Youth Perspectives on Transit

Increasing Access and Utilization

TransportationChoices

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Introduction

In 2022, the Washington State Legislature passed the historic Move Ahead Washington transportation funding package. In order to be eligible for a new Transit Support Grant, the package required that agencies make fares zero cost to riders 18 and younger.

Transportation Choices Coalition (TCC) was thrilled to see virtually every agency in the state adopt and implement new Youth Ride Free policies. Young people across Washington now face one less barrier to accessing transit. At TCC, we know that fares are just one part of the equation. Distance to stops, frequency of routes, overall travel time, and many other factors continue to act as barriers for many to access transit. With the new free youth fares in place, we wanted to better learn how young people view transit and what improvements would make it easier for them to become lifelong riders.

We held 16 focus groups in January and February of 2023 to hear directly from people 18 and younger in Washington State about these questions. This report details the results of this project, including the demographics of who participated, findings from our sessions, and recommendations to transit agencies, local government bodies, and the state legislature on how transit can better serve young people.

Acknowledgements

Transportation Choices Coalition is grateful to everyone who made this project possible. First off, thank you to the Washington State Legislature for passing the Move Ahead Washington package that paved the way to make transit free for people 18 and younger. Thank you to the transit agencies across the state who so quickly adopted and implemented Youth Ride Free policies.

This project would not have been possible without the incredible work of Iz Berrang. Iz is a graduate student in the University of Washington's Community Oriented Public Health graduate program and chose to work with Transportation Choices Coalition for her graduate practicum. Iz was instrumental in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting the data.

We would also like to thank Amazon, who provided gift cards for each participant. Thank you for supporting us in compensating the young people for their time and input.

Finally, we extend a huge thank you to all of our participants. You all were incredibly thoughtful and generous with your time and perspectives. We hope to keep working to make Washington the world you all deserve. Thank you so much to:

Abbey V.	Ella T.	Kai R.	Nithin B.	Sojourn G.
Ally Y.	Eva M.	Kinley M.	Odmaral T.	Stefania T.
Anna R.	Evangeline S.	Lily C.	Olivia L.	Sydney B.
Aryan J.	Evita M.	London G.	Raquel N.	Thy H.
Aurora H.	Ezra R.	Malia G.	Sandra R.	Tinbeet Y.
Avis D.	Gabi P.	Mariah C.	Sarissa B.	Tristan D.
Bee H.	Georgia S.	Marley G.	Shalaka D.	Zayd L.
Bing R.	Hannah S.	Mia G.	Shaunak D.	Mount Vernon High
Blaine A.	Jack K.	Mila T.	Shreedhaarin B.	School Latinos in
Cameron F.	Jam H.	Nikko F.	Sierra S.	Action Club

... and 53 other anonymous young people.

Project Design

Transportation Choices staff collaborated with various youth groups and transit agencies to collect information before designing this project. Notably, we consulted with Youth for Equitable Streets (Y.E.S.) to gain input and feedback from young people on outreach and recruitment processes, focus group structure, and question design. Over several meetings, we worked with Y.E.S. to gather information, present options, and collect feedback. Their input was instrumental in our design process.

Focus groups aimed to capture ridership experiences, transit-related beliefs and attitudes, and perceived and actual barriers and strengths of transit access. The questions were designed to be open-ended, engaging, and appropriate for youths who used transit regularly, infrequently, or not at all, to capture data from many different experiences.

Each focus group was led by one of two facilitators, both of whom were referred to us by Youth for Equitable Streets.

Neither audio nor visual was recorded during focus groups due to privacy and consent concerns. Instead, two notetakers were present at all focus groups with more than two participants who typed the transcriptions of the focus groups in real-time, to capture participants' responses verbatim.

Outreach

Prior to the formation of focus groups, Transportation Choices Coalition mapped out a comprehensive outreach plan. The plan was aimed at students who could benefit the most from new Youth Ride Free policies and whose perspectives we wanted to center when considering additional policy, advocacy, or education options to make transit more accessible and equitable.

We collected the following data from every school district in Washington that falls within a transit agency system:

- Percent of student population who are people of color
- Percent of student population who qualify for free or reduced lunch
- Percent of student population who are English language learners

We then determined school districts with over 50% eligibility for free or reduced lunch, over 50% students of color, and/or more than 10% English language learners. We prioritized outreach to schools that met all three of these criteria, followed by schools that met two criteria, and then one criterion.

Once the priority school districts were established, we contacted youth groups and school clubs that were founded around transportation or social justice-related topics or were founded for students from a specific affinity or identity, and groups that were founded around a shared interest in volunteering or community engagement. We also bought one round of radio ads on the La Ranchera Radio station which airs to Spanish-speaking communities in Eastern Washington and was also developing youth programming for local teens.

In total, we reached out to 448 youth groups in 46 cities spanning 19 counties across the state to encourage their participation in our youth focus groups.

We Reached Out To...

448 Youth Groups

46 Different Cities

19 Different Counties

103 Total Participants

From this pool, youth elected to participate in focus groups by filling out an online registration form, which asked for basic contact information and optional demographic information. In order to be eligible to partake, interested participants had to be age eighteen or younger at the time of the focus groups and live within Washington state. After verifying the eligibility of prospective participants, we collected consent forms from their parents and guardians. Exceptions were made in the case where parental permission was not possible. We coordinated focus group scheduling with participants based on availability; various times and days of the week were offered throughout January, February, and early March.

