

# Research Brief

## Mobility at a Cost: Barriers to Transportation Access for Low-Income Rural and Urban Youth in BC and Pathways to Equity

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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>	Youth 13-18
<b>Mode(s) of focus</b>	Public and private transportation, transit, active transportation
<b>Geographic area of focus</b>	Lower Mainland and West Kootenay region, British Columbia

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

1. Address financial barriers through fare reform: The unaffordable cost of public transit limits youth mobility and forces youth to make difficult choices that often put them in harm's way, including interactions with transit police and the legal system. Policy developments should prioritize expanding and simplifying fare discount programs, as well as extending free transit to youth aged 13-18 to 18, to reduce financial hardship and improve access to opportunities.
2. Improve service reliability and safety beyond enforcement: unreliable service and safety concerns, particularly for women and gender-diverse youth, restrict mobility. Investments should focus on increasing bus frequency and implementing human-centred safety measures (such as increased lighting and service attendants), rather than relying primarily on police presence, which can increase anxiety for youth. To create a truly accessible system, transit planning must be coordinated with safe walking/cycling infrastructure and existing community support systems, which can help distribute transit subsidies and connect all populations with community services.
3. Increase bus and all transit routes and reliability in rural areas: Youth in rural areas face intensified mobility barriers due to a lack of other options. Getting a car and driver's license was the only choice for reliable mobility, while being an added expense they couldn't afford. Increasing bus routes, walking/cycling infrastructure, and improving transit reliability have the potential to allow youth to access opportunities and resources while also improving mobility for the broader community.

### INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Community mobility, the ability to move around one's community, is essential for youth as they navigate their youth and grow into adulthood.<sup>1</sup> Youth mobility needs and access are shaped and impacted by a range of internal and external factors, including socio-economic status, safety, and public infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> Youth from low-income households and those facing additional systemic barriers, particularly encounter transportation challenges that impact their access to education, extracurricular activities, work, services, resources, and opportunities. Low-

income youth who experience further marginalization due to their gender identity, Indigeneity or racialized identity, and youth with physical, developmental, or behavioral support needs, among others, face additional barriers to accessing transportation.<sup>3 4</sup>

This case study builds on the Centre for Family Equity's work to address mobility poverty and equitable access to transit for youth. The study examines the mobility-related experiences and challenges that low-income youth, many of whom are impacted by marginalization due to their intersectional identities, encounter in the Lower Mainland and West Kootenay regions of British Columbia (BC). These two regions represent BC's urban and rural-urban distinctions and are served by different transit systems: TransLink in the Lower Mainland and BC Transit in West Kootenay. The case study focused on youth aged 13-18, who are excluded from BC's Get on Board free transit access for children 12 and under.<sup>5</sup> The case study explored how mobility impacted the overall well-being of youth, including access to school, work, opportunities, social activities, and mental health services and other supports.

Predominant approaches to transport infrastructure often overlook the needs of children and youth.<sup>6</sup> The inclusion of children and youth in transportation research, planning, and decision-making advances equity in transportation systems and promotes equitable allocation of transportation resources.<sup>78</sup> This case study sought to bring in the voices of low-income/marginalized youth, which are often absent from transportation research and policy discourse. The research process encountered challenges in outreach, particularly in recruiting youth participants in remote and rural communities. Through sustained direct outreach, youth-serving frontline organizations offered to recruit participants in their areas and helped with logistics to facilitate data collection. To protect the privacy of participants, the names of these organizations are not disclosed. Their support and involvement enabled the participation of barriered youth who otherwise have limited opportunities to engage in research relevant to their experiences.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Understand the barriers that low-income youth encounter accessing transportation and transit.
- Identify the socio-economic implications of transportation and transit access for low-income youth.
- Explore the connection between mobility barriers and their implications for the overall well-being of low-income youth.

## METHODS

This research employed a participatory action research approach that engaged youth peer researchers. Two youth peer researchers were recruited and compensated to shape and inform the study. The peer researchers supported outreach by identifying youth-serving organizations in their area, distributing recruitment materials, and providing input to develop the interview and focus group guides.

