

Getting Around to Age in Place

Meeting Older Canadians' Mobility Needs
via Public Transportation

Greater Halifax

Summary Report

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All photos and maps used in this report have been sourced from the Transportation Research at McGill (TRAM) lab.

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Territorial Acknowledgment

We would like to acknowledge that McGill University is located on unceded Indigenous lands. Tiohtià:ke/Montréal has long served as a site of meeting and exchange among Indigenous peoples, including the Kanien'kehá:ka of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Huron/Wendat, Abenaki, and Anishinaabeg, among others. TRAM recognizes and respects these nations as the traditional stewards of the lands and waters. We respect the continued relationship these diverse Indigenous peoples have with the territory upon which we now gather.

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Summary

Older adults represent a rapidly-growing age group in Canada, and many rely on private vehicles as their main mode of transportation for their daily travel. Despite the risk of having to give up driving as they age, the impact of driving cessation on older adults' mobility and wellbeing is still poorly understood. The Getting Around to Age in Place project, conducted by the Transportation Research at McGill (TRAM) research lab and funded by the National Research Council of Canada (NRC), centers on older adults' perceptions of their travel patterns and how daily mobility affects their lives. The Aging in Place survey (N=3,551) was conducted in six metropolitan regions across Canada in 2023. This report presents a summary of the survey findings from Greater Halifax (N=165). For further details about the project, and comparative data for all six regions please see the [Aging in Place Final Report 2022-2025](#).

Key Findings

- A majority of older adults in Greater Halifax believed that daily travel contributes positively to their **quality of life**, and stated that continuing to travel **independently** was very important to them. However, many older adults were concerned about whether they will be able to remain in their current neighbourhood due to changing mobility needs as they age.
- While driving remains the main mode of transport for many older adults, more than half of Halifax respondents believed the public transit system allows them to satisfy their **daily needs**. A quarter of respondents are **frequent transit users**, taking transit at least once a week.
- Older adults in Halifax commonly considered **30 minutes** as the most reasonable travel time for a public-transit trip. These trips tended to be taken during **off-peak times**.
- The most common **destinations for public-transit trips** are recreation and leisure activities, medical appointments, and shopping.
- Among transit users, overall **satisfaction** with the service was generally high. However there are some **concerns** about the convenience and reliability of public transit in Greater Halifax.
- More than one-third of older adults reported having some type of **disability or health condition** which limits their mobility. A large number of respondents who identified as having a disability felt that the transit system does not meet their needs.
- One-third of older adults in Halifax lacked **knowledge about how the public-transit system works**, and knowledge about paratransit services is lacking.
- In open-ended questions, many Halifax residents praised their transit service. The main sources of **concern** centred around the frequency and reliability of transit services, distances to transit stops and difficulties boarding safely.



INTRODUCTION

One in six people around the world will be 60 years or older by 2030 (World Health Organization, 2021). In Canada, older adults rely mostly on private vehicles as their main mean of transport (Newbold et al., 2005). However, not all older adults have access to a car, and, as they age, many have to regulate their driving or even stop driving altogether (Musselwhite & Shergold, 2013). Public-transit can play a crucial role in facilitating the ongoing mobility of older adults. However, research on older adults' public-transit use is limited, especially in the Canadian context (Ravensbergen et al., 2022).

The Getting Around to Age in Place project conducted by the Transportation Research at McGill (TRAM) research lab and funded by the National Research Council of Canada

(NRC) seeks to better understand older adults' perceptions of their travel patterns and how daily mobility affects their lives. This project examines how well public-transit services across Canada are supporting the needs of older adults and their ability to age in place.

In order to capture variations in regional contexts and differing transit service levels, the NRC, alongside key stakeholders, selected six Census Metropolitan areas (CMAs) as focus areas for the study: Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver, Halifax, Victoria, and Saskatoon.

This report presents a summary of the key findings for the Greater Halifax region. For a more comprehensive outline of the project, the methods used, and comparisons across regions we invite you to read the [Aging in Place Final Report 2022-2025](#).