Focus Group Structure

The majority of the sessions contained 5-10 youths to enable and encourage full participation and involvement from all. In total, the research team received input from 103 youth participants over the course of 18 focus group sessions.

Participants were encouraged to answer and engage verbally with additional options to writing in the chat or using the Zoom reaction icon features. Participants could also message notetakers privately via direct message on Zoom to share their thoughts. After concluding the questions, participants had the opportunity to elaborate on their thoughts or ask questions, either publicly or privately. Each participant received a $50 Amazon gift card for their involvement and insights upon completing the session.
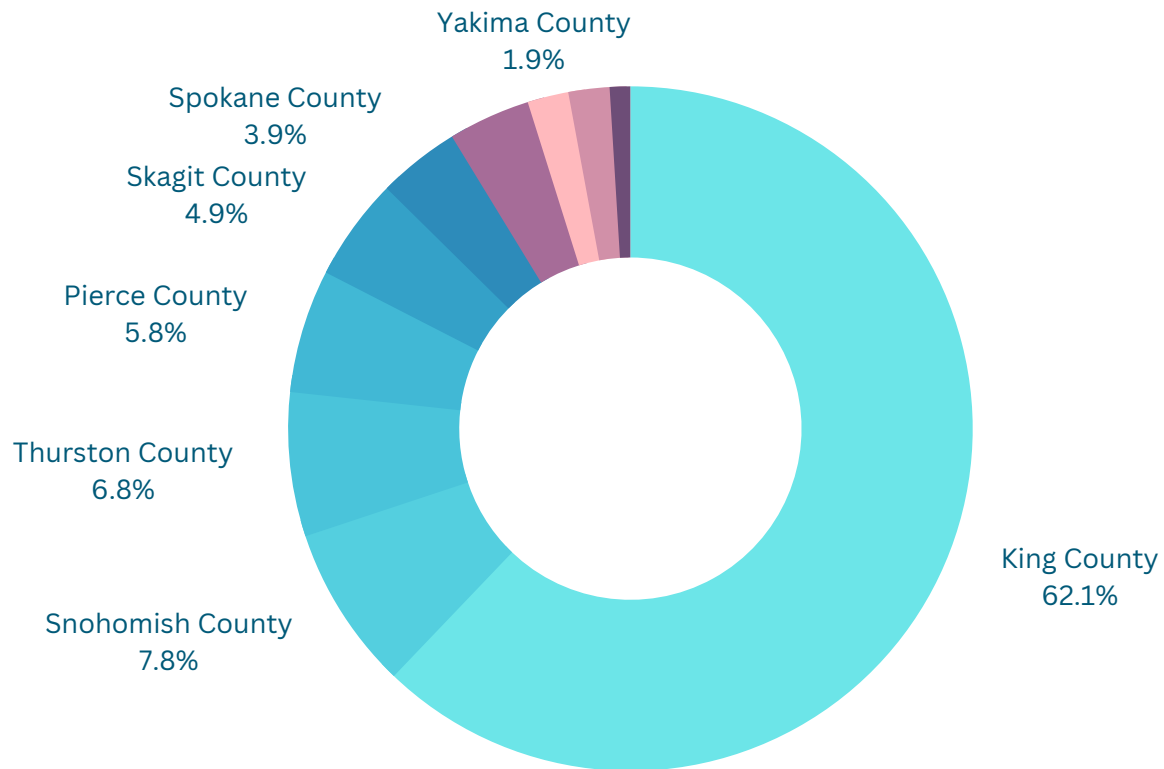
What Did We Ask?

1. Icebreaker Warm-Up
2. Do you know that people 18 and younger are now able to ride buses, light rails, ferries, and other kinds of public transit for free?
3. How often do you ride the bus, light rail, ferry, streetcar, or use other kinds of public transit?
4. What kind of transportation do you most often use in daily life? Where do you go most often and where do you go for fun?
5. Whether you ride the bus, light rail, or ferry a lot or not, what would make using public transit easier or more enjoyable for you?
6. What types of messages have you heard about the bus, light rail, or other types of public transit? Have these influenced you and if so, how?
7. What makes you feel safe on the bus? What makes you feel unsafe?
8. Transportation sits at the intersection of many other big challenges - climate, affordability, housing, etc. As you think about the future, what are the issues that are most important to you and how does public transit play a role?

Demographics

In total, we talked to 103 young people. Focus group participants were required to indicate their age and city of residence on the registration form; they ranged from 9-18 years of age and were all residents of Washington. We included optional fields for participants to provide their race and gender identity information. The following charts show participants demograhpics.

Geographic Location by County

Yakima County
1.9%

Spokane County
3.9%

Skagit County
4.9%

Pierce County
5.8%

Thurston County
6.8%

Snohomish County
7.8%

King County
62.1%

Full geographic information

- King County 62.14%
- Snohomish County 7.77%
- Thurston County: 6.80%
- Pierce County: 5.83%
- Skagit County: 4.85%

- Spokane County: 3.88%
- Clark County: 3.88%
- Benton County: 1.94%
- Yakima County: 1.94%
- Grant County: 0.97%