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus groups from 27 youth (n=27) aged 15 to 18 from the Lower Mainland (n=12) and West Kootenay region (n=15). Recruitment was conducted primarily through outreach to youth-serving frontline organizations. All participants provided written consent and were informed that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time during the data collection process. Participants self-identified as low-income and/or vulnerable youth. Fifteen (56%) participants identified as male, while 9 participants (33%) identified as female, and the remaining 3 (11%) identified as gender-fluid and trans in response to an open-ended gender/pronoun question. Nearly half (48%) of participants reported having one or more disabilities, including physical disabilities, mental health disabilities, and neurodevelopmental disabilities. Most participants, 24 of them, (89%) live in a family home, while 3 (11%) live by themselves or couch-surf. Over half (55%) work part-time or do casual work, and 11% receive government assistance. To reduce participation

barriers, the study offered online, in-person, and hybrid engagement options. Participants were asked to share their mobility patterns, barriers to access, and the impact of transportation and transit access on their daily lives and well-being. Data collection included 12 online interviews (individual and paired) in the Lower Mainland, and 4 individual online one-on-one interviews and 3 hybrid focus groups in the West Kootenay region. The hybrid focus groups were held with support from two community partners in the West Kootenay region. Community collaborators recruited participants, obtained written consent, and provided space for the research team to virtually conduct interviews and facilitate focus groups. The data were transcribed verbatim, coded, and thematically analyzed.

