

Getting Around to Age in Place

Meeting Older Canadians' Mobility Needs
via Public Transportation

Greater Toronto

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.

Research Acknowledgment

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Summary

Older adults represent a rapidly-growing age group in Canada, and many rely on private vehicles 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 Toronto (N= 936). 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 Toronto believe that daily travel contributes positively to their **quality of life**, and stated that continuing to travel **independently** is very important to them. However, some 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 two-thirds of Toronto respondents believed the public transit system allows them to satisfy their **daily needs**. Around one-third of respondents were **frequent transit users**, taking transit at least once a week.

Older adults in Toronto commonly considered **30 minutes** as the most reasonable travel time for a public transit trip.

The most common **destinations for older adults' public transit trips** were recreation and leisure activities, medical appointments, and visiting friends and family.

Among transit users, overall **satisfaction** with the service was generally high, however there were some **concerns** about the comfort, convenience and safety of public transit in Greater Toronto.

About 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 did not meet their needs.

One in ten older adults in Toronto lacked **knowledge about how the public transit system works**, and knowledge of paratransit services was especially limited.

In open-ended questions, many Toronto residents praised their transit service. The main sources of **concern** centred around the frequency and reliability, travel disruptions caused by construction, accessibility for those with disabilities, as well as safety improvements.



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 Toronto 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 Toronto

Greater Toronto is the largest metropolitan region in Canada, with a population of 6.2 million residents. In 2021, 16% of the population were aged over 65 (Statistics Canada, 2023). This is forecasted to increase to 19% by 2051 for the Greater Toronto Area (Government of Ontario, 2024).

The majority of Toronto residents commute using private vehicles (76%), while 16% use public transit, 5% walk and 1% cycle (Statistics Canada, 2023). Of the conventional transit service operated by TTC, buses are the most frequently used. Buses represented half (50%) of all passenger trips in 2023, followed by the three subway lines (42%), and the nine streetcar routes (8%) (TTC, 2023a). The Wheel-Trans paratransit service had 39,166 active registrants in 2023 (TTC, 2023b).

Older adults aged 65 year or over receive discounted fares on both the TTC and regional Go Transit services (City of Toronto, 2019).

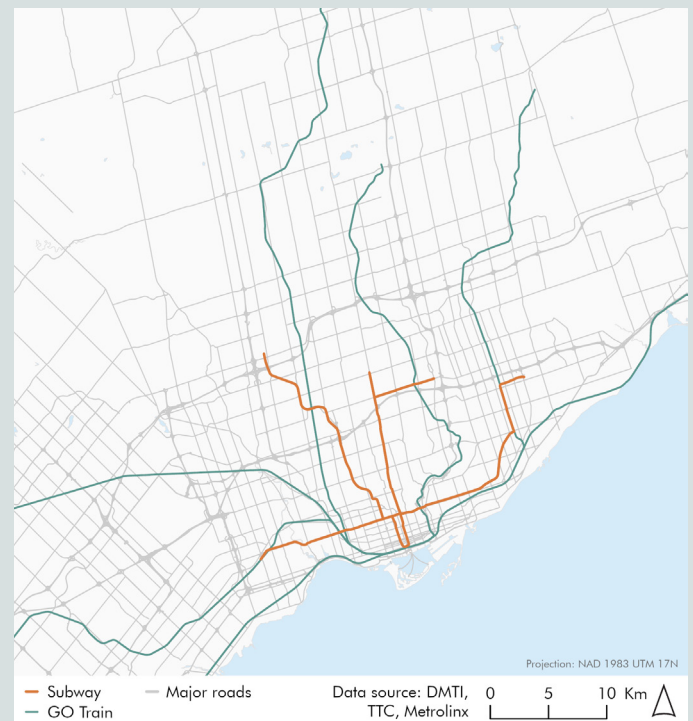


Figure 1 Study area: Greater Toronto CMA, with main public transit routes highlighted

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](#).