Racial Identity
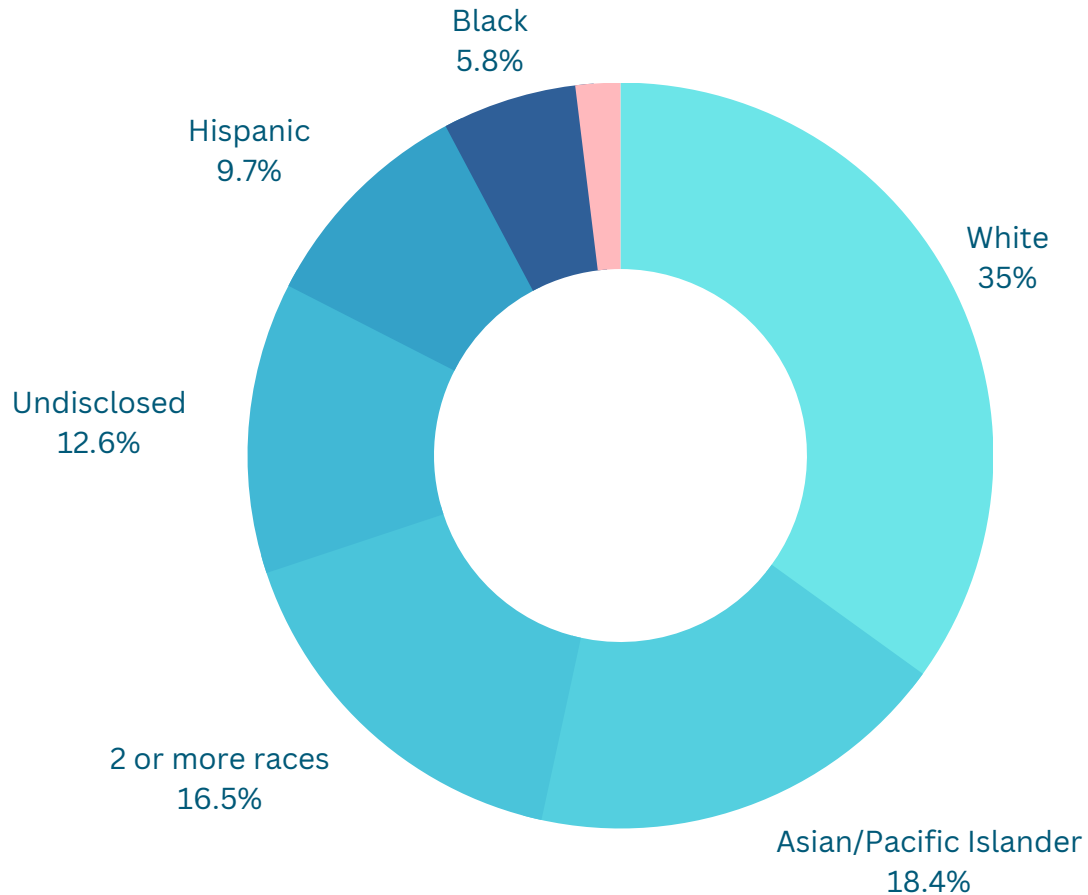
Full racial identity information

- White: 36 (34.95%)
- Asian/Asian American: 12 (11.65%)
- Hispanic: 10 (9.71%)
- Black/African American: 6 (5.83%)
- White/Asian: 3 (2.91%)
- Alaska Native: 2 (1.94%)
- Black/White: 2 (1.94%)
- Multiracial: 2 (1.94%)
- White/Chinese: 2 (1.94%)
- Chinese American: 1 (0.97%)
- East Indian/Native American: 1 (0.97%)
- Thai, Chinese, and White: 1 (0.97%)
- South Asian: 1 (0.97%)
- Asian/Indian: 1 (0.97%)
- Black/Hispanic: 1 (0.97%)
- Two or more races: 1 (0.97%)
- Indian: 1 (0.97%)
- Irish/Pacific Islander: 1 (0.97%)
- Filipino: 1 (0.97%)
- Amerasian: 1 (0.97%)
- Hispanic/White: 1 (0.97%)
- White/Korean American: 1 (0.97%)
- White/Southeast Asian: 1 (0.97%)
- Korean: 1 (0.97%)
- Undisclosed: 13 (12.62%)

