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TRANSIT FOR TEENS: PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF FREE TRANSIT FOR YOUTH 13-18 IN BC

SMA RESEARCH BRIEF



**single
mothers'
alliance**

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City of Vancouver Reduced Fare Transit Pilot

Transportation is inextricably linked to people's social and economic well-being and their ability to access the systems that support them. In September 2021, the City of Vancouver launched a pilot project to assess the impacts and benefits of free-fare transit for low-income city residents.

The **City of Vancouver Reduced Fare Transit Pilot** provided 100 participants with free one-zone TransLink Compass Card passes for six months from October 2021 to the end of March 2022. The Single Mothers' Alliance was one of four community partners invited to carry out the pilot project in collaboration with the City of Vancouver. Each community partner was responsible for recruiting an assigned number of participants and onboarding their own peer researchers.

The SMA was responsible for recruiting a total of 30 pilot participants. Three lone-caregiver peer researchers directly impacted by the issue were engaged and supported by SMA to carry out data collection and analysis.

SMA held optional focus groups to capture additional data from the pilot participants supervised by SMA. This report focuses on select data regarding free transit access for youth aged 13-18 from the additional focus groups held by SMA. A full report on the pilot project will be released by the City of Vancouver at a later date.

RECRUITMENT CRITERIA



SMA RECRUITMENT CRITERIA INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING:

- ➔ Families who identified as low-income and who did not own a car or access any other form of subsidized transit.
- ➔ Lone caregiver-led families with single income households.
- ➔ Families residing in isolated neighbourhoods such as the Downtown Eastside and East Vancouver.
- ➔ Mothers escaping intimate partner violence living in transition homes in Vancouver.
- ➔ Low-income households with children under 12 already enjoying free transit and/or with teenagers over 12.
- ➔ Multi-generational households.

KEY FINDINGS - YOUTH

The SMA-led focus groups were guided by a set of open-ended questions and engaged the parents of youth aged 13-18 who received a transit pass in the project. Some parents held pilot transit passes themselves, and others did not.

This report shares a narrow scope of data regarding the impact of free transit on youth pilot participants aged 13-18 from their parent's perspective. A report on the full pilot project research data will be released at a later date by the City of Vancouver.



Access to activities

Parents expressed that unlimited and free transit access opened up the lives of their teens and hugely impacted their ability to access school, after-school programs, volunteering, and social activities.



Uptake of supports

Parents shared that their youth were able to increase access to the services and supports they needed. This was particularly true for those struggling with mental health issues and those accessing programs such as support groups and counseling.



Sense of inclusion

Parents reported that their youth's sense of inclusion, worth, and mental well-being were visibly affected by the free transit access. The ability for youth to move freely without persecution and judgement impacted their sense of belonging and connectedness.



Freedom to thrive

Parents reported that unlimited transit access for youth increased their confidence to explore opportunities and activities. The ability to explore helped them to no longer feel "left behind" and left out of activities and opportunities due to their socioeconomic status.

Data gathered about the experiences of free transit for youth aged 13-18 showed an extremely positive impact in most aspects of their lives.

ACCESS TO ACTIVITIES

Parent focus group participants were asked how the transit pass held by them and/or their youth affected their daily lives. The positive impact of unlimited transit access when it came to their youth's ability to carry out their basic activities and access daily needs such as shopping, attending doctor's appointments, and visiting parks and recreation places in the city for social activities and exercise was emphasized across all the focus groups. Ease of access to get to school, after-school programs, and work was cited as one of the main benefits of unlimited transit access by parents and their teenagers. Participants shared that previously, their inability to afford all the transit their youth needed and asked for limited their youth's access to work opportunities, school, after-school activities, and visiting green spaces in Vancouver.

“Use of transit definitely increased for my daughter. Her high school is only a block away, but through the COVID situation, she really wanted to start trying to go out more to see friends or to try to get to programming through her school. The pass really helped a lot to get her out. It helped her get out more. I've noticed a big change in her because of that pass.”



