

Free Public Transit Intervention for Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Toronto

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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 historically underserved by the transportation system.

SPOTLIGHT

Population(s) of focus	Youth experiencing homelessness
Mode(s) of focus	Public transportation
Geographic area of focus	Toronto
Community collaborator	Transit Access Project (TAP)

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

- The cost of transportation is a significant barrier to access essential supports and opportunities for youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto.
- Current transportation supports, available at social service providers, are not adequate in meeting the transportation needs of youth experiencing homelessness.
- Offering free monthly transit passes to youth experiencing homelessness can improve quality of life and access to essential destinations.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Toronto has faced a record-high homeless population in 2025, with over 11,500 people experiencing homelessness, 2,000 of whom are youth ages 16-24^{1,2}. Public transit is the most common form of transportation beyond a walking range for people experiencing homelessness in Toronto³. However, many people experiencing homelessness are unable to pay for transit fares, denying access to essential destinations, like healthcare, social support, essential services, employment, and housing opportunities^{4,5,6,7,8,9}. Lack of access to essential destinations can prolong periods of homelessness^{10,11}, making dismantling transportation barriers essential to reduce the length of homelessness. To reach essential supports, people experiencing homelessness must risk ticketing or conflict by transit authorities^{12,13}. Shelters and support services in Toronto do not have enough funding to offer sufficient transportation supports to meet clients' needs¹⁴.

For youth, access to social supports is especially critical in fostering well-being and stability in the simultaneous transitions from childhood into adulthood and from being homeless to being stably housed^{15,16}. For youth experiencing homelessness, the longer one's first experience of homelessness is, the more likely they are to experience chronic or recurring homelessness throughout their lifetime^{17,18}. Dismantling transportation barriers to access services that aid in rapid rehousing is thus essential in preventing chronic or recurring homelessness among youth.

To address this gap in transportation access, Canadian cities like Edmonton, Calgary, and Guelph, have created free public transit programs for people experiencing homelessness or extreme poverty. The City of Edmonton was the first to create a program of this kind, establishing the PATH program in 2016 to offer fully subsidized monthly transit passes for people experiencing homelessness. This intervention has shown strong outcomes in reducing barriers to employment and housing, improving quality of life, decreasing the cost of social services, and reducing criminalization of people experiencing homelessness^{11,19,20}.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study explored the causes of transportation deprivation and the impact of a three-month free transit pass intervention on access to essential destinations and quality of life for youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto. This study answered the following questions:

1. Pre-intervention, are participants experiencing transportation deprivation due to the cost of public transit?
2. If youth do experience transportation deprivation, how does this experience impact their quality of life and access to essential destinations, including supportive services, food security programs, healthcare, employment, housing opportunities, and social supports?
3. How does the provision of free public transit change access to essential destinations and quality of life for youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto?

METHODS

Participants were either living in (n = 28) or recently rehoused from (n = 8) three youth shelters in Toronto. There were 36 participants, ages 16-25 with a mean age of 21.5, including 16 men, 13 women, and 7 trans or nonbinary participants. This study used a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. Pre- and post-intervention semi-structured group interviews were conducted. Pre-intervention interviews observed the causes and consequences of transportation deprivation. Post-intervention interviews explored the impact of the monthly transit pass on access to essential destinations and quality of life. A longitudinal survey was distributed pre intervention and at the start, mid, and end points of the intervention. This survey observed changes in housing type, employment, income, and use of supportive services. As the study population was small and had a high amount of transience, attrition and non-responses were high. The findings report on all the responses received to each question. Response rate varied by question, leading the total respondent population to differ between questions.

FINDINGS

Pre-Intervention: Mobility Barriers & Impact on Participants:

- **Transit Fare was a Barrier to Daily Transportation:** The cost of transportation was a significant financial burden on participants pre-intervention. 21 of 28 (75%) survey respondents spent more than 10% of their monthly income on transit, with 8 (29%) participants spending 30% or more of their monthly income on transportation (see Figure 1).
 - **Lack of Transportation Supports:** Transportation supports at participating shelters were not sufficient in meeting participants' daily transportation needs. Toronto's low-income transit program, the Fair Pass Transit Discount Program, was still prohibitively expensive for participants, with many others not aware of the program.
- **Unable to Reach Essential Destinations:** The cost of public transit was a significant barrier to access essential destinations, such as employment, housing opportunities, or supportive services. 24 of 29 (83%) respondents reported struggling to access essential destinations due to the cost of transit.