Gender Identity
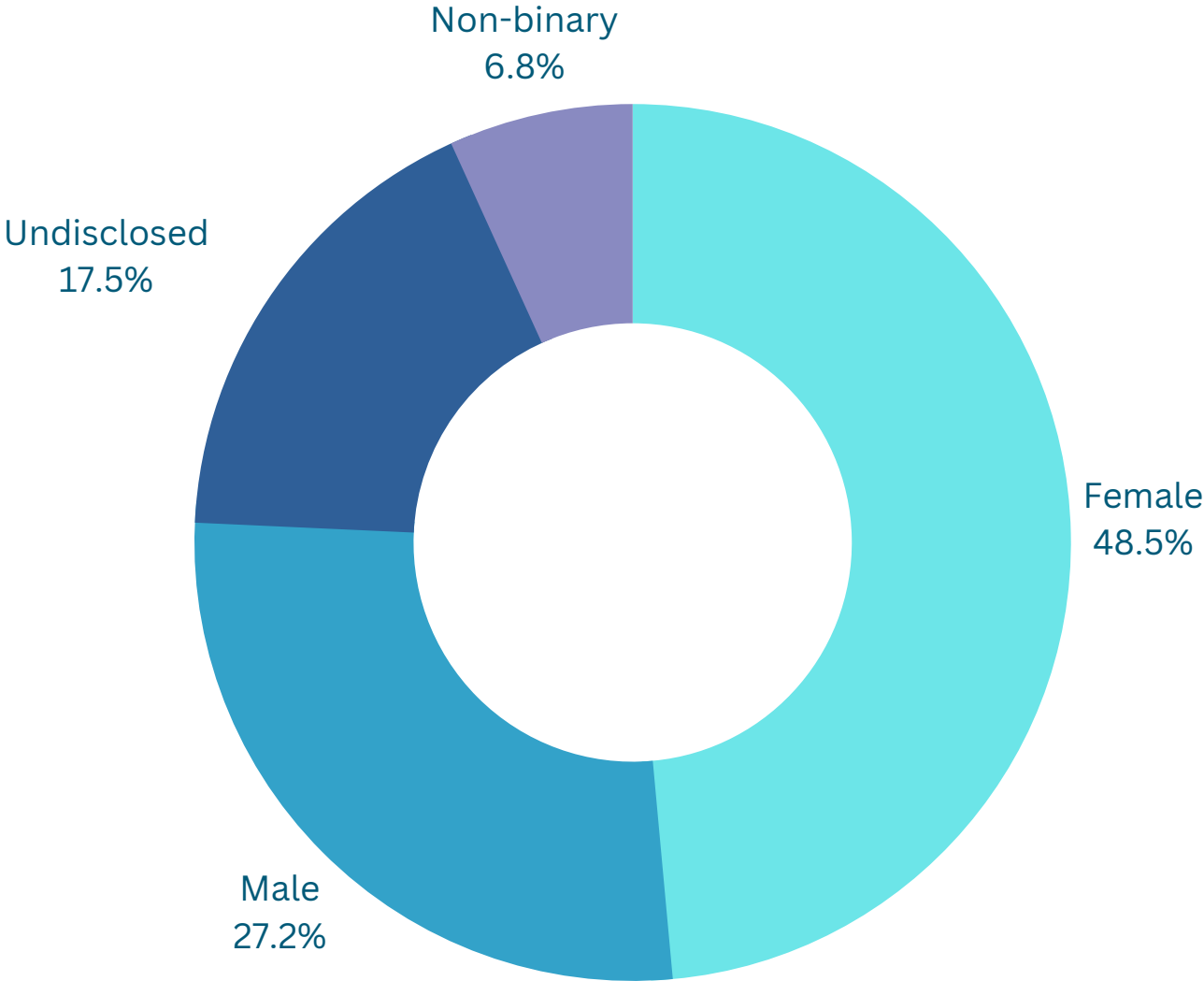
Full gender identity information:

- Female: 48.54%
- Male: 27.18%
- Undisclosed: 17.48%
- Non-binary: 6.8%

Youth Perspectives on Transit

After concluding the sessions, we conducted a thematic analysis of the qualitative focus group data. We uploaded transcripts to a mixed methods data analysis software, Dedoose, for organization and thematic coding. We developed a codebook—a research tool used to facilitate thematic coding—based on the qualitative data from focus groups, which was used to detect themes and key takeaways.

Each focus group began with two Zoom poll questions then moved into the five deeper, more conversational questions.

Zoom Poll Question 1

"Do you know that people 18 and younger are now able to ride buses, light rails, ferries, and other kinds of public transit for free?"

YES 84.62%	NO 15.38%

Zoom Poll Question 2

"How often do you use public transit?"

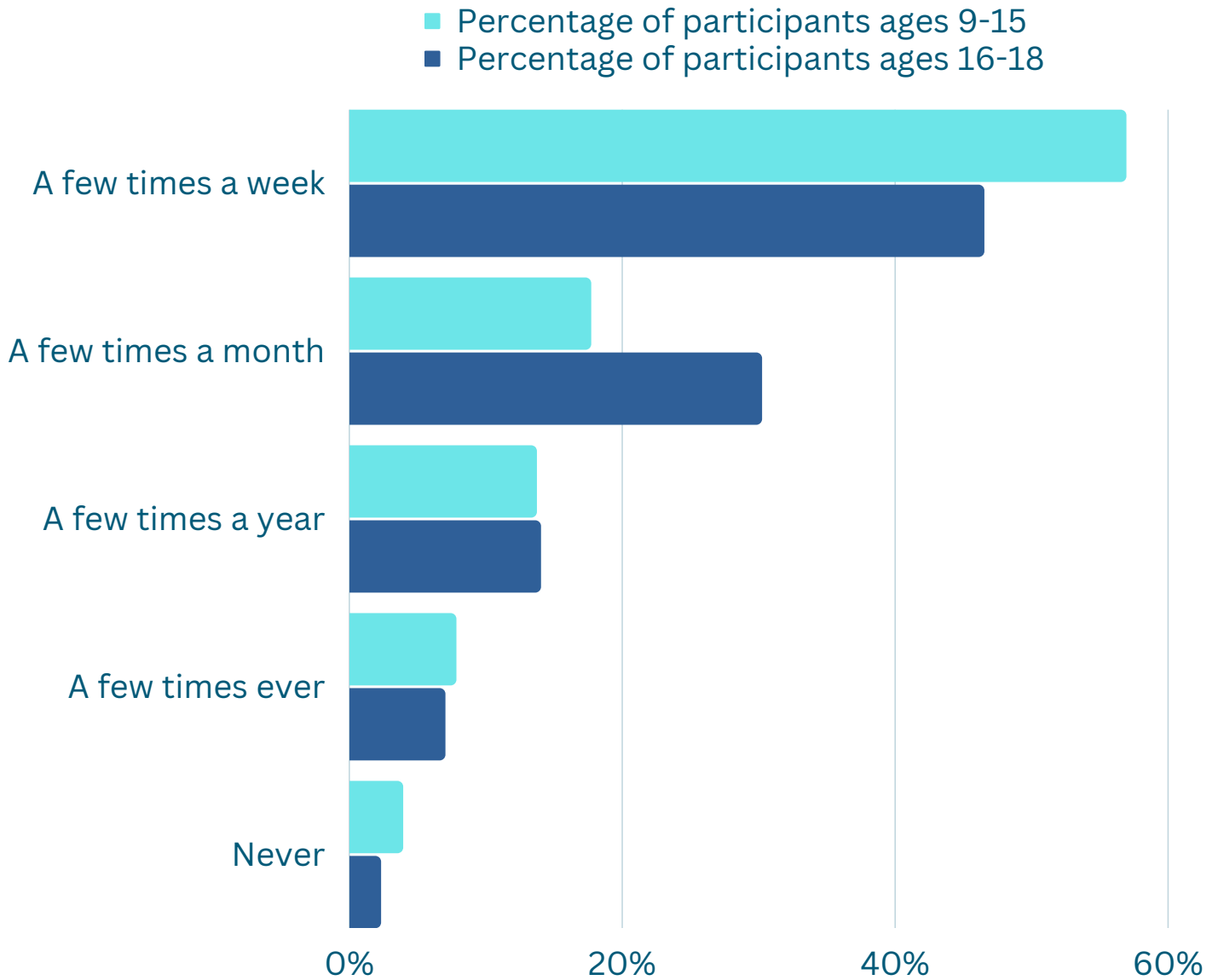| A few times a week or more 51.58%	A few times a month 24.21%	A few times a year 13.86%	A few times ever 7.37%	Never 3.16%

