



# CASE STUDY | CITY OF VANCOUVER

## REDUCED FARE TRANSIT PILOT – BENEFITS BEYOND COST

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Access to affordable, safe transportation is a key ingredient for people's well-being, providing access to economic, social, cultural and health opportunities. For these reasons, the City of Vancouver's Reduced Fare Transit Pilot offers significant benefits for residents living in poverty.

### OVERVIEW

The City of Vancouver [Reduced Fare Transit Pilot](#) showed benefits across the social determinants of health for all participants. Despite implementation challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the

#### **About City of Vancouver – People and Programs**

Building liveable, sustainable, inclusive communities is a priority for the [City of Vancouver](#). The City works closely with community groups and other agencies to ensure critical social issues are addressed using an equity lens and that the needs of all residents are met.

Ensuring people have safe and accessible ways of getting around the city is a key pillar in the 2014 [Healthy City Strategy](#), the overarching sustainability plan for Vancouver. The City has also developed an [equity framework](#) and is currently developing a Poverty Reduction Plan.

The project recognizes that *poverty* is not a term used by most Indigenous communities in BC. The social determinants of health more accurately represent the issues and reflect the systemic conditions that render people into situations where they cannot afford to support themselves and their families.

successful pilot took place over a 6-month timeline in 2021-22, engaging 100 participants. Project partners included [TransLink](#), four community-based organizations and 10 peer researchers. Lessons learned and key themes emerged from baseline survey data, interviews and advisory committee input. Reported gains took place in the areas of safety, education, employment, basic needs, health, sense of inclusion, finances and freedom of time and movement.

## DIGGING DEEPER

The need for accessible transportation options for equity-denied residents emerged as an important insight during consultations for a poverty reduction plan in 2017–2019. While the COVID-19 pandemic paused work towards the plan, the City continues to work on actions based on initial priorities identified, including transportation.

To start, in 2019 City of Vancouver Council endorsed the [#AllOnBoard](#) campaign, calling on TransLink to develop a plan for free transit for youth and reduced fare transit for low-income residents in BC, based on a sliding scale using the Market Basket Measure. While BC announced [free transit for all children 12 and under](#) in September 2021, Vancouver recognized more work is needed on equitable fare policies.

The transit pilot was the next step, aligning with the [#AllOnBoard](#) campaign and funded by the [Union of BC Municipalities \(UBCM\) Poverty Reduction Program](#). The purpose of the pilot was to evaluate the impacts that access to free and/or reduced fare transit has on relieving time and financial pressures for residents with low incomes. As well, the pilot sought to make recommendations for a reduced fare or free transit program in Vancouver for youth and people with low incomes in collaboration with community partners, TransLink and the province.

Recognizing that transit is a consistent barrier for access to potentially all social determinants of health, the pilot aimed to answer the following questions, among others:

- Will access to free or reduced-fare transit reduce instances of time poverty?
- Will access to free or reduced-fare transit increase access to opportunities that help residents out of poverty?
- How has a person's social determinants of health changed because of access to free or reduced-fare transit?

## COMMUNITY PARTNERS AND PEERS INFORM PROCESS

To help ensure success, the City recognized the need to leverage trust and relationships established by community-serving organizations and peers working with equity-seeking communities. The project collaborated with four community organizations to support participant recruitment, distribution of passes and implementation of this pilot:

- [Single Mother's Alliance](#)
- [Urban Native Youth Association](#)
- [South Vancouver Neighbourhood House](#)
- [EMBERS Eastside Works](#)

Partners recruited a total of 10 peer researchers to support the data collection. Peer researchers were hired to conduct pre- and post-pilot interviews and to provide ongoing support and check-ins with participants throughout the pilot. This led to more nuanced responses to the survey, while data gatherers gained skills and interviewing experience.

