from loud cars, contributes to the perception of crime people have.

What lies ahead for 2026?

The year is rolling ahead with the reopening of Cincinnati’s convention center and continued progress on new developments. Leaders are expressing optimism for what is next.

Police continue to bolster a strong presence in Downtown and Over-the-Rhine with millions of dollars approved by Cincinnati City Council to fight crime and launch new programs, such as deploying police drones as first responders.

As the weather warms, officials have said plans are in the works to keep crime in check in the urban core this summer and address long-running issues.

“Downtown and Over-the-Rhine are safe and are succeeding, dynamic and growing,” Cramerding said. “That is reality and people will continue to be exposed to that reality. And that is a great thing.”