Greater Halifax

Greater Halifax is the largest metropolitan area in Nova Scotia, with a population of 465,703 residents. In 2021, 17.4% of the population were aged over 65 (Statistics Canada, 2023).

The majority of Halifax residents commute using private vehicles (82%). Public transit is used by 8% of commuters, while 7% walk, and 1% cycle (Statistics Canada, 2023).

The transit system consists primarily of a conventional bus system and a ferry service. Older adults unable use the regular transit system due to physical or cognitive disabilities may be eligible for the Access-A-Bus paratransit service. Buses represented over 94% of the 30.2 million annual passenger boardings in 2023/2024, compared to 5% for ferry and 1% for the Access-A-Bus (Halifax Transit, n.d.).

Older adults aged 65 and over receive discounted fares for Halifax transit services, and free travel during off-peak times on Tuesdays (Halifax Transit, n.d.).

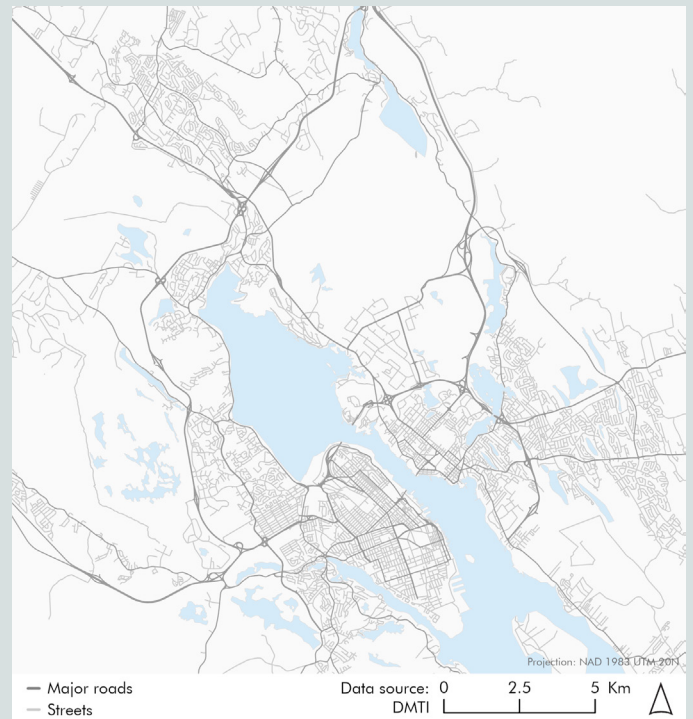


Figure 1 Study area: Greater Halifax CMA, with road network highlighted

SURVEY AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Survey Design and Recruitment

A survey was conducted to collect first-hand accounts of older Canadians’ perceptions and experiences of public-transit in their region, as well as to better understand the impact of their daily travel on their wellbeing. The survey design process included the TRAM team, NRC project managers, the project advisory committee members, and the appointed Experts by Experience. It was estimated the survey would take respondents 20 to 25 minutes to complete, and was circulated in French and English.

Recruitment methods included a paid advertisement campaign on Facebook which targeted users aged 65 years and over. Leger, a Canadian firm specializing in public opinion and surveys, was also hired to recruit respondents.

The survey was launched in early February 2023 and remained open until mid-March 2023. This report covers the results of the first wave of the survey. Further details about the survey design, recruitment, the second wave, and data cleaning processes can be found in the [Aging in Place Final Report 2022-2025](#).