Youth Perspectives on Transit

The following chart breaks down the second Zoom poll question ("How often do you use public transit?") to show responses by driving age.

Legend:
- Percentage of participants ages 9-15
- Percentage of participants ages 16-18

Youth Perspectives on Transit

The youth focus groups generated two primary themes: **strengths of** and **challenges to** the utilization of public transit. Nine subthemes were identified alongside these broad themes.subthemes were identified alongside these broad themes.

Strengths

- Environmental Impact
- Increased Independence
- Enhanced Equity
- Connections with Operators

Challenges

- Insufficient Infrastructure and Service
- Negative Stigma
- Difficulties Navigating the System and Lack of Rider Education
- Safety Concerns and Discomfort
- Unreliable Real-Time Information

STRENGTHS

Environmental Impact

Many young people said that climate change was a significant issue for them and a big concern when thinking of the future. A strength of public transit, therefore, is the role it can play in mitigating negative climate impacts and decreasing carbon emissions. Many participants highlighted that more public transit use, and therefore less car use, will cause fewer harmful emissions and help yield positive environmental impacts for communities.

Many participants drew connections between the environmental impacts of transit and public access to transit. They noted that in order to maximize the potential climate benefit that can come from widespread public transit use, people need to be able to easily use bus and train systems.

For example, a participant said "if we all have access to public transit that's a really easy way to reduce our impact. Where I live we don't really have the light rail yet, but just having that so you don't have to drive into the city and use as much gas, that's important to me to reduce my impact." (Sydney, 16, Sammamish)

Additionally, many noted that electric buses would be another great step toward cleaner transportation. In general, participants appreciated that widespread public transit generally has a positive environmental impact by taking single occupancy cars off the road, and they want to see transit's impact maximized by making it electric and more energy efficient.

> " Taking care of my environment and my community is very important to me. And if I can reduce my carbon footprint by taking the light rail I would rather do that than, you know, drive a car around." (Thy, 15, Seattle)

Increased Independence

Participants were asked about where they go most frequently via transit, and who is with them when they ride the bus. Responses covered a range of destinations, including school, work, places for extracurricular activities, and community centers. In their answers, participants discussed how using transit allows them to go places with big groups of friends and without needing to rely on a parent or someone else to drive. One captured this particularly well by saying "One thing that is important to me is that as I am getting more freedom I want to be able to use that freedom, and having transportation that is affordable and accessible would be helpful [for that]." (Anonymous Participant)

Many participants said that they take transit for fun to explore a city with their friends. These experiences were described as enjoyable and social and highlighted their ability to navigate their regions independently and learn to use their transit systems.

Additionally, participants stated that transit allows them to go places without needing their parents or relying on a car ride. One said directly, "I take the bus regularly because I can't rely on my parents to drive me." (Anonymous Participant). Another highlighted the opportunities that transit can provide to young people, noting that "accessible public transit could help them get to places like jobs and school." (Ally, Redmond).

Several participants noted that they will start driving themselves once they get a driver's license or that their ridership declined when they received a driver's license.