In addition, the City established a Transit Pilot Advisory Committee. This committee is an advisory body comprising representatives from the City, each community partner organization, peer researchers, TransLink, the [Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council](#) (MVAEC) and other key stakeholders. The committee meets once a month to provide support and feedback to the pilot project regarding the following:

- Provide insights and suggestions on pilot project design, survey and interview questions, and the evaluation framework
- Work with the City of Vancouver to advise pilot implementation by suggesting sites of distribution for transit passes and organizations for the coordination of peer researchers
- Share relevant organizational data and/or information from previous studies to support the pilot's success and outcomes

#### Priority Populations:

- IBPOC (Indigenous, Black and People of Colour)
- Youth
- Families, including single-parent families
- Newcomers to Canada

Working with community partners, the pilot prioritized four communities and demographics: IBPOC (Indigenous, Black and People of Colour) residents; Youth; Families, including single-parent families; and Newcomers to Canada. Passes were distributed to individuals who did not have access to a transit pass via other means, such as through Provincial income assistance programs, or employer programs.

The pilot included 100 participants, who were provided free 1-Zone transit passes over a six-month period (October 2021–March, 2022). Participants self-identified as follows:

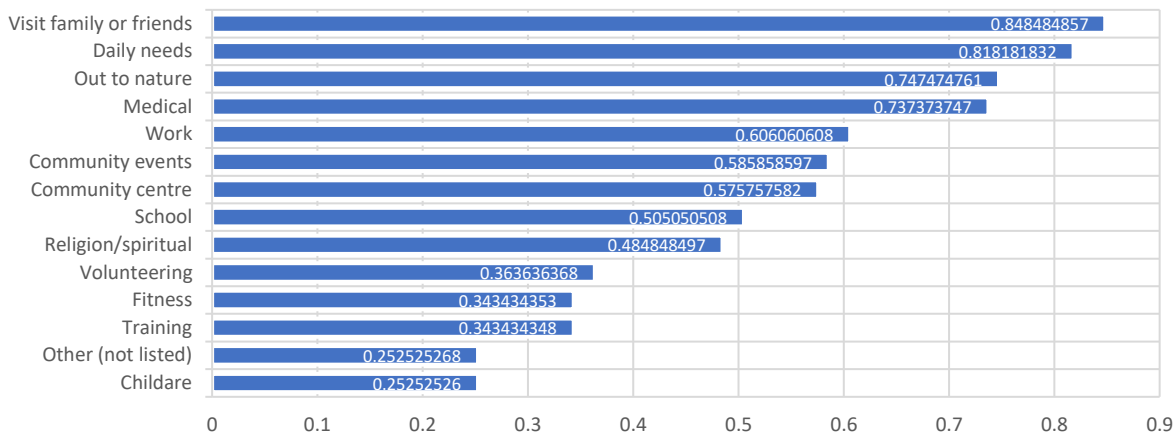
- 64% identified as women, 32% identified as male, and 5% identified as transgendered, non-binary, or gender queer
- 13% of respondents identified as 2SLGBTQIA+
- Ages were split fairly evenly among age groups – under 18 (29%), 19–29 (14%), 30–39 (21%), 40–49 (19%) and 50+ (18%)
- 50% identified as being racialized, and 37% as Indigenous

- Only 23% of the respondents identified as having a disability or chronic illness. It is important to note that people on disability income assistance who have access to a reduced fare transit card were not eligible to participate
- 45% of the participants stated they cared for dependents
- 17% said they actively cared for child that was not their own
- 26% of participants identified as the lone primary parent, 10% were in a two-parent situation, while 5% had some sort of shared parenting responsibilities and 3% were a lone parent with a partner