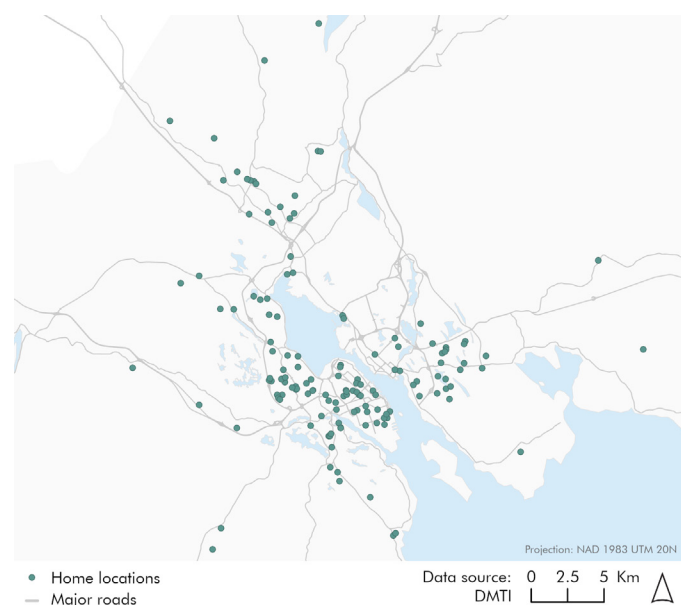


Figure 2 Home locations of survey respondents within the Greater Halifax CMA

Sample Characteristics

A total of 165 responses were collected from Greater Halifax in the first wave of the survey. Respondents’ home locations were well distributed across residential areas, with a concentration of respondents near the downtown area (Figure 2).

Sample characteristics were compared with data from the 2021 census (Statistics Canada, 2023) in order to gauge how representative the survey respondents are of the older population of the entire CMA (Table 1). The gender distribution of the sample is consistent with the CMA average, and the sample is well distributed across incomes. Respondents tended to be younger, mostly aged 65 to 74, compared to the CMA. More than 85% of respondents were retired or not in the workforce.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics compared with the older population in CMA

		Survey Respondents		Greater Halifax	
Total N		165	100.0%	80,875	17.4%*
Gender	Man	71	43.0%	36,285	44.9%
	Woman	91	55.2%	44,590	55.1%
	Other	3	1.8%	-	-
Age	65 to 74	113	68.5%	48,945	60.5%
	75 to 84	45	27.3%	23,695	29.3%
	85+	7	4.2%	8,240	10.2%
Household Income (CAD)	< 30k	19	14.4%	-	-
	30k - 60k	51	38.6%	-	-
	60k - 90k	36	27.3%	-	-
	90k - 150k	21	15.9%	-	-
	> 150k	5	3.8%	-	-
Work Status	Employed	24	14.5%	-	-
	Not in WkF	141	85.5%	-	-

* Represents the proportion of the older population (65+) of the total CMA population (2021 Census)

SURVEY RESULTS

Older Adults Travel Behaviour

Older adults in Halifax used private vehicles in large numbers. 86% of respondents held a valid driver's licence and 79% felt confident driving. Over half (60%) of respondents had driven a car in the last two days. Still, public transit remains a popular option for older residents, with 36% of respondents having made their last trip by public transit. Indeed, over a quarter (27%) of respondents are frequent transit users, taking public transit at least once a week in the previous year. On the other hand, 45% of respondents had not taken public transit at all in the previous 12 months. Frequent public transit use is seen to decline with age (Figure 3).

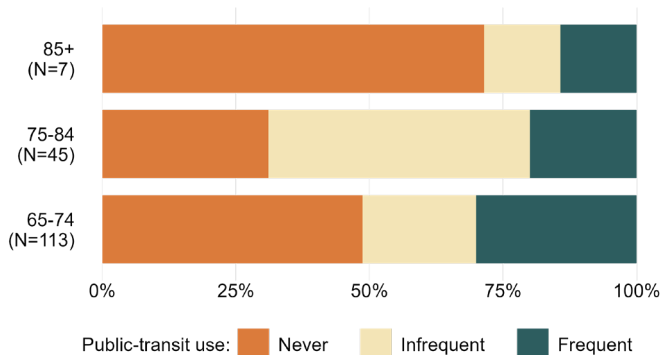


Figure 3 Frequency of public-transit use in previous 12 months by age

Independent Travel and Wellbeing

The results highlighted the importance of daily travel to older adults' wellbeing and continued independence. In Halifax, almost all respondents (90%) agreed with the statement "as I get older, it is important for me to continue to travel independently", reinforcing the need to provide transportation options that allow older adults to continue traveling independently, such as public transit, walking and cycling. Additionally, 71% of respondents in Halifax agreed that "daily travel contributes positively to [their] quality of life."