> " One thing that is important to me is that as I am getting more freedom I want to be able to use that freedom, and having transportation that is affordable and accessible would be helpful." (Anonymous Participant)

Enhanced Equity

Participants have noticed the difference that free fares have had on their lives. A lot of young people also acknowledged the benefits that free transit can play in the community and that they would love to see this expanded. One person noted, "high schoolers have minimum wage jobs which shouldn't be spent just getting to the places they need to go like school. I think this is the right step toward public transit." (Odmaral, 16, Kirkland)

Beyond this, participants noted that public transit is in general a more affordable way to get around than driving. "Taking the bus is a much more affordable option than cars," (Kinley, 17, Redmond) one person bluntly said. They appreciate that public transit allows people to save money over the cost of gas. When speaking to affordability, many participants voiced that owning and maintaining a car is too expensive for many people, and can become a burden. For instance, one participant stated, "a lot of people can't afford cars or gas consistently. Accessible public transit could help them get to places like jobs and school." (Ally, Redmond)

> " Being able to get anywhere in the community would be great. I'm seeing more and more of my friends not be able to afford cars and that's really important for the buses to be useful for everyone."
> (Michael, Olympia)

Connections with Bus Drivers

Positive interactions with bus drivers have made a big impact on our participants, influencing both how they feel about particular rides and their overall impressions of transit.

Communicating with a bus driver upon boarding has made many participants feel an instant connection with the bus and helped set the stage for a calmer experience. One person shared: "When I come onto a bus and someone's just like having a conversation with the bus driver, it definitely makes me feel more comfortable to see that there's a friendly bus driver and they're just having [...] a nice chat." (Evita, 17, Olympia) These initial interactions also offer an opportunity for young riders to ask questions and make sure they know how to get to their destinations if needed.

The feelings from such interactions carry into the rides themselves. Young people notice when a driver seems to be looking out for their riders by being attentive and driving safely. As seen later in this report, participants in our focus groups often feel nervous about their safety when taking transit. The role of the bus driver, especially in making small efforts like greeting and checking their mirror, was commonly stated to ease these fears and make them feel more comfortable on transit. One participant noted how "if the bus driver is nice to you" it can feel as if "you have them as an ally." (Anonymous Participant)

Lastly, participants liked that bus drivers help protect safety on the road. Bus drivers are, after all, professional drivers and our participants noted that this is an important aspect of safety.

> " The bus driver also plays a part in how safe other people feel, I think, because the bus driver follows the rules, like they're not going above the speed limit and they're not breaking any laws." (Nithin, 13, Kirkland)

CHALLENGES

Insufficient Infrastructure and Services

Frequency and Timing

Participants shared that long wait times between buses, infrequent schedules, and late or canceled trips contribute to feelings of inconvenience and lack of appeal regarding public transit use. For instance, one participant noted, "I think the timing of the bus was the biggest challenge, especially when I started commuting all the way across town. It's significantly longer than driving, which isn't unexpected, but it was so drastic that it wasn't feasible." (Jack, Spokane) Very similarly, a separate youth said, "The main reason why I'd rather drive than take the bus is it takes like 2 or 3 times as long to bus as it does to drive." (Cameron, 17, Seattle) Another shared, "I would like more buses coming every 5-10 minutes instead of every 30-45 minutes because that can make me late to school or anywhere else I go." (Mia, Seattle)

Long wait times between bus transfers were of particular concern to some participants, with some experiencing significant wait times between buses. As one youth expressed, "I have to take 2 buses to get to school. I usually miss it by like one minute so I have to wait 30 minutes for the next one." (Anonymous participant) Echoing this feeling, another participant acknowledged that "having more consistent connecting time for buses would definitely make it a lot easier." (Bee, 15, Tacoma)

> " There was a time when I needed to get somewhere. I wasn't in a rush but I had to wait like hours for a bus to turn up, and I know for some people who depend on that sort of transportation it's really, not only inconvenient but it's really scary at some point because I don't wanna wait two hours in order to get somewhere on public transportation."
> (Anonymous participant)

Route Efficiency and Location of Transit Stops

The need for expanded access and infrastructure was especially pronounced for participants from smaller cities and rural communities. Several participants noted that bus stops are often very far away from their destinations. Several expressed that insufficient access to transit stops, especially when paired with infrequent buses, can make taking transit a burdensome choice.

> " The nearest bus stop to me is more than a mile away." (Anonymous participant)

Within this subtheme, multiple focus group participants also expressed that bus routes are not direct enough in arriving at their destination and bus stops are too sparse or inconveniently located. One youth noted, "If I were to ride more frequently it would be easier if there were stations close to my house; usually I have to use a car to get to a station to take it so I feel like I might as well just take a car." (Anonymous Participant) Another shared that, "it would be easier to use public transportation if it went more directly to some places; like to [get] to my school it's a 12-minute drive but it takes more than an hour on the bus because it goes really far away halfway through." (Anonymous Participant)

Negative Reputation & Stigma

Negative Stigma

Many young people shared that they were aware of the reputations of various modes of transportation, and generally felt that there was a stigma attached to riding public transit. One participant expressed that "there's a big reputation among high school students that it's cool to drive a car and uncool to ride a bus… I've heard a lot of people, friends, that are hesitant to ride the bus, even though it might be more efficient or cost-effective, because of those negative stereotypes." (Jack, Spokane)

Feelings of shame attached to public transit use were expressed by multiple participants. One person shared, "I would take the bus to school and I just never really was like open to talking about it because I was embarrassed that that was what I had to do. And if someone was like why does it take you so long to get to school I kinda just avoided it because of that like bad reputation." (Evita, 17, Olympia)

> " Sometimes I feel embarrassed about how much I use public transit so I push it to the side and don't talk about it... it's not something we should be ashamed of doing because it's a way of transportation." (Anonymous participant)