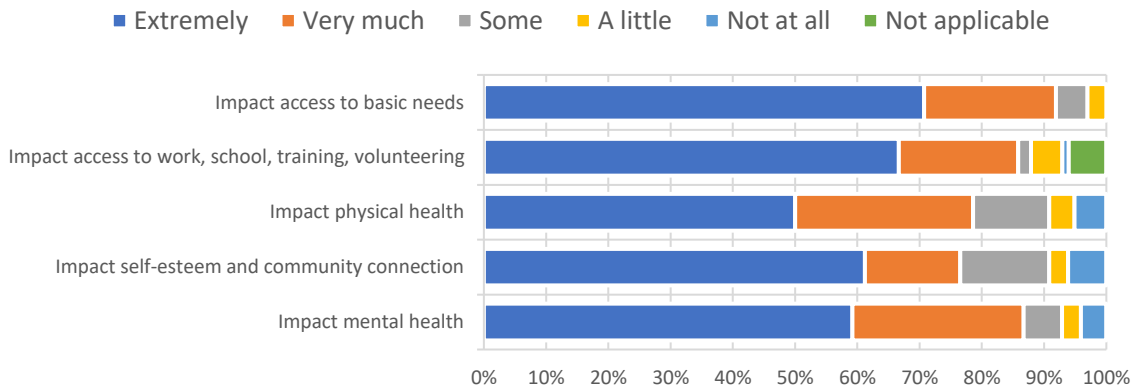
## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Survey questions revealed the wide variety of reasons people use public transit, how important free or low-cost transit would be and how it has the potential to expand opportunities.

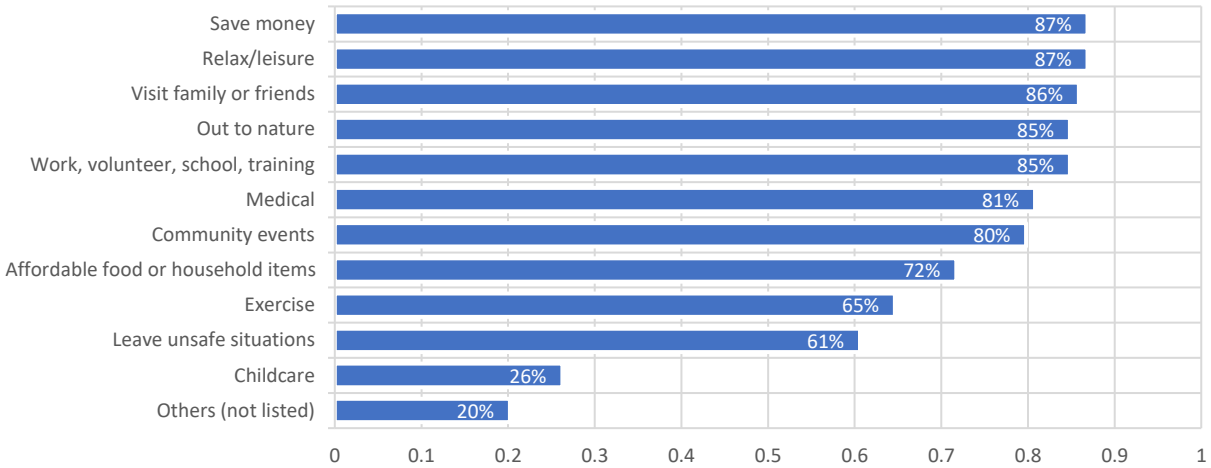
### Where do you go when you use transit?



### How much would free or low-cost transit...



### What would you do more of?



Qualitative survey questions were coded and clustered into key themes and patterns based on responses.

#### SAFETY (travelling safely)

Many participants reported feeling safer with access to a free transit pass. More specifically, men, women and individuals from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community of various ages expressed a sense of relief and comfort in having the ability to take a bus at night rather than walking. Some participants explained how riding the bus allowed them to avoid potentially negative and dangerous situations.

“ I often work late nights. This helps me get home safely, without having to walk in the dark.

– Pilot participant ”

#### EDUCATION (school attendance, training programs)

Participants found that a free transit pass was convenient and allowed for them to get to and from school safely, whether for their own learning experience or picking up family members such as siblings or children. Importantly, some participants mentioned that lack of bus fare had previously prevented them from attending school.

“ Having a free transit pass helps a lot, because I can now go to school or even go out with my friends.

– Pilot participant ”

**EMPLOYMENT (access to work, applying for work, volunteer)**

Many participants reported that the free transit pass improved their ability to access volunteer roles, employment, job interviews and training.