- **Employment:** Lack of transit access was cited as a barrier to work by half of participants, with individuals missing job interviews and employment opportunities due to inability to afford the transit fare.
- **Healthcare:** Nearly half of participants could not access healthcare due to the cost of transit. Participants with chronic health conditions regularly missed appointments due to the cost of transit.
- **Education:** Six participants reported that they were unable to reliably attend school due to lack of access to transportation, leading to less consistent attendance.

- **Impacts of Transportation Poverty on Quality of Life:**

- **Social Isolation:** Participants widely discussed being socially isolated due to the cost of travel. 19 of 29 (66%) respondents could not visit family or friends due to transit costs, reducing critical support networks needed for rehousing. Participants avoided taking these trips to save money.
- **Food Security:** Participants reported regularly having to forgo buying food to afford transit fare. Participants struggled to access available food security programs due to the cost of transit.
- **Safety:** Participants reported being stranded in unfamiliar destinations and denied transit in extreme weather conditions. Participants often had to disclose their homelessness to bus drivers while negotiating to ride without fare. These conversations were overheard by other passengers that led to predatory behavior by other riders who had become aware of their situational vulnerability.

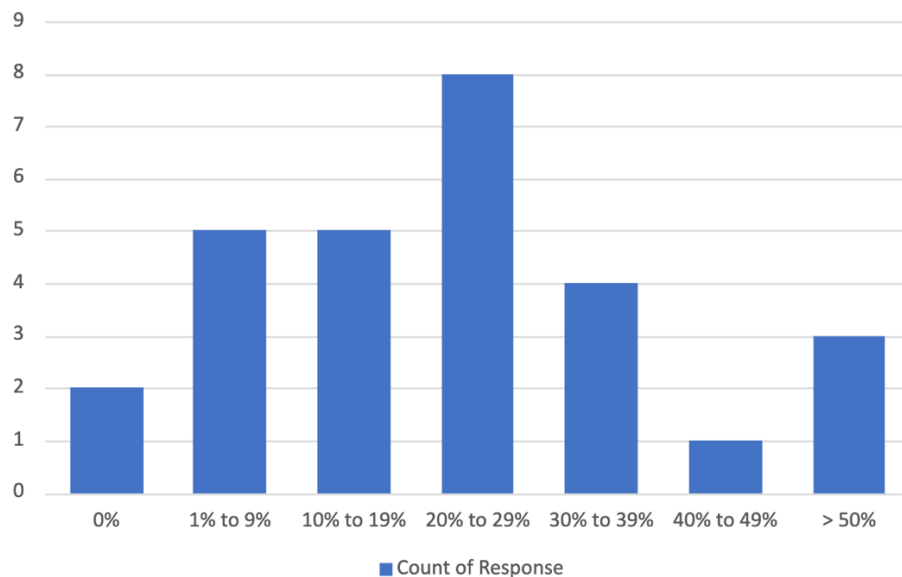


Figure 1: *Proportion of Participants' Income Spent on Transit Pre-Intervention (n = 28)*

Findings During the Free Transit Pilot Intervention

- **Access to Essential Destinations:** Participants reported greater access to support services, employment, housing opportunities, healthcare, social support, recreational spaces, and education during the intervention.