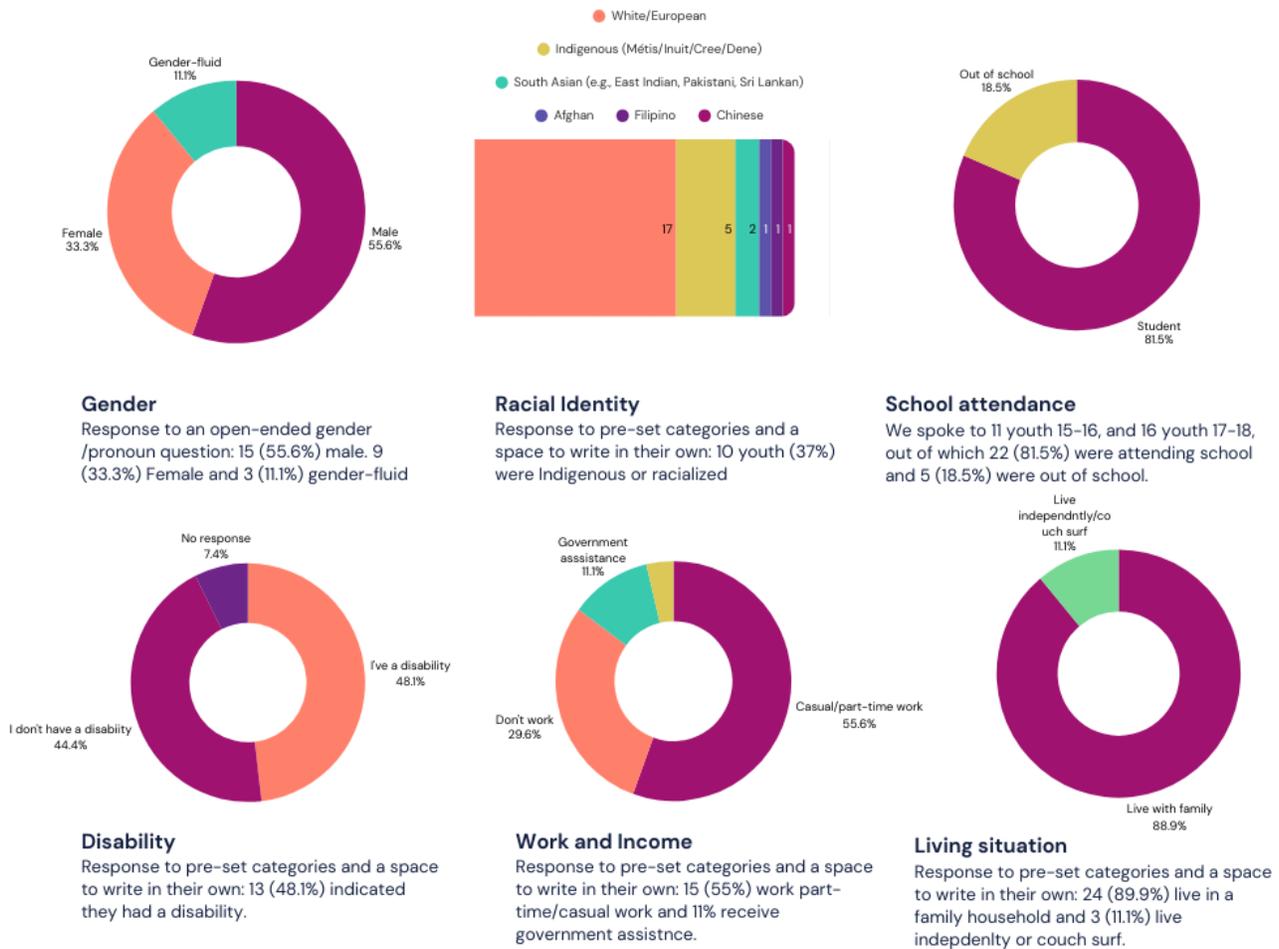


Figure 1: Key demographic information of participants

## FINDINGS

Key Finding	Policy Implications
Youth relied on public transit and walking.	Prioritize investment in these healthy and environmentally friendly modes of transportation.
Cost was a primary barrier.	Explore fare discounts, free transit, or expanding youth subsidy programs.
Unreliable (and unsafe) service limited youth opportunities.	Improve frequency and reliability, especially in rural and suburban residential areas.
Safety concerns were gendered and real; policing strategy heightened them.	Enhance human-centered safety such as staff and improved lighting, instead of punitive ones.
Transportation impacted youth well-being	Recognize and address transportation access as a stressor and barrier to accessing support services and programs for youth.

### Youth Rely on Public Transit and Walking for Transportation

Transit served as an essential part of youths’ lives, powering their commutes to school, work, and social activities. For some youth who faced barriers, especially in the West Kootenay region, transportation provided access to opportunities that they might not have access to otherwise, including education and the means to support themselves. Getting access to income to support themselves was particularly important for youth who had no family support or lived independently. As one youth shared:

*“It [transit] enables me to be able to actually support myself financially, find a future outside of what I live in right now.” (Female, West Kootenay, Interview participant #1)*

For shorter trips, youth in the Lower Mainland preferred walking. In contrast, youth in the West Kootenay region often had to walk long distances. In rural areas, particularly outside city centres, limited and infrequent bus services necessitated youth to walk long distances to get around. Youth across both rural and urban regions spoke about how walking was not always a safe or healthy option, especially for those with chronic health conditions and disabilities. While youth expressed an interest in cycling, they were hindered by a lack of safe infrastructure, including protected lanes, secure bike parking, and adequate lighting.

*“The terrible transportation here affects me greatly. I am constantly stressed with my health conditions. I have regularly had heart episodes where I’ve passed out on the sidewalk from having a walk. So far, [I have] had heat stroke multiple times because of it, frostbite because of it. It affects my physical wellbeing...it causes a lot of fatigue and a lot of stress and depression, a lot of feelings of hopelessness at times.” (Female, West Kootenay region, Interview participant#1)*

There was a marked difference in how youth participants saw and valued transit. Youth in the Lower Mainland indicated a preference for obtaining a driver’s license and car primarily due to transit costs and service barriers, although they preferred to use a reliable and affordable transit system. In contrast, rural youth in the West Kootenay region expressed that a personal vehicle was the only reliable option to get where they needed to go and did not see any viable alternative.

*"I'm in the process of getting my license, but I don't think that I'll be able to afford a car, and I don't really want to deal with having a car either, because it's a lot of work." (Male, Lower Mainland, Interview participant #10)*

In the West Kootenay region, where some youth accessed support programs, such as counselling and substance use support programs, they relied on staff for a ride to attend these programs. For some youth who supported themselves, these rides were essential for completing errands and accessing other support services.

### **Financial Barriers**

The cost of transit fares was highlighted as a significant and often prohibitive burden. Many youth could not afford a monthly pass and relied on family, school programs, or limited community programs for support. This financial pressure forced youth to explore ways to get around and support their mobility. A youth who was attending a work program shared:

*"They [community support program] give us two Compass cards at the end of the day, and I'd use one of the Compass cards to get home. Then I'd end up using the Compass card, whether it's... just going for an errand, or ..I'm going to hang out with friends, so both Compass cards would end up being getting used so I don't have a Compass card in the morning to get [back to] my program." (Male, Lower Mainland, Interview participant #5)*

Financial trade-offs forced youth to avoid social activities and use their transit money for errands. Some youth missed school, appointments, programs, services, and work as a result. By necessity, a few tried using transit without paying the fare, including by asking for rides from bus drivers, which caused anxiety and guilt for many, as they would have paid their fares if they could. As one youth noted, *"I don't want to miss out just because I'm lacking a couple of dollars."* A participant spoke of the hostility they faced from a driver who refused to stop for them if they weren't displaying their fare money through the bus door.

*"He [the driver] would tell me I would need to hold the money up to the bus door for him to open the door. And if I didn't hold up money to the bus door [he] would just drive away without. And that has happened to me multiple times within the past year and a half, when I was thrown out because I didn't really have anywhere to go get \$2.50 for the bus." (Male, West Kootenay region, Focus group participant #2)*

Similarly, youth in the Lower Mainland spoke of "unreasonable" fare infraction fines that are issued to people who couldn't afford the fare.

