

## Health and Social Impacts of the Kikinahk Free Bus Service in Saskatchewan

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*This research brief is one of a series of briefs that shares findings from research conducted as part of Mobilizing Justice's Theme 1, which aims to understand the experiences of people, especially those facing transport-related social exclusion, across different transportation modes.*

### SPOTLIGHT

<b>Population(s) of focus</b>	Bus Riders
<b>Mode(s) of focus</b>	Free community-based transportation
<b>Geographic area of focus</b>	La Ronge, Saskatchewan
<b>Community collaborator</b>	Kikinahk Friendship Centre, La Ronge

### POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

- Free transportation in rural communities has the potential to reduce social exclusion and promote access to care and services
- In creating free transportation services in rural communities, governments and policy makers should consider capacity building for service personnel such as drivers
- More evidence needs to be generated to increase public support for free transportation in rural communities given its positive impacts

### INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

This project is about impacts of the Kikinahk Free Bus service in La Ronge on community members' health and quality of life. Since the closure of Saskatchewan's main intercity bus system, the Saskatchewan Transportation Company (STC) in 2017, many individuals and communities have been left without access to travel options.<sup>1,2</sup> Although this challenge is recognized by researchers and policy makers, no clear solutions have been proposed to support communities. Many communities have either had to do without public transportation or develop their own solutions, although questions remain about the sustainability (financial and operational) of any emerging community-driven transportation interventions. Questions also exist on the impacts of these emerging initiatives and how best to support them.

The Kikinahk Free Bus service was a community-driven transportation initiative developed by the Kikinahk Friendship Centre to support travel for people in Northern Saskatchewan (primarily residents of the tri-community – Town of La Ronge, Village of Air Ronge and the Lac La Ronge Indian Band [combined population of 5,200] and Prince Albert [population 37,000]). Over the last couple of years (2023-2024), 2,346 trips were completed on the bus as part of travel to visit family and friends, access jobs and economic opportunities, seek medical care and just get out of town. As part of a partnership between University of Saskatchewan based researchers and the leadership of the Friendship Centre, a research project was conducted to highlight the impacts of the service and to describe some of the challenges the Friendship Centre has faced in trying to maintain the service up until its closure in June 2024.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To explore the impact of the free bus initiative on healthcare access and equity for vulnerable populations in Northern Saskatchewan
- To identify how the free bus initiative could be scaled up/sustained over the long term to promote equity in other rural communities

## METHODS

This was a mixed methods study relying on both quantitative approaches (numbers and counts) and qualitative approaches (descriptions of experiences).<sup>3</sup> The study was designed using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework.<sup>4</sup> This type of research draws on community relationships and prioritizes the needs of community members and community-based organizations from the conceptualization of the study all the way to implementation.

The research component of the project began with consultative meetings between Dr Jacob Alhassan and the Executive Director of Kikinahk Friendship Centre – Mr Ron Woytowich (now retired). Dr Alhassan and the community partner codesigned the study with support from Dr Daniel Fuller. We held consultative meetings to define the scope of the research project and to agree on how to explore the impacts of the community driven transportation scheme. All the study participants were recruited by a community-based research assistant although interviews were conducted by Dr Alhassan and research assistants from the University of Saskatchewan.

### Qualitative methods

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with thirty-five (35) bus riders and six (6) people involved in the administration of the bus service including drivers and management of the free bus. Qualitative data analysis involved inductive and deductive coding followed by the combination of codes to form categories and subsequently themes.<sup>5</sup> We audio-recorded interviews and transcribed them verbatim before importation into NVivo 12 software for analysis.