- **Employment Gains:** Participants were able to attend interviews they previously could not afford to reach, helping to secure new employment. Others were able to change jobs to receive more consistent hours and pay. One participant noted:

"It helped me to find a job—I never had a job before, but whenever I could see any place where they were advertising, I could just board public transit and go straight away without thinking about."
- **Housing Opportunities:** All participants renting or living in a transitional shelter maintained their housing stability throughout the intervention. Five participants successfully moved from emergency housing into private housing or a transitional organization (see Figure 2). Those who moved cited the transit pass as a key factor in accessing housing support and opportunities:

"It helped me find my first apartment. It helped me save money. I moved out of [the shelter] a few months ago."
- **Quality of Life Improvements:** Participants' improved transportation access led to greater engagement with available supports, social networks, and improved their ability to meet their daily needs. These cumulative effects led to overall improvements in quality of life.
 - **Mental & Physical Health Improvements:** Participants reported attending more medical appointments, improved mental health and stability, and an increased ability to make plans and execute them to improve their material circumstances. One participant noted:

"It brought peace of mind. If I got into another hard spot and I needed to go somewhere to find some food or to get groceries, I know I can get there. It's not only just to see friends. But all my necessities... it really gave me a peace of mind."
 - **Social Inclusion:** Participants' ability to see friends and family drastically improved during the intervention, enhancing support networks and reducing feelings of loneliness. One participant simply stated:

"I felt comfortable commuting to [a friend's] place because I have to worry about how much I'm spending."
 - **Financial Security:** The mean and median monthly income of participants increased overall throughout the intervention. Median monthly income range increased from \$250–\$549 to \$700–\$849 and the approximate mean increased from \$475 to \$695.45.

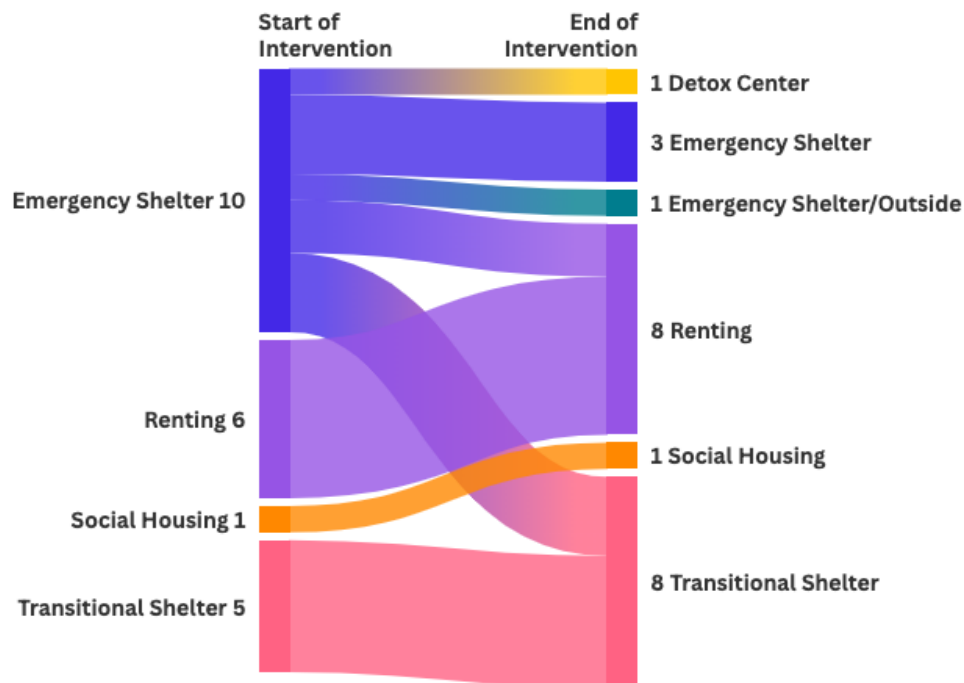


Figure 2: *Change in Housing Type Between Start & End of Intervention (n = 22)*

Overall, this study showed that the cost of public transit is a significant barrier to support and opportunities for youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto. Providing free public transit was an effective intervention to improve participants' access to essential destinations, leading to improvements in quality of life. A longer study should be conducted to examine the impacts of this program on rehousing outcomes long-term.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

- Visit the Transit Access Project (TAP) website: www.transitaccessprojecttap.ca
- Contact the author at noah.kelly@mail.mcgill.ca or Mobilizing Justice Theme 1 Lead at mravensbl@mcmaster.ca

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