**BASIC NEEDS (food access, banking, daycare, laundry)**

Data analysis showed that the free transit pass was not only commonly used to make trips to the grocery store and access food pantries, but it also allowed the participants to afford more and better-quality food. Many participants mentioned having more money to spend on their groceries and more time to shop around for food due to the fact that they did not have to worry about their return transit pass expiring.

Participants also reported that the transit pass helped enable them to access daycare. They were able to drop their kids off and pick them up on time and with less stress.

**HEALTH (access to medical/mental health services, exercise facilities/community centres, less stress on body, and peace of mind)**

Access to healthcare services was a recurring theme. Many participants reported that the transit pass gave them ease of access to attend medical appointments, helped them obtain reliable medical support and visit pharmacies for prescription pickups.

Several participants reported physical benefits, as they were more inclined to visit community and/or exercise facilities because it was more convenient and faster. As well, there were participants who noted that the free pass helped alleviate any pain and/or pressure they had in their body as they no longer had to walk long distances. Many participants expressed an overall sense of relief from their mental health and less stress while having the free pass.

**SENSE OF INCLUSION (not feeling discriminated/stigmatized, easier to see family/friends, community gatherings/cultural events, nature, spirituality)**

As a result of having access to a free transit pass, many participants shared a common theme of feeling a sense of inclusion and connection. Having a free transit pass enabled many to take part in group activities, to meet up with friends/family and to access community programs when they would have otherwise deemed the transit trip “unnecessary.”

**FINANCES (can save money towards future, spend more on daily needs, financial relief)**

A common theme was the positive financial impact that the free transit pass had on participants. Many explained how they were now able to put money towards their debt; save money for their future; or allocate the saved money to use towards important things in life that they would enjoy, like self-care and better food. Participants also shared they felt less stressed because they did not have to worry about adding stored value to their transit card or buying another monthly pass.

### FREEDOM (more time available, access across the City)

Participants spoke about having more time available. Other forms of transportation (such as walking) took much more time to get to where they needed to go and were more physically draining. Participants also spoke about the relief of not having to rush to finish their trip within the 90-minute transfer window. Less time commuting meant more time with friends and family, going to work early or on time, and more free time to pursue other hobbies and interests. Many participants also spoke to the ability to explore the entire city and not just their neighbourhoods.

### OTHER LESSONS LEARNED

The pilot shed light on other barriers faced by participants:

- In a large urban centre like Vancouver, navigating the transit system often involves travelling through more than one zone. Often, zone boundaries do not match peoples' requirements for mobility and the complexity of a multi-zone system was confusing for participants provided with a free 1-zone pass.
- Lack of access to technology can make navigating transit processes difficult. Many people involved in the pilot did not have access to credit/debit cards to reload fares or register their cards.
- Transit passes (cards) were lost, resulting in the conclusion that wrist bands were more effective.
- Some participants needed a higher level of support, as each time a card was lost or accrued a negative balance from traveling through multiple zones, city staff worked with community organizations and TransLink to support reloading, registering and/or replacing participants' cards.

### CONCLUSION

The City of Vancouver Reduced Fare Transit Pilot shows that the impact of free transit on those living in poverty is significantly beneficial in ways beyond simple cost. The success of the pilot was grounded in working with community partners and peers while building on prior trusting relationships with vulnerable populations. The link between barrier-free transit and the overall well-being of those who are struggling to make ends meet cannot be ignored.

“ Overall, participants were extremely grateful for the free transit pass, and spoke to how it drastically improved their lives.

– Austin Lui

Similar to the collaborative [Transportation Innovation Lab](#) project in Cape Breton, Vancouver's project highlighted how accessible, affordable transit can impact important aspects of everyday life including family connections, connections to community, impacts on time, mental and physical well-being and access to opportunities.

The City of Vancouver intends to work with the province, TransLink and other groups to advocate for a more equitable approach to transit fare policies. It is hoped that insights acquired from the pilot will help shape other transit plans and policies across BC and beyond.

## RESOURCES

- [#AllOnBoard](#)
- [City of Vancouver Reduced Fare Transit Pilot](#)
- [TransLink](#)
- [Metro Vancouver Regional Transportation Strategy](#)
- [UBCM Poverty Reduction Program](#)