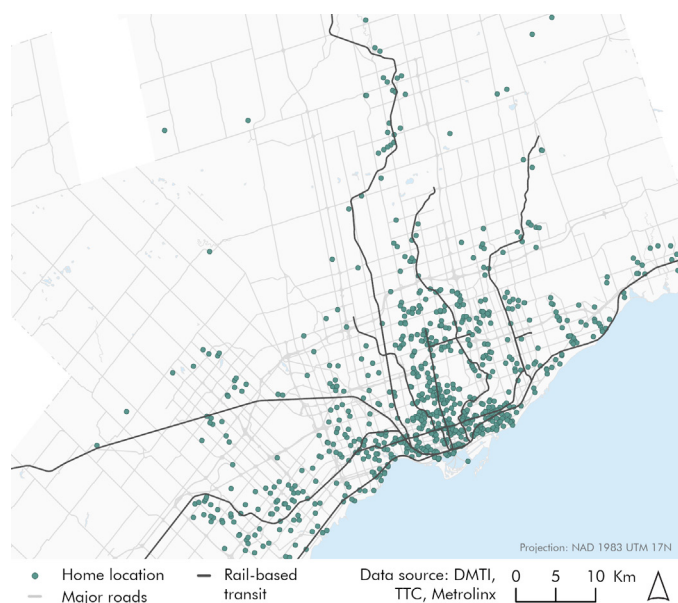


Figure 2 Home locations of survey respondents within the Greater Toronto CMA

Sample Characteristics

A total of 936 responses were collected from Greater Toronto in the first wave of the survey. Respondents' home locations are well distributed across residential areas, with notable concentrations near the downtown area and near major transit or highways (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). Women are well represented in the sample of respondents compared to the CMA, and the sample is well distributed across incomes. Respondents tend to be younger, mostly aged 65 to 74, compared to the CMA. Just over 81% of respondents were retired or not in the workforce.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics compared with the older population in CMA

		Survey Respondents		Greater Toronto	
Total N		936	100.0%	1,002,645	16.2%*
Gender	Man	436	46.6%	449,055	44.8%
	Woman	489	52.2%	553,585	55.2%
	Other	11	1.2%	-	-
Age	65 to 74	639	68.3%	567,500	56.6%
	75 to 84	267	28.5%	301,990	30.1%
	85+	30	3.2%	133,155	13.3%
Household Income (CAD)	< 30k	107	13.7%	-	-
	30k - 60k	199	25.4%	-	-
	60k - 90k	178	22.7%	-	-
	90k - 150k	200	25.5%	-	-
	> 150k	99	12.6%	-	-
Work Status	Employed	174	18.6%	-	-
	Not in WkF	762	81.4%	-	-

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

SURVEY RESULTS

Older Adults Travel Behaviour

Older adults in Toronto used private vehicles in large numbers. 87% of respondents held a valid driver's licence and 77% felt confident driving. Over half (56%) of respondents had driven a car in the last two days. Still, public transit remained a popular option for older residents, with 53% of respondents having made their last trip by public transit. Indeed, over one-third (34%) of respondents were frequent transit users, taking public transit at least once a week in the previous year. On the other hand, 24% of respondents had not taken public transit at all in the previous 12 months. Frequency of public transit use is seen to decline with age (Figure 3).

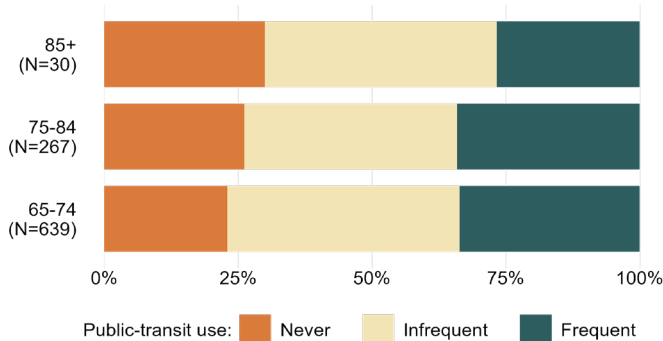


Figure 3 Frequency of public transit use in previous 12 months by age

Independent Travel and Wellbeing

The results highlighted the importance of daily travel to older adults' wellbeing and continued independence. In Toronto, almost all respondents (92%) agreed to the statement "as I get older, it is important for me to continue to travel independently", reinforcing the need to provide transport options that aid older adults to keep traveling independently, such as public transit, walking and cycling. 66% of older adults in Toronto agreed that "daily travel contributes positively to [their] quality of life." Those who used public transit more frequently were more likely to agree with this statement.