*"I don't even have \$2. How am I supposed to pay a \$200 ticket? How does that make sense? Something I should be excited for...has me leaving the house nervous and filled with anxiety." (Female, Lower Mainland, Interview participant #8)*

### **Reliability and Convenience Issues**

Unreliability—primarily buses that don't arrive, are infrequent, or are scheduled once per day at different times—directly impacted the lives of youth, that caused them to be late for school, work, and appointments. This issue was particularly acute in the West Kootenay rural region and residential areas surrounding city centres in the Lower Mainland. Geographic challenges, such as long walks to stations/stops and limited-service hours, further restricted mobility. Unreliable transit caused youth to avoid recreational activities, social events, jobs, and opportunities in farther-away locations. As well, several participants in the West Kootenays region spoke of

employers' perception of the unreliability of transit meant that even if they tried to arrange transportation through family or transit, they risked being rejected for jobs because employers considered these arrangements unreliable. In rural areas, youth felt the need to have access to or own personal vehicles to access employment opportunities and experienced discrimination for not owning a car.

*"I've been having a hard time getting a job due to the transit in town being so inconsistent that you need to have your own vehicle to have a job, because the companies do not trust you to show up consistently on time if you are just using public transit...I've been applying for jobs for two years now, ..., and it is extremely hard to get any job without having your own vehicle and license, as most places will immediately veto you for having to take public transit or walk." (Female, West Kootenay, Interview participant #1)*

For the most part, youth participants in rural areas didn't view transportation as geared toward them; instead articulating that it was mainly geared toward "seniors". However, youth also recognized that the same reliability concerns were potentially harmful to the health of older adults, as participant youth viewed older adults as relying more on transit for attending doctors' appointments and weekly trips for groceries.

### **Safety Concerns**

Safety perceptions were not uniform across youth and were strongly influenced by identity. While many felt generally safe during the day, women and gender-diverse youth reported specific concerns about harassment and assault, particularly at night, which affected their travel choices—from what mode they took to whether they even chose to go out. Similarly, some youth spoke of their experiences feeling unsafe due to substance abuse by other passengers on transit. In the Lower Mainland, youth noted the recent increased presence of transit police which they perceived as focusing on fare evasion rather than addressing harassment and substance abuse on transit, which they noted affects passenger safety. Echoing this focus on fare evasion, a 17-year-old young woman reported feeling uncomfortable when she was age-checked by transit police and had to *"remind people that I'm a kid."* (Female, Lower Mainland, Interview participant #9)

Without transit as a viable option for youth, especially in the West Kootenay region, many ended up asking friends for rides when possible. When rides fell through, or they missed a transfer bus, some youth in the West Kootenay region found themselves stranded, waiting for someone to pick them up late at night. Further, youth participants spoke about accepting rides from people they didn't entirely trust or feared being around. Some rural youth resorted to hitchhiking to get around, which posed significant safety risks. One youth described 'putting on a clown hat' to appear non-threatening while hitchhiking. Youth were forced into making these precarious choices, knowing they are unsafe, due to the lack of safe transit options. A youth shared,

*"I've definitely contemplated causing a public disturbance to get...a ride from a cop home." (Male, West Kootenay, Focus group participant #3)*

### **Impact of Access on Opportunities and Mental Health**

Affordable and reliable transit access was directly linked to accessing necessities, improved well-being, and expanded opportunities for youth. Especially for youth in the West Kootenay region, the ability to get to a store to buy groceries or to go and from school, work, or programs was considered a source of mental well-being, regardless of the ability to access mental health supports.

*"And we're also like experiencing stuff that we shouldn't have to experience if we have reasonable transportation exactly like younger kids...some people might think...it makes you be able to...work through it*

and stuff...but it doesn't because your mental health is shit." (Male, West Kootenay, Focus group participant #1)

Some youths were forced to drop out of support services due to a lack of transportation to get to their appointments. With better access, youth expressed that they would participate in more extracurricular, social, and cultural activities. Access to a reliable transit pass was viewed by youth as reducing travel anxiety and the risk of fines. Conversely, the stress of affording fares led youth to make difficult financial trade-offs, with some also feeling inadequate in their social circle as 'the one who always asks for a ride.' Transportation barriers, particularly in remote and rural areas, contributed to social exclusion and resulting decreased mental well-being.

"Sometimes I limit myself on buying food and stuff I want to buy because of paying for the Compass." (Female, Lower Mainland, Interview participant #11)

## WANT MORE INFORMATION?

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