Negative Perceptions of Cleanliness

Alongside this stigma associated with transit ridership, participants commonly acknowledged negative associations with the dirtiness that they perceived on the bus. Various youths named bad odor, litter, and general lack of cleanliness as contributors to public transit's poor reputation and factors that dissuaded them from riding. For instance, one participant shared of a particular ride, "the smell in that bus was strong and that made me feel a little bit uncomfortable, so I guess maybe if we could take care of the bus a little bit more, the trash and the smell, that'd be nice." (Anonymous participant)

Another participant described that "there's already a lot of negative stigma[...], especially that public transport is really associated with dirtiness." (Anonymous participant) Yet another youth shared their direct experience with this stigma: "I have met a lot of people that never took public transportation who're just like 'oh like why would I wanna do that, that seems gross.'" (Evita, 17, Olympia)

> " I feel when there isn't that trash it feels a lot more like someone's actually been taking care of the space and when a space is taken care of it makes you feel like if something were to happen then you would be taken care of too." (Aurora, 14, Seattle)

Difficulties Navigating the System and Lack of Rider Education

The third prevalent subtheme cited as a challenge to using public transit was inexperience and uncertainty regarding the act of riding. A lack of understanding surrounding the fare system and lack of adequate signage and maps to alleviate concerns with unfamiliar routes were barriers for many new riders or riders recounting their initial public transit experiences. Several participants expressed a lack of confidence navigating transit: "When I started riding, it was really difficult to figure out how to use the routes and there was no information on how to use the fare system. It's easy once you figure it out but hard to get on the learning curve." (Jack, Spokane)

Several participants noted that a lack of rider information poses a safety concern. For example, one said "I'm always scared of getting lost, so online resources are helpful. Familiarity with the route is safety. When you're somewhere you're not comfortable, you feel scared." (Anonymous participant) There was also an appetite for more transit education in schools. One participant said, "it would be cool if someone could come to a high school and kind of talk about it in front of a lot of high schoolers. Or, we have our school news, and [...] having a segment or some way to reach a lot of high schoolers per school to kind of explain how transportation works [would be great] because a lot of people just don't really know how it works around my school or have fears about it, but I guess hearing how it works and that it's mostly safe would be a good thing to hear from an adult." (Abbey, 16, Sammamish)

Unreliable Real-Time Information

A fourth challenge that participants described as a barrier to accessing and utilizing public transportation was a prevailing distrust in current bus tracking systems. This subtheme was prevalent throughout focus group sessions as many participants expressed frustrations about buses not showing up when an app said it would arrive. This subtheme is related to insufficient infrastructure and services because participants said the reason unreliable tracking is so frustrating and impactful is that a missed bus means a long wait for the next one to arrive.

Many discussed the impact this has had on their ability to get where they need to go. Across sessions, participants shared that a reliable way to track a bus would help them plan better and feel more confident choosing transit to get to their destination on time.

Safety Concerns and Discomfort

A lack of safety and comfort, both real and perceived, emerged as another prominent challenge to a positive rider experience. This section details what makes participants feel unsafe and safe while taking transit. Safety concerns took on several different forms, several of which are included in other subthemes. Many participants referred to general bus environments and bus infrastructure as heavily impacting their sense of safety.

Environmental Factors

Participants had a lot of input on the general bus environment, both at stops and on board.

Communicative and attentive bus drivers make a big difference to the participants, with several saying that when a driver seems aware of their riders, they feel safe. This is detailed more in the "Strengths" section above.

Additionally, high ridership and traveling in groups contribute to a positive bus environment. Participants mentioned that seeing other people ride the bus, especially families and other teenagers, makes them feel generally safer. However, many participants noted that there is a limit here. When buses are so crowded that people are packed in tight together, participants noted that their sense of safety declines. For example, one participant (Bee, 25) from Tacoma said, "For me personally, a lot of people from my school take the bus home, and oftentimes the bus is so crowded that we have to leave people behind and make them wait for the next bus. And I just feel like everyone being so crowded and not really having anywhere to hold onto is pretty unsafe. There've been a lot of times where people have fallen and gotten injured."

Lastly, rider behavior makes a big difference to participants' sense of safety. They noted that when people are having altercations, yelling, staring directly at them, or actively doing drugs or vaping, then they do not feel safe. This was especially felt at bus stops, where the absence of security or a driver means they often feel more alone and vulnerable in the event of escalation. There was a general sense among participants that if these cases escalated, no one would help.

In general, participants expressed a desire for someone to be available to help should something bad happen. One participant noted that "most of these experiences don't have to do with public transportation, you can just as easily be harassed on the street. It's just the public in general." (Anonymous participant) We do not include this quote to discount any unease experienced by riders, but rather to show that it is a public space and such challenges are not unique to transit.

Transit Infrastructure and Maintenance

Bus infrastructure and maintenance also impact participants' sense of safety.

At transit stops, participants largely feel less safe when the areas are poorly lit, when they are empty at night, and when there is drug use or illicit activity. Conversely, participants noted feeling more safe when bus stops have more amenities, including weather-protective shelters and bright lighting.

On board, participants feel less safe when the bus is dirty and when a bus is so overcrowded that they cannot find a safe place to ride. Participants ideally want to be able to sit down and, if they can't, to have abundant and safe handles to help them keep their balance.

In terms of bus cleanliness, one participant said that "I feel when there isn't trash it feels a lot more like someone's actually been taking care of the space, and when a space is taken care of it makes you feel like if something were to happen then you would be taken care of, too." (Aurora, 14, Seattle)

> " For me, feeling safe is not about having security cameras but having a driver who is communicative and present."
> (Jack, Spokane)

It is worth noting that this experience was not entirely universal and has had varying impacts on ridership, so much so that we cannot definitively say how safety concerns have impacted ridership as a whole among participants. We can say that safety concerns have created feelings of unease while on board and that participants want to feel more supported.