Ability to Age in Place

Older adults expressed a desire to be able to age in place. Three-quarters of respondents (76%) agreed that "as I get older, it is important for me to continue to live in my current neighbourhood". Despite this strong desire to age in place, 41% agreed with the statement "I am concerned about whether I will be able to remain in my neighbourhood because of my changing transport needs and capabilities as I get older." Non-transit users were more likely to be concerned (see Figure 4). Of those who had driven recently, 45% agreed that there would be "no adequate travel alternatives" around their home if they had to stop driving.

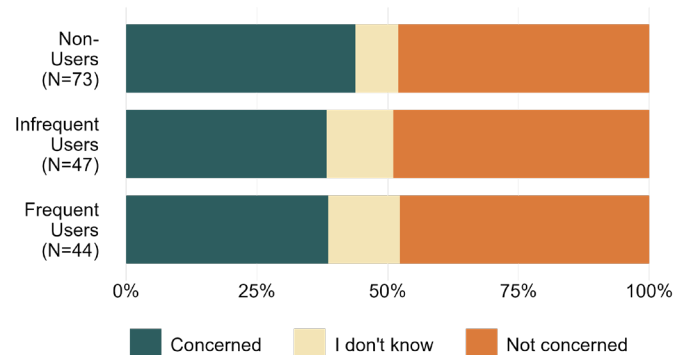


Figure 4 Concerned about ability to remain in current neighbourhood as they get older?

Intention to move

More than a quarter (27%) of older adults indicated that they were considering moving in the next five years. Affordability and a desire to live in a more walkable environment were identified as the top factors in this consideration, both chosen by 39% of respondents who were considering moving. Living in a region with better public transit was chosen as an important factor for 30% of those who are considering moving. Desires (or needs) to live in closer proximity to social centers (34%) and medical services (30%) also stood out as important considerations.

Public Transit Modes

Among older adults who had used public transit in the previous 12 months, the most common mode was the bus (90% of transit users), followed by the ferry (53%). Paratransit services were only used by 5% of transit users.

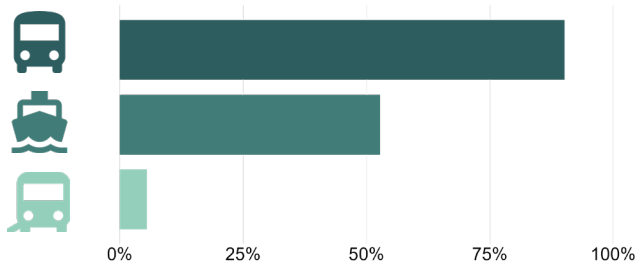


Figure 5 Transit modes used at least once in the past year in Halifax (transit users only)

Destinations Reached using Transit

The most common destinations for older adults using public transit are recreation activities (56%) and medical appointments (49%), followed by shopping (43%) and grocery stores (34%). Relatively few respondents used public transit to visit friends and family. This finding may suggest that while transit is effective in connecting people to community centers and essential services, it is less effective in connecting people to different neighbourhoods.

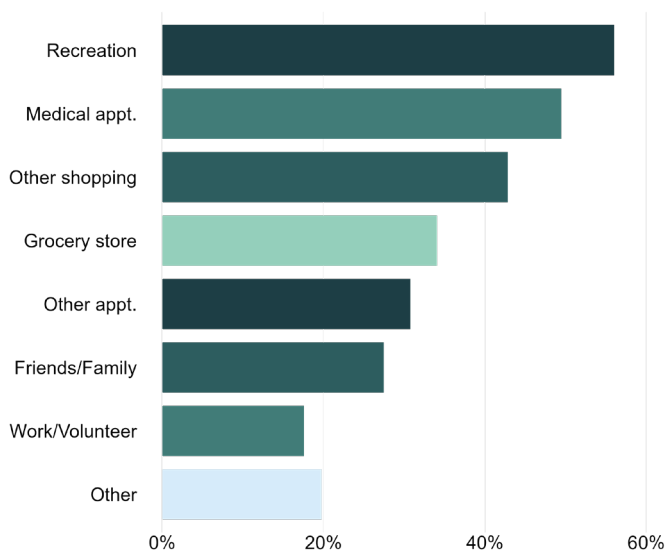


Figure 6 Destinations reached using transit in the past year in Halifax (% of transit users)

Travel Times

The survey data revealed that older adults in Halifax primarily used public transit during off-peak times (Figure 7). This could directly impact older adults' experience, as transit services are often less frequent at off-peak times, and fewer connections are possible.