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, around one-third (29%) 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, 32% agreed that there would be "no adequate travel alternatives" around their home if they had to stop driving.

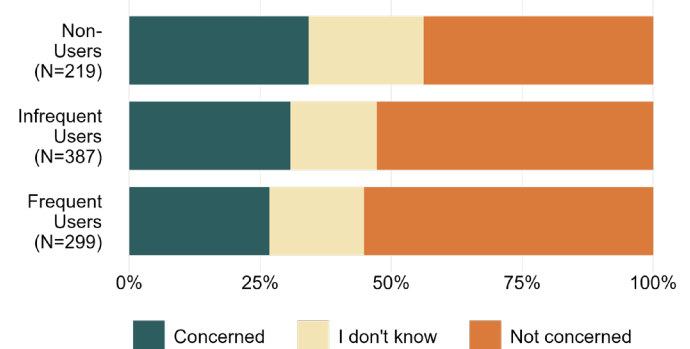


Figure 4 Concerned about ability to remain in current neighbourhood as they get older?

Intention to Move

Around 26% of older Torontonians indicated that they are considering moving in the next five years. Affordability was identified as the main factor in this consideration, chosen by 55% of respondents who are considering moving. Mobility and access to destinations were also key considerations for many respondents. Living in a region with better public transit was chosen as an important factor for 23% of those who are considering moving. Desires (or needs) to live in a more walkable environment (38%), and being in closer proximity to parks and nature (33%) also were important considerations.

Public Transit Modes

Among older adults who had used public transit in the previous 12 months, the most common mode was the subway (78%), followed closely by bus (68%). The streetcar service was used by 45% of transit users compared to 31% for the commuter train and 4% for paratransit services.

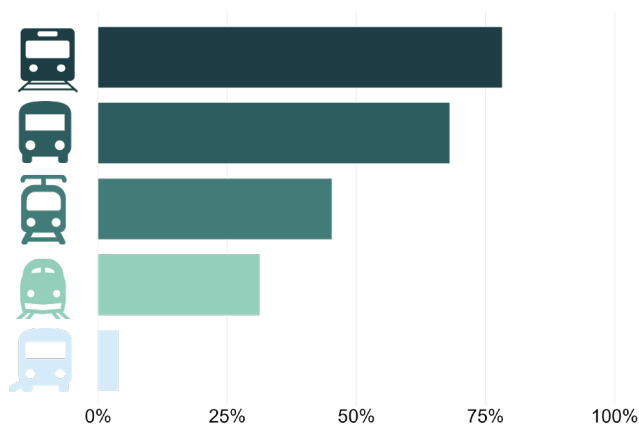


Figure 5 Transit modes used at least once in the past year in Toronto (transit users only)

Destinations Reached using Transit

The most common destinations for older adults using public transit were recreation activities and medical appointments (both cited by over 55% of transit-users), followed by visits to friends and family and shopping.