While safety concerns and discomforts were a prevalent issue for many participants, several acknowledged that their transit experience has been overwhelmingly positive. One participant captured this well by saying "I've had a positive [experience] because the free riding transit program makes it possible for me to go to school. And I've heard good stuff about the bus riding experience. People are nice on the bus when I go. The summer pass has also helped to make it possible to go places during the summer when it's hot." (Anonymous Participant)

Another said bluntly, "I don't feel unsafe on the bus." (Anonymous Participant)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations

Drawing on the focus group findings, we have the following recommendations for agencies across the state. These recommendations respond to the challenges and strengths of using transit identified by our participants.

Establish Youth Ambassador Programs

- Support youth in taking on leadership roles in their schools and communities to promote transit use among their peers.
- Youth ambassadors could promote group ridership among their peers to increase feelings of safety and comfort.
- Create opportunities and spaces for Youth Ambassadors to foster connections with operators by sharing perspectives, information, and resources with each other.
- This program could also include a Youth Development component, wherein youth would be introduced to various career opportunities in transportation, including planners, operators, mechanics, or advocates.
- We are thrilled to see this kind of program already taking shape! Seattle Department of Transportation, for example, hosts a Youth Ambassador Program focused on transportation equity and mobility justice, job readiness, and peer-to-peer collaboration.

Offer More Educational Materials and Instructional Programming

- Create and more widely disseminate materials that help new young riders better understand and navigate transit systems.
- Tutorials could be in the form of videos, signage, or school curriculum programming.
- Provide more structured content on card swipes, fare systems, and how to communicate a stop to the driver.
- Display route maps more prominently for riders.
- Emphasize the importance of transit in terms of young people's ability to exercise independence and move freely through their neighborhoods and surrounding area. Rider knowledge is power!

> " It would be cool if someone from the transportation place could come to a high school and kind of talk about it in front of a lot of high schoolers. Or like we have our school news, and [...] having a segment or some way to reach a lot of high schoolers per school to kind of explain how transportation works [would be great] because a lot of people just don't really know how it works around my school or have fears about it. [...] Hearing how it works and that it's mostly safe would be a good thing to hear from an adult." (Abbey)

Establish More Frequent and Reliable Service

- Expand transit service operations, especially during peak hours and on busy routes, and particularly on the east side of King County.

Create a More Reliable System for Tracking Real-Time Information

- Improve accuracy in real-time information both at transit stops and on digital platforms.

Enhance Cleanliness & Sanitation on Buses and at Transit Stops

- Implement more frequent cleaning and sanitation on board public transit to alleviate the discomfort that participants expressed.
- Maintain transit stops and, as possible, implement better infrastructure at stops, including:
  - Adding more lighting;
  - Enhancing bus shelters with more weather protection;
  - Adding and maintaining trash cans;
  - When possible, design seats for easy cleaning and maintenance.

Recruit and Retain Civilian Transit Security Personnel with Specific Training in De-escalation Tactics and in Supporting Young Riders

- Recruit and retain civilian transit security personnel who can support young riders by providing general information and resources on social services, and who are specifically trained to utilize de-escalation tactics when necessary.
- Train civilian transit security personnel to communicate with teenagers and young people. Any crisis training should additionally include ways to support vulnerable youth—including homeless youth, runaway youth, and suspected trafficking victims—and connect them with appropriate social services.

Invest in Broader Upstream Social Services

- Government bodies should invest in expanded, accessible crisis intervention and treatment options for people experiencing mental health and substance use disorders. We also recommend deeper investment in non-transit resources like health and social services, designated and well[1]known safe places for vulnerable youth, and professionals trained to connect young people with needed services. When transit agencies are not able to provide these resources directly, they should explore partnering with agencies and non-profits that have existing programs and expertise in these areas.
- Support transit investments in communities that have been overlooked, neglected, or displaced, as well as prioritizing new infrastructure and transit expansion in communities that depend on public transportation for access to jobs, schools, social supports, healthcare, and other essential services. In addition, we recommend upstream investments in affordable housing to promote more equitable access to resources.

Conclusion

Throughout these focus groups, participants expressed a deep desire for transit to easily support their lives and movements. The young people we spoke with largely understand the important role transit plays in our society, in terms of climate impact, affordability, and access to opportunity.

In order to realize these dreams, transit agencies and decision-makers must make appropriate changes to ensure that transit is easy, frequent, and safe for young riders. Proposed changes are outlined in our recommendations in the next section.

By and large, a common theme amongst participants was wanting to feel cared for and connected while riding transit. This was evident in their perspectives on bus operators and conditions that make them feel safe on transit. In cases where public transit falls short of expectations, disappointments were connected to feeling that their time and safety were not priorities.

Just as generations past created Social Security, Medicare, and our National Parks, with robust public transit we too can create what we need for a better future for our youth. By coming together across race and place, a fully funded, accessible, and reliable public transit system can ensure we all have the freedom to get where we need to go.

This project intended to gain a foundational understanding of how young Washingtonians view transit, but it did not address every aspect of youth perspectives on transit. We hope that this project will be the first of many efforts by Transportation Choices Coalition and others to better understand the youth experience on transit and work toward positive change that supports a new generation of transit riders.