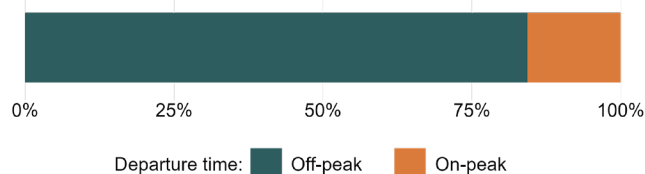


Figure 7. Time of most recent public transit trip

Reasonable Transit Travel Times

When planning public transit for older Canadians, it is important to consider their specific daily travel needs, behaviours and expectations. Respondents were asked what they consider to be a reasonable time to reach their desired destinations by public transit. 30 minutes stood out as the most frequently chosen reasonable travel time, selected by around one-third (34%) of respondents (Figure 8).

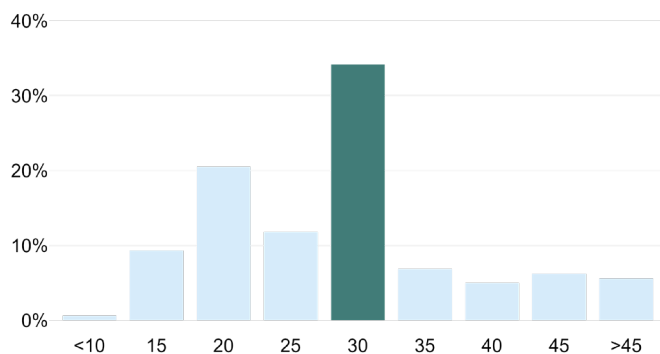


Figure 8 Reasonable public-transit travel time for older adults in Halifax

To ensure more older travelers can reach their destinations within 30 minutes, public-transit service frequency should be increased, especially during the day, outside of peak commuting hours. Increasing the number and variety of destinations available to older adults by public transit could also reduce their travel time as well as increase their travel satisfaction.

Satisfaction with Public Transit

The majority of older adults expressed their satisfaction with the public transit system in Halifax. More than half (55%) of older adults agreed that public transit in Greater Halifax meets their needs, and 60% of respondents were willing to recommend public transit to a friend or family member. Of those using the public transit system (n=91), 70% agreed that public transit positively impacts their quality of life.

Respondents who recently used transit were asked about their satisfaction with the main mode of their last transit trip. The results concerning the most frequently used service, bus, are presented in Figure 9.

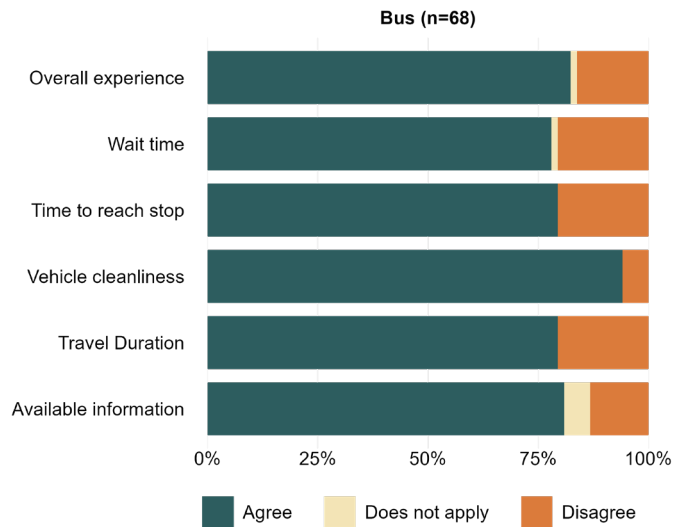


Figure 9 Satisfaction with last public-transit trip by bus

Older adults who took the bus on their last transit trip were highly satisfied with their overall experience. In particular, bus users expressed strong satisfaction with vehicle cleanliness (94% satisfied). 81% of respondents agreed that available information about schedules was easy to understand. Around 20% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with wait time, travel time to the bus stop, and length of bus trip. These findings indicate that while there are opportunities for service improvements, the majority of older adults who currently use the bus in Halifax are satisfied with the service.