UPTAKE OF SUPPORTS

The parents of youth participants aged 13–18 indicated that, from their perspective, unlimited and free transit access for their teenagers meant an uptick in their access to available support both at school and within their community. Without the barrier of lack of mobility, parents noticed their teenagers making an increased effort to access support services, which led to an overall perception of improved mental well-being for low-income youth.

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Just having that pass and being getting out to be able to go get the support that she needs. I [mean] like a program or something to get some help and direction and [deal with] whatever depression she's feeling - it, [the free pass], encouraged her to go. She didn't have to worry about, you know, 'do we have tickets?'

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SENSE OF INCLUSION

Participants reported their youth shared with them a feeling of being judged when using transit when they could not afford to pay, and some said they experienced persecution and harassment. The ability to "afford" transit fares during the pilot improved their sense of inclusion and belonging to the city and their community. Being able to visit neighborhoods and recreational spaces outside of their immediate surroundings also contributed to an increased feeling of belonging rather than feeling 'stuck' in their neighbourhood.

It would be great to see them just take that one more step and cover the teens to Grade 12. I think those are the people that tremendously need it right now because of mental health and you know, isolation. Once COVID rules drop, they'll be able to get to groups and sessions and counseling more often as they need to or even just go out with friends and hang out. So, I would really like to see them just take that one more step and make transit free for kids and up until Grade 12.



FREEDOM TO THRIVE

Parents with youth who had free transit access for six months repeatedly cited the positive effect the free transit access had on building confidence in their youth to explore their surroundings and opportunities. They shared that free access to transit for youth encouraged them to become more independent in planning their daily activities and doing things on their own. For all participants, transit is the only means of transportation and takes up a significant amount of their income. According to parents and caregivers, accessing free transit for six months during the pilot allowed their families to save on transit and spend on other necessities and activities that benefited their families such as food, outings and activities fees for the whole family and for the children and youth.

“My son, he's got the pass and has actually joined a couple of afterschool programs now. The pass gets him to and from and he doesn't have to worry about whether or not he catches me in the morning to give him tickets, and to see if I even have enough tickets.”



IN THEIR WORDS

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It's great and a blessing that we have transit systems that run all night with a short stint in between, and to know that my teenage son has a way of getting home without having to worry about whether or not he has cash. It has really allowed that freedom and the flexibility to be able to make it home every night instead of having to sleep at someone else's house. And, you know, [previously] he can't get home; he didn't have enough change and there were no stores open or, you know. For him to be able to access the transit to bring him home safely was a great, great peace of mind as a parent because it ensured that when I wake up in the morning, I know that my son is in bed.

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Every time I handed the bus pass to my kid, he felt really like, wow, we have money on it. And we didn't have to say, oh, 'can you give us a ride here' to the bus driver, and he was so happy to actually tap it. And I was happy because he loves being on the bus. So, it also helped me to connect more with him because we would take long trips, we wouldn't just stay in this [our] area.

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You know, sometimes my son was even asking the bus drivers for free rides because he doesn't have the tickets... So, it's really beneficial to just be able to present the pass and have it available. It has given him a lot of freedom to be able to be social, and to be out with his friends.

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I really feel at peace. And I feel like 'normal' - I don't know what that means. But I feel like a normal human being... respected. And you feel like you are a member of the community because you're not looking at your shoulder for transit police or security.

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What we relied on before COVID-19 was collecting tickets from family programs that we would attend. But because of COVID, there was no programming. And it was really difficult to acquire tickets for her [my teenager]. Now with COVID a lot of the programs are not buying tickets anymore. So, we're really dependent on having a pass. It would be great if they can continue it [the free passes] for sure. I think it would be very beneficial for a lot of teens to have free access to transit.

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It's a good chunk of your finance that really goes into transit, especially when you're not doing a monthly pass. Because you think, oh, well, it's a shorter month, a school break in between or something, so you won't do a monthly pass, and then all of a sudden, you're actually spending a lot more, because now you're restricted with the 90 mins time limit.

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