

EVIDENCE BRIEF: FREE AND REDUCED-FARE PUBLIC TRANSIT FOR YOUTH

Free and reduced-fare transit for youth and/or students is a subject of increasing interest globally, including among Canadian municipal governments (e.g. Saltman, 2018; Tank, 2016) and citizens (e.g. Relf, 2012; Schreck, 2020).

Why Free or Reduced-Fare Transit?

Multiple arguments have been made in support of free transit for youth, including:

- to encourage students to use public transit and increase their independence and participation in employment and civic life (Akiyama, 2017; Gillmore, 2012; Relf, 2012; Sullivan, 2017; Tank, 2016),
- as a way to close the equity gap and to reduce poverty (Cleverley, 2017; Griffin, 2019; Isitt, 2020; McManus, 2018; Van Brenk, 2016),
- for sustainability reasons (Isitt, 2020; Kines, 2020; Schreck, 2020),
- to incentivize a shift to transit by youth and families traveling by car (Todd, 2020),
- to take the pressure off parents to drive their teenagers around (Tweedie, 2007),
- to provide access to those youth who need it (Thistle & Paget-Seekins, 2017; Van Brenk, 2016),
- to encourage youth to continue to use transit and not rush into obtaining their drivers licenses (“Free Bus Scheme for 18-Year-Olds to Kick in on Sunday,” 2016),
- to increase ridership (“Surplus Used to Sustain Free Public Service for Young People,” 2019),
- to offer savings to teenagers or their parents (Tweedie, 2007), and
- to decrease the number of accidents involving young drivers (Tweedie, 2007)

Canadian Initiatives

In 2012 Kingston, ON became the first municipality in Canada to provide high school students with free transit passes. Whitehorse, YK and Peterborough, ON tried small-scale versions of the initiative in 2012 and 2017, respectively (Akiyama, 2017; Gillmore, 2012). City council in Victoria, BC implemented free transit for youth in 2019 (Bailey, 2019). The province of British Columbia made transit free for children under 12 as of September 2021 (*B.C. Rolling out Free Transit for Kids Starting in September, 2021*). Outside of Canada, there are a patchwork of free transit fare schemes in areas such as Seattle, Malta, Estonia, and Luxembourg (Isitt, 2020; Magri, 2019; Saltman, 2018).

Do Free and Reduced Fare Programs Achieve Their Objectives?

Despite increased adoption of free and reduced fare transit policies, there is only a small number of published assessments of these initiatives. In Canada, assessment of the Kingston, ON program demonstrated that ridership among youth increased, and that students undertook a greater number of independent trips, thus enabling increased participation in activities (Sullivan, 2017). The most thorough assessment of free and reduced fare policies to date is Saphores et al.’s (2020) *A Review of Reduced and Free Transit Fare Programs in California*, in which they collected survey responses from 59 California transit agencies. While most respondents to the survey deemed that free and discounted policies increased ridership, many expressed concerns about the financial losses associated with the

programs – despite almost half of the respondents not actually knowing the fiscal impact. The financial impact is a central concern for city officials, who question how to fund free-fare programs (Bailey, 2019; Van Brenk, 2016). In 2019, Victoria, BC solved this question by implementation of parking fees on Sundays and using this revenue for the fare free program (Bailey, 2019).

Other assessments found that free and reduced fare programs increase transit usage, but come with caveats. For example, Boston piloted a successful reduced-fare program for all youth under 18 and those 19-21 who demonstrated financial need; trips taken by this demographic increased significantly (Thistle & Paget-Seekins, 2017). However, they note that administrative barriers for demonstrating need posed a problem. To resolve this issue, when the program was made permanent it was expanded to all youth without the necessity to prove need. In Spain, Arranz et al. (2019) found that Madrid’s subsidization of youth transit passes benefited medium and high-medium households the most in terms of reducing transportation costs. However, they also found that the program assisted low-income households to increase their access to transportation.

Free and Discounted Transit Are Not Enough on Their Own

When considering the results of free transit initiatives, it is critical to note that they must be integrated into broader comprehensive policies and strategies. Saphores et al. (2020) specify this includes ensuring the transit needs of intended recipients are understood; coupling free transit policies with other initiatives to reduce private vehicle use; and providing transit that is useful, safe, and clean. The authors’ suggestions were borne out in Kingston, ON, which implemented free transit for youth in 2012, but found that simply making transit free was not enough on its own. Jeremy DaCosta, the city’s director of transit and fleet services, noted: “Don’t think just because it’s free that youth are going to start to use [transit]. You still need a transit system that provides a level of service that people are going to want to use. You can’t just make it free and assume that all of a sudden, you have got a service that is desirable” (Bailey, 2019). A similar conclusion was reached by Sukor et al. (2021) with regard to free bus service for youth 18-25 in Penang, Malaysia that did not achieve ridership goals: free transit is not enough if transit service is not useful and reliable. Additionally, lack of real-time transit information (i.e., the ability to check where the bus is at any time) and negative symbolic status (i.e., the bus being “uncool”) were cited as reasons why the program did not work as expected (Sukor et al., 2021). In the US, Zhou’s (2016) research with university students found that not only were affordable and/or subsidized passes necessary to promote not driving alone, but a decent transit system that provides students with proximity to bus stops and a short waiting time are also critical to shift individuals away from private vehicle usage.

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

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

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