Accessibility to Destinations by Public Transit in Halifax

Using respondents' suggestion of 30 minutes as a reasonable travel time by public transit to reach destinations, an accessibility analysis was conducted to compare access to destinations across Greater Halifax. The total number of jobs was used as a proxy for the number of destinations that can be reached from someone's home (Census tract). Further details can be found in Rodrigue et al. (2023).

Accessibility by public transit was found to be higher for those living in the downtown core of Halifax, where the number of activities tends to be the highest (Figure 10).

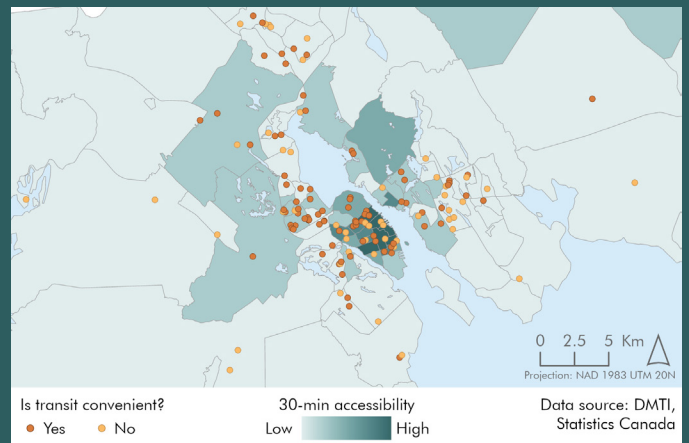


Figure 10 Accessibility of jobs by public transit (30-minute travel time, departing at 10am)

Accessibility and Perceived Convenience of Public Transit

The results suggests that the more accessible an older adult's neighbourhood is, the more convenient they find public transport. For residents living in the most accessible census tracts, 61% agreed with the statement "public transit in my region is a convenient way of traveling." On the other hand, for those living in the least accessible census tracts, only 43% agreed.

Challenges for Public–Transit Use

A perceived lack of convenience (40%) and unreliability (32%) are the largest causes of concern for older adults regarding the public-transit system in Greater Halifax. A quarter of respondents (26%) do not believe transit is a comfortable way of traveling around the region. Despite these concerns, the majority of respondents still believe transit is convenient, reliable, comfortable, and safe. Affordability is the least concerning issue: only 8% of respondents indicated that they believe public transit in Halifax is unaffordable.

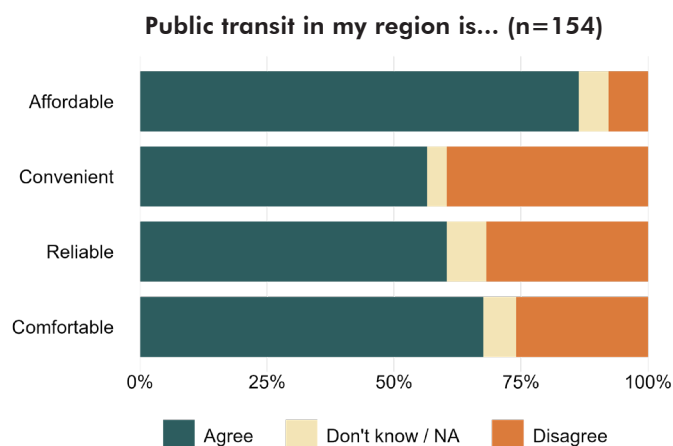


Figure 11 Older adults perceptions of the public-transit system in Halifax

Among those who are not currently using transit, there is a prevailing opinion that transit is not capable of transporting them to their required destinations. Only 27% agreed that they would be able to get to all the destinations they need using public transit.