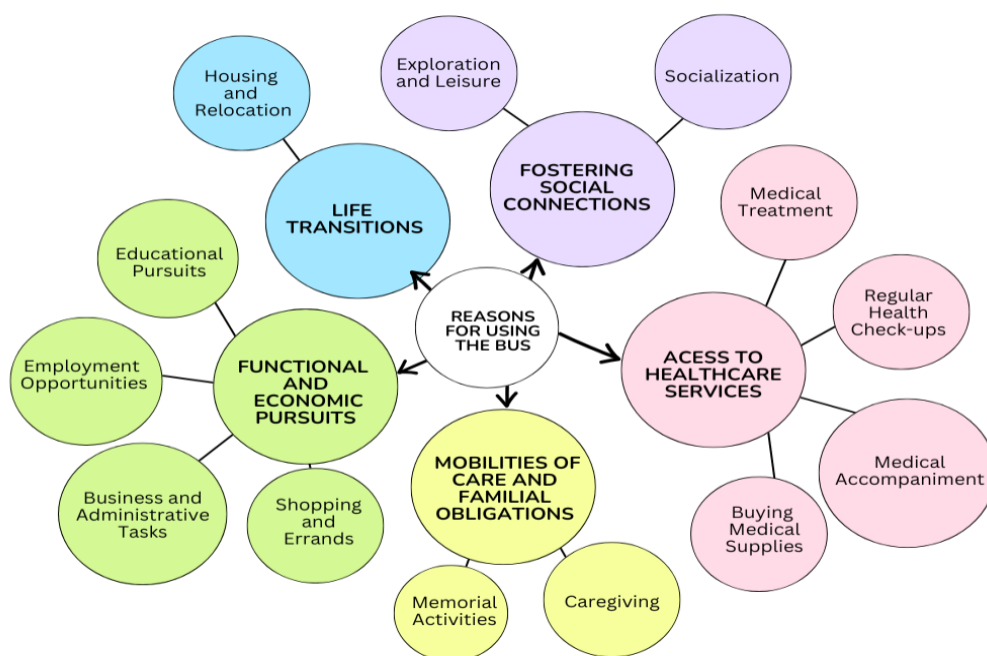
### Quantitative methods

The transportation manager of the Kikinahk Free Bus service collected trip details of those phoning in to ride the bus. When passengers phoned in to book rides they would be asked demographic questions on their gender, a proxy question on whether they were an adult, a child or an elder, their First Nation status and a question on trip origin, purpose and destination. We drew on this data (2,346) trips to reveal demographic characteristics of bus riders and performed Chi Squared tests using R software.

## FINDINGS

### a) Qualitative insights on reasons for using the free bus

The qualitative data revealed that usage of the Kikinahk free bus service was related to people's personal circumstances and the context of life in rural Saskatchewan. The main reasons for use of the service are represented in Figure 1 and some are described in depth below.



**Figure 1: Some key themes from qualitative analysis**

### 1) Access to healthcare services

The first prominent theme which emerged was the use of the bus service primarily to access healthcare services including treatment, routine dental or eye appointments, and visits to the city to obtain medical supplies. Participants reported that they used the bus for convenient access to healthcare, which previously had been challenging due to the lack of available transportation options in the north. In the absence of the free bus, individuals often had to depend on inconvenient modes of travel or, in some cases, avoided seeking healthcare services altogether. One participant noted:

*“It helped people make medical and dental appointments otherwise they would suffer.” (Male, 39, Driver#1)*

### 2) Functional and economic pursuits

The bus service provided individuals with the means to pursue opportunities that were previously unattainable due to transportation constraints and financial barriers. The following quotes below highlight this theme:

*“Oh, I had to go...it's not just for medical, also SGI [Saskatchewan Government Insurance] ... Had to go to SGI for my license, and that's what I was using it for”. (Female, 49, Rider #22)*

*“Majority of the time what we have is what is here. But you know, if we are going to go to PA [Prince Albert] and we'll just do everything all in one shot, like, because you don't have Dollar Store here. They do, but it's, it's very expensive. It's like, everything's like \$7 dollars, right? So, when we do stop there and get all the majority of a lot of things that we need that are cheap and still good, you know.” (Female, 48, Driver #23)*

### 3) Fostering social connections

Some individuals used the free bus for reasons such as visiting family and friends. Many interviewees indicated that such visits were particularly beneficial for elders’ health and wellbeing. Beyond healthcare access for elders, the bus also

allowed for many elders to maintain some degree of social connection – a key social determinant of health. Two respondents describe the role of the bus in fostering social connections below:

*“As the drivers ... we got to take people down and then a lot of the old people like to explain their lives away. So, you sit there listen and meet a lot of individuals through it.” (Male, 30, Driver #2).*

*“Ah just like, just go get away for the weekend. Get on the bus to go visit friends.” (Female, 60, Rider #21)*

**4) Interpersonal obligations**

The data revealed that people sometimes also travelled to fulfill obligations such as to visit family members to provide support in periods of grieving, for memorial activities or as part of caregiving.

*“Because that was my friend who passed away. But usually, when funerals do happen, they're always here in town. But this one, he lived out of town. So, his funeral was out of town. And that's the reason why I used the bus.” (Female, 62, Rider #11)*

**b) Quantitative analysis of reasons for using the free bus**

A total of 2,346 person trips were made on the bus. Overall, more than half (54.8%) of bus riders in both years (2023 and 2024) were female. In terms of age, the largest proportion of the participants who used bus were typically adult (47.4%), followed by elders (17.3%). In terms of ethnicity, 68.4% of those who rode the bus were Status First Nations people. Most of the respondents (61.0%) used the bus for visits and approximately 20% for medical reasons in both years as seen in Figure 2. Both men and women used the bus more for visits than for anything else followed by medical reasons. Interestingly, 5.1% of males used the bus for work as compared to 2.5% females.

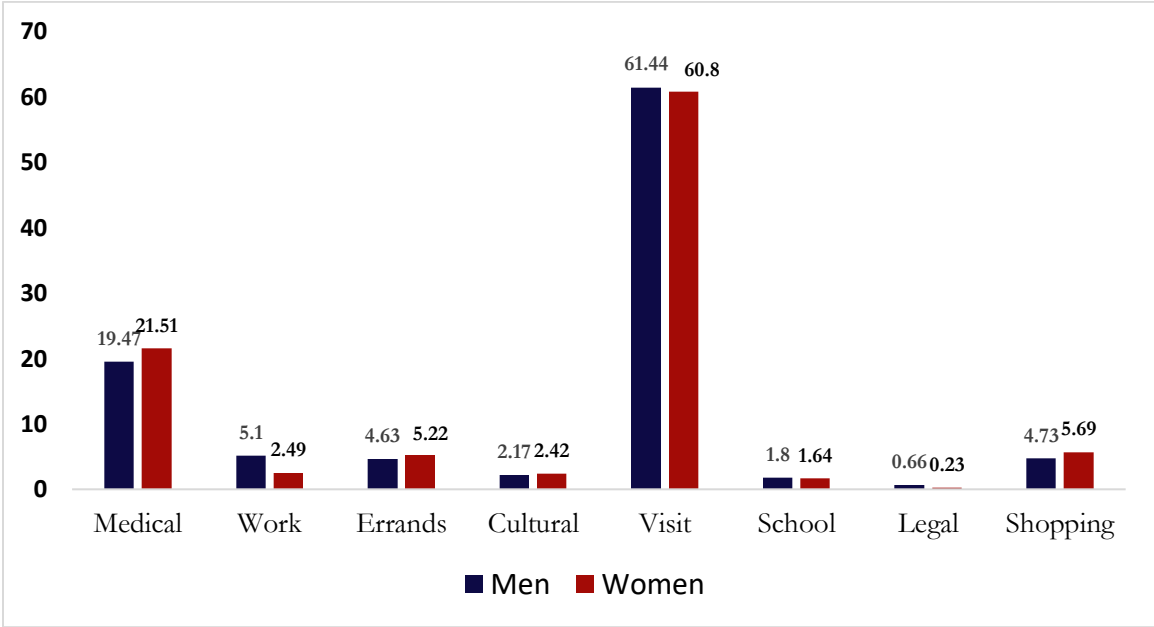


Figure 2: Bar chart showing trip purpose by gender

**WANT MORE INFORMATION?**

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