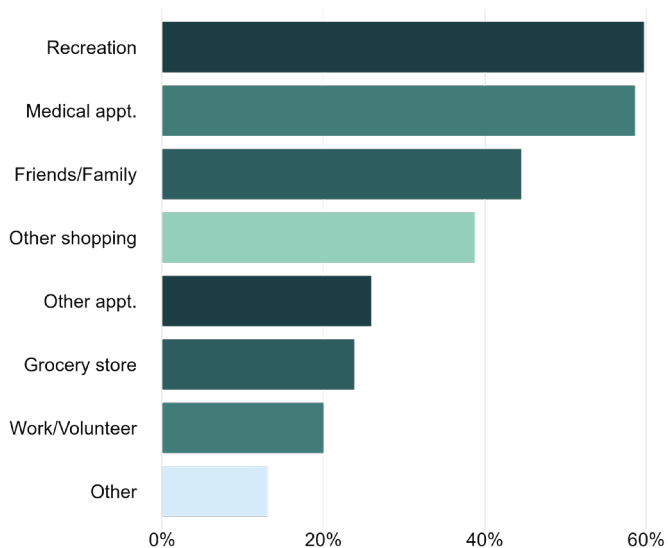


Figure 6 Destinations reached using transit in the past year in Toronto (% of transit users)

Travel Times

The survey data revealed that older adults in Toronto 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 connection and opportunities are possible.

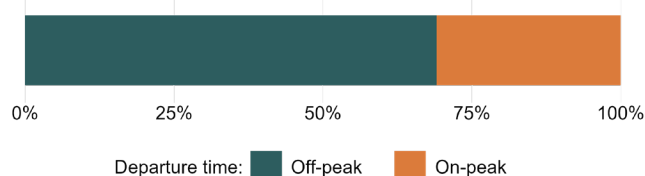


Figure 7. Time of most recent public transit trip

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 stands out as the most frequently chosen reasonable travel time, selected by around one-third (32%) of respondents (Figure 8).

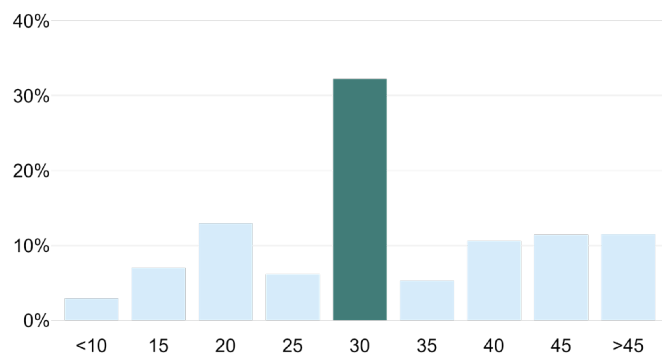


Figure 8 Reasonable public transit travel time for older adults in Toronto

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 Toronto. Over two-thirds of older adults agreed that public transit in Greater Toronto meets their needs, and three-quarters of respondents (70%) were willing to recommend public transit to a friend or family member. Of those who used the public transit system (N= 710), 73% agreed that public transit positively impacts their quality of life.

Frequent transit users were asked about their satisfaction with the main mode of their last transit trip. The results concerning the most frequently used services, subway, bus, and streetcar are presented in Figure 9.

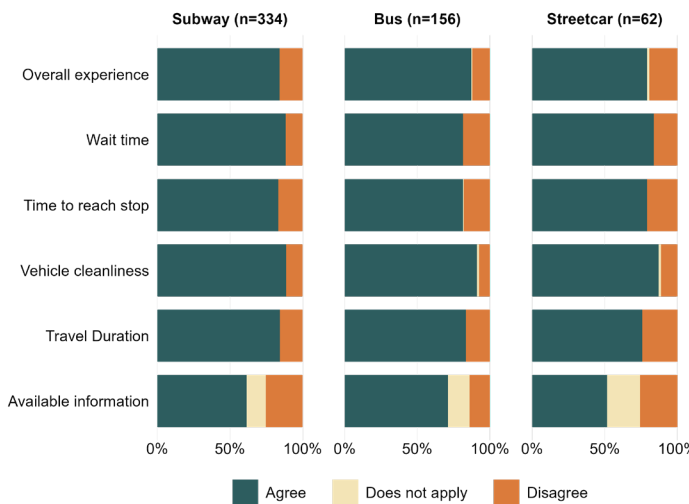


Figure 9 Satisfaction with last public transit trip by subway, bus, and streetcar

Older adults who took the subway, bus, commuter train, or streetcar on their last transit trip were happy with their experience. Bus users were slightly less satisfied with their wait time (81% were satisfied) compared to subway users (88%) and streetcar users (84%). All users were generally satisfied with the time it took them to reach their stop, and were highly impressed with the cleanliness of transit vehicles. Streetcar users were least satisfied with their travel duration (76% satisfied). Many subway, bus, and streetcar riders indicated that information about transit schedules, announcements etc., was not easy to understand, or was lacking.