Who Does not use Transit?

Non-transit users do not necessarily have a negative view of the mode. Indeed, respondents who do not use transit vary greatly in their perceptions towards transit, and their intentions to use it in the future. A cluster analysis of survey responses revealed several distinct profiles of non-users, from those who have a generally positive view of transit, but just feel that it is not for now, to those who are staunchly transit-averse and have no intention of ever using the service. Respondents shared their main barriers to transit use, including concerns about the access to and from transit stops and stations and perceptions of transit being infrequent, unreliable and slow. Many stated that driving was simply a more convenient option for them.

Given the heterogeneity of non-users, a range of strategies must be implemented with different timescales to facilitate and encourage transit adoption. For more information please refer to Alousi-Jones et al. (2025b) and the [Aging in Place Final Report 2022-2025](#).

Knowledge of Public–Transit Offer

A lack of knowledge about the public-transit services on offer to older adults is apparent. 35% of older adults in Halifax either disagreed with the statement “I know how my local public transit system works” or responded neutral. Of those who had not used transit in the previous year, only 43% agreed they knew how the public transit system works, representing a significant barrier for mode shift. Awareness of paratransit services and their eligibility criteria was also lacking for many residents. 22% of respondents reported not knowing whether they were eligible to use paratransit.

Despite all seniors aged 65 or over being eligible for discounted transit fares in Halifax, only 63% of transit-users in the survey sample reported receiving a reduced fare. Targeted information campaigns could therefore yield important benefits to older adults in Halifax.

Disability and Mobility Challenges

Some older adults face added mobility challenges which may impact their ability to perform desired or necessary everyday tasks. In our survey, 39% of respondents reported having a disability or health condition that limits their mobility. Among those, 68% reported their disability to be permanent while 19% stated their condition to be recurring. The most reported forms of disability are presented in Figure 12.

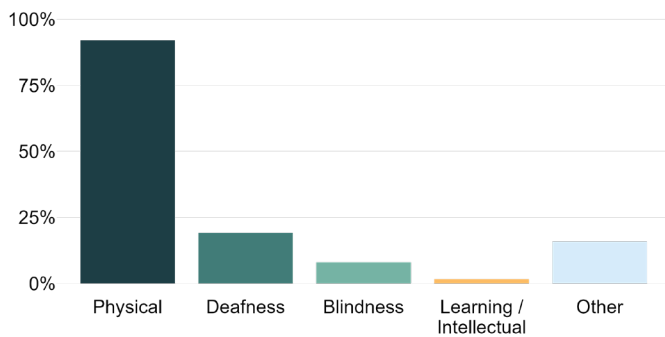


Figure 12 Most common forms of disability (as % of respondents reporting a disability, n=63)

One-fifth (19%) of respondents reported requiring a mobility aid device such as a cane or a wheelchair, to assist them in their daily activities. Mobility challenges associated with public-transit use, specifically getting to and from the bus stop, were raised by many respondents:

“...the closest public transportation is a 22-minute walk from our house. The area is very hilly and can be slippery in the winter, which is not the best for senior citizens due to safety issues, and to the risk of slipping and falling.”

“I use a walker and need to walk down the hill to get the regular bus. It doesn’t stop near by building where many seniors live in their own apartments.”

Transit Use and Disability

Older adults in Halifax who stated having a disability or mobility-limiting health condition were more likely to be frequent transit users (33%) compared to those without a disability (22%). This difference in frequency of use suggests that older adults with a disability are more likely to regularly depend on transit than other respondents. While many rely on transit to meet their everyday travel needs, there is a sizeable portion (46%) of older adults with a disability that did not use transit in the last year.

