

EVIDENCE BRIEF: YOUTH AND PUBLIC TRANSIT

Historically, youth (13-25) have been one of the most active user groups of public transit in Canada, accounting for one-third of ridership nation-wide, and up to two-thirds in cities such as Moose Jaw, SK and Red Deer, AB (Canadian Urban Transit Association, 2004). Despite their high usage of public transportation, youth as a specific category of riders have received an underwhelming amount of focus by academics and transit authorities. This can be partially attributed to a lack of available data. Of the academic literature and media reports over the last 10 years, major themes include: demand, barriers, youth advocacy, various types of passes (i.e., U-PASS, free or reduced-fares), and active transportation.

DEMAND

Youth are using public transportation at a higher rate than both current adults and youth in previous generations, and are reducing private vehicle usage (Davis et al., 2012; Delclòs-alió & Miralles-guasch, 2019; Grimsrud & El-Geneidy, 2013a, 2014b; Kuhnimhof et al., 2012; Newbold & Scott, 2018a). A key question in the literature is if high transit use will continue as young riders age. Research from Montreal attempted to answer this question comparing work and school commuting data from 1998, 2003, and 2008 in Greater Montreal. They found that young people use transit at an increased rate compared to similar cohorts in previous years, although this usage decreases over time until stabilizing in the 30s (Grimsrud & El-Geneidy, 2014a). At this point of stabilization, however, transit usage remains much higher than previous generations, and the authors expect this trend to continue (Grimsrud & El-Geneidy, 2013b). However, Agarwal (2017) argues that it is important not to assume that Canadian youths' eschewing of private vehicles for transit will continue, as does Brown et al. (2016) in a US context. Agarwal (2017) and Newbold & Scott (2018b) both note that investment in useful, reliable, and safe transit must occur to support the continued use of transit.

BARRIERS

A lack of accessible public transit leads youth to report physical, economic, and social barriers to full participation in society (e.g., Fresh Voices, 2018; Kersten et al., 2020; Wayland et al., 2020). Thus, it is important to identify the barriers to transit use. The cost of transit is routinely cited in the literature and media reports as being a key barrier to youths' use of public transportation (e.g., Auguste et al., 2020; Los Angeles County School Attendance Task Force, 2012; Marzoughi, 2011; Novak, 2019; Stein & Grigg, 2019). Equity-deserving members of society, including those who are racialized, disabled, LGBTQ+, newcomers to Canada, and/or who experience poverty also report specific barriers to public transit use related to racism, sexism, ableism, and queer/transphobia (e.g., Ceccato et al., 2020; Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2021; Fresh Voices, 2018; Kersten et al., 2020; Lindsay, 2020; Lindsay & Lamptey, 2019; Roberts et al., 2019a; Wayland et al., 2020). Aside from these financial and safety concerns, lack of service – particular in suburban and rural areas – and inconvenient stops and hours of operation pose barriers to using using public transit (Litman, 2017; Marzoughi, 2011; Thomas, 2010). Finally, a lack of knowledge is also reported as an obstacle (Auguste et al., 2020; Thomas, 2010).

YOUTH ADVOCACY & TRANSIT AUTHORITIES

Transportation system officials around the world are attempting to boost youth ridership numbers, and involving youth in public transportation planning is seen as one avenue in which to accomplish this goal. This includes efforts in Jordan (Youth for the Future, 2014), Bangladesh (Anik et al., 2020), the UAE (Moussly, 2011), and Australia (Richards, 2014). In Portland, OR, researchers worked

with youth to create and assess transit messaging aimed at increasing ridership and positive attitudes toward transit (Shafer & Macary, 2018).

FARE TYPES (e.g., free, reduced-fare, U-PASS)

Free and reduced-fare transit for youth and/or students is a subject of increasing interest globally, including among Canadian municipal and provincial governments (e.g., *B.C. Rolling out Free Transit for Kids Starting in September*, 2021; Saltman, 2018; Tank, 2016). Due to growing attention to the subject, a separate [two-page summary of academic literature and media coverage](#) is available. As for universal access passes (U-PASS), most academic research demonstrates that these programs work in increasing ridership and decreasing private vehicle use (Han et al., 2019; Zhou, 2016), and are beneficial to both students and transit programs (Saphores et al., 2020). In Canada, however, most program assessments and guides concerning the implementation of U-Pass programs are more than a decade old (e.g. Faucher, 2011; Noxon Research Associates, 2004; Wu et al., 2004), reflecting the fact that these programs are well-established in many institutions. Only recently has there been renewed discussion of UPASS programs, largely due to the Ontario Ford government’s “Student Choice Initiative,” which limits compulsory ancillary fees (e.g., Butler & Sweet, 2020; “No Discounted Public Transit Pass for Sheridan College Students in Oakville,” 2019)

ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION

Active transportation (AT) is another area in which there is investigation into adults and children but little research on youth. Active transportation is any form of human-powered travel (i.e., walking, cycling). As almost every transit trip begins and/or ends with a form of active transportation, transit systems are frequently included in this scholarship. Research in this area tends to focus more on children than youth, examining the link between public transit, free fares (e.g., Gase et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2012; Pesola et al., 2020), and school travel (e.g., Voss et al., 2015). Roberts et al. (2019b) consider how youth inhabiting disadvantaged racial, gender, and class social locations engage in active transportation less than privileged youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Based on a review of the evidence, the following would enhance public transit for youth:

- Establish youth transit advisory committees
- Improve or implemented public transit education for youth (ideally youth-led)
- Improve safety
- Improve service at night and on weekends
- Use of a transportation equity or mobility justice framework to guide transit planning
- Record and publish national data related to ridership statistics and demographics

More detailed recommendations can be found in our [full report](#).

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A larger knowledge synthesis of literature related to youth and public transit (2010-2021) may be found at:

<https://viurrspace.ca/handle/10613/25235>

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