Accessibility to Destinations by Public Transit in Toronto

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 Toronto. 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 is found to be higher for those living in the downtown core of Toronto, where the number of activities tends to be the highest, as well as those living along major rail transit lines (Figure 10).

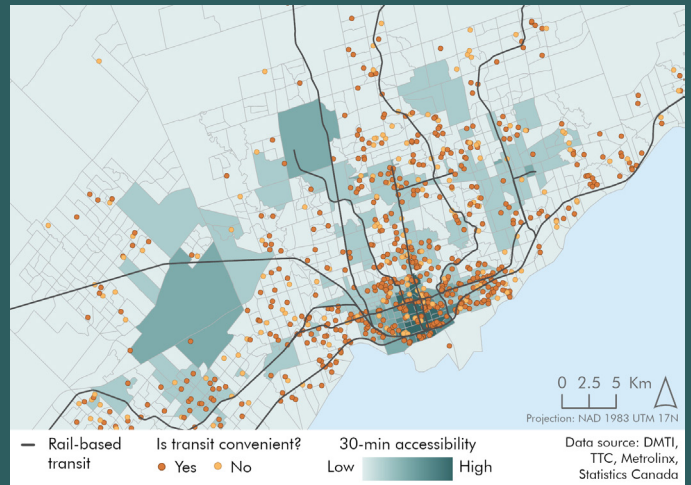


Figure 10 Accessibility of jobs by public transit (30-minute travel time, departing at 10am)

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, 85% agreed to the statement "Public transit in my region is a convenient way of traveling." On the other hand, for those living in census tracts with low accessibility, agreeance was 67%.

Challenges for Public Transit Use

A perceived lack of convenience (25%) and poor comfort (26%) were the largest causes of concern for older adults regarding the public transit system in Greater Toronto. In comparison, only 12% of respondents believed public transit to be unaffordable in Toronto and 24% thought the service was unreliable. Among existing public transit users (n=710), safety was also a key concern, with over one-third of respondents stating that they do not feel safe “from crime and unwanted attention” on public transit in Toronto.

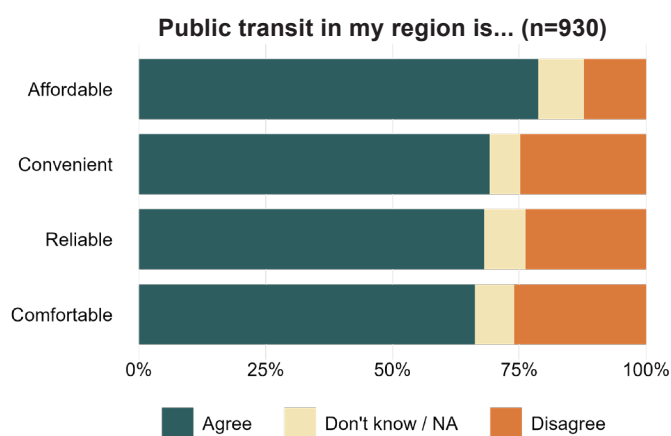


Figure 11 Older adults perceptions of the public transit system in Toronto

Among those who were not currently using transit (n=220), there was a prevailing opinion that transit is not capable of transporting them to their required destinations. Only 22% agreed that they would be able to get to all the destinations they needed using public transit.



Who Does not use Transit?

Not all non-transit users have negative views 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 had a generally positive view of transit, but just felt that it is not for now, to those who are staunchly transit-averse and had 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 was apparent. About 1 in 10 (11%) of older adults in Toronto 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 half (51%) agreed they know 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. 31% 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 Toronto, only 80% of transit-users in the survey sample reported receiving a reduced fare. Targeted information campaigns could therefore yield important benefits to older adults in Toronto.