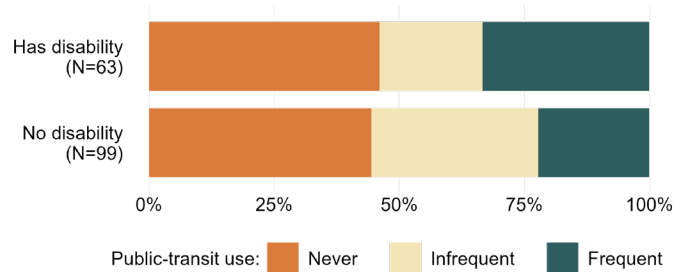


Figure 13 Transit-use frequency by disability status

Public-transit’s ability to meet the needs of older adults with disabilities

Perceptions of how well transit meets user needs are similar between people with and without disabilities: just over 50% of respondents in both groups indicated that their needs are being met. Still, a sizable proportion of older adults reported that transit did not meet their daily travel needs. This finding suggests that more needs to be done to ensure transit effectively serves all older adults.

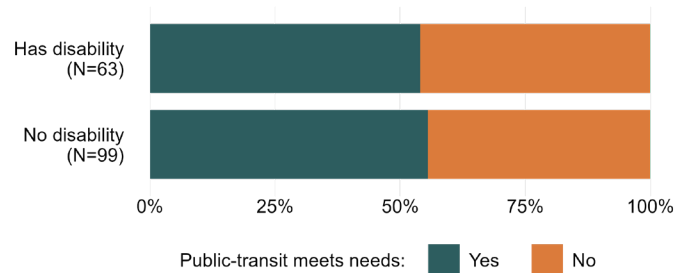


Figure 14 Perception that public transit meets older adults’ needs by disability status

Older Adults' Recommendations on how Public Transit can be Improved in Halifax



How do Older Adults in Halifax Think Transit can be Improved?

The survey results suggest that older adults are generally quite satisfied with the transit system in Greater Halifax. Nevertheless, it was important to ask older adults directly about their experiences and how they thought the service could be improved. Respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments and suggestions via open questions. A wide range of comments were provided, with some of the main themes summarized here:

Many are grateful for the transit service

As suggested by the relatively high levels of satisfaction, many respondents expressed their appreciation for the service.

“Just moved to HRM last fall and very pleased with public transportation services. The bus and ferry services are great...”

“Between owning my own handicapped van, Access-A-Bus, and public transit, I never have issues getting around.”

More frequent, reliable, and direct service

Some of the most common responses related to infrequent, unreliable, and indirect service. Buses not arriving, long waits and long trips were often mentioned. A major concern raised by many respondents was that the long walk to and from transit stops is a barrier to using transit more regularly.

“Service here is limited to commuter hours. I can’t get to town on weekends or evenings...”

“...transferring to a second bus [...] could be up to a 59 minute wait.”

“[I] would use public transit if routes were more efficient. [It’s a] 20 min to drive to hospital in car, approximately 1.5 hours by bus.”

Expand services and destinations

A common complaint among respondents was that transit service was either not available in their neighbourhoods or did not effectively connect older adults to the destinations they want to go.

“I would like to go to large regional shopping centres more often, but that requires a transfer and takes a long time. There is no transit route to beaches or walking trails.”

“I would love to see a bus service in my area. I would certainly take advantage of it. When I am no longer able or willing to drive I am not sure if I will be able to stay in my home.”

More assistance when boarding and exiting vehicles

Many respondents expressed apprehension about boarding and exiting the bus. They mentioned drivers not waiting for people to be seated and difficulties managing steps on the bus. While some praised the bus drivers who assist with boarding, many others had less positive experiences.

“I have asked so many bus drivers if they could lower the ramp (for wheel chairs) for me, 80% say no! They say the ramp is for wheel chairs.”

“walking down the aisle while the bus is moving, accelerating, turning is tricky for me. I am very grateful for the few drivers who wait until I am seated.”

“I often find it difficult to get off the bus. It is a big step down [...] the bus driver will lower the [front] end if asked when people get on, but [the exit is at the back] which does not lower.”

Improving the service for older adults will benefit all users

While these comments arise from the mobility concerns of older adults and their specific travel needs, it is evident that any intervention which seeks to improve the transit experience of older adults, will ultimately benefit all transit users.

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A complete list of the publications from the Getting around to Age in Place project can be found on the [TRAM website](#). The full questionnaire is available for consultation [here](#).

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McGill