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, about one-third of respondents (31%) reported having a disability or health condition that limits their mobility. Among those, 68% reported their disability to be permanent while 23% stated their condition to be recurring. The most reported forms of disability are presented in Figure 12.

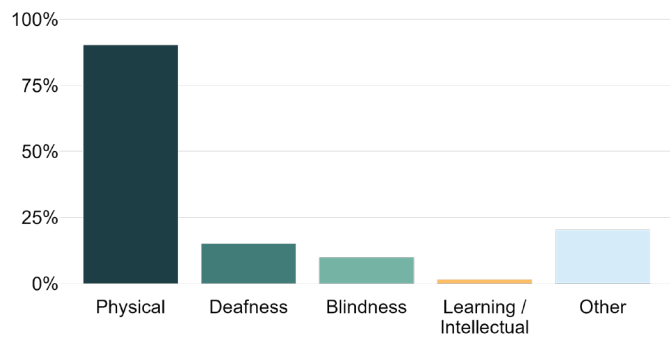


Figure 12 Most common forms of disability (as % of respondents reporting a disability, n=287)

Over 1 in 10 (15%) 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 were raised by many respondents:

“Better accessibility boarding and leaving streetcars and buses. They are good for wheelchair users, but terrible for someone using a cane, mainly for disembarking.”

“More benches to sit on.”

“Being a person with mobility issues it can be very difficult to ride public transit especially to stations without elevators “

Transit Use and Disability

Older adults in Toronto who stated having a disability or mobility-limiting health condition were more likely to be non-transit users (28%) compared to other respondents (23%).

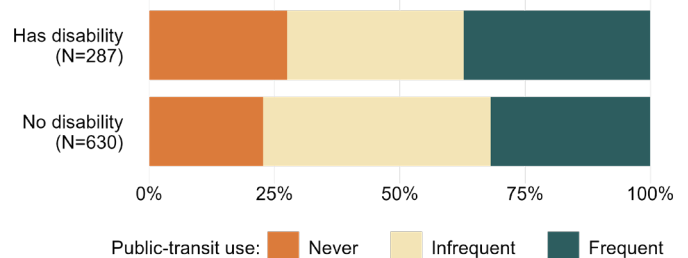


Figure 13 Transit-use frequency by disability status

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

People with disabilities are more likely to feel that their public transit needs are not met compared to people without disabilities. As seen in Figure 14, 67% of Toronto respondents who stated having a disability stated that the public transit services in their region met their daily travel needs, compared to 74% for those who reported no disabilities. This disparity indicates a need to better grasp the transit needs of older adults with disabilities.

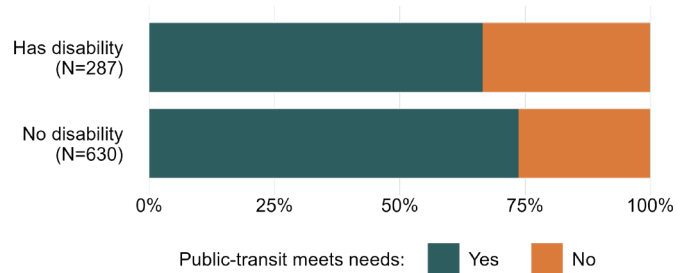


Figure 14 Perception that public transit meets older adults’ needs by disability status



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



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

The survey results suggest that older adults are generally quite satisfied with the transit system in Greater Toronto. 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. Some of the main themes summarized here:

For many, the system works well

As suggested by the relatively high levels of satisfaction, many respondents said the transit system benefits their lives by providing an alternative to driving in busy areas.

"I'm very happy with the access to public transit in my immediate area. I chose this area... taking public transit into consideration."

"Whenever I need to go Toronto downtown, I use GO transit, because much faster, and no stress for driving."

More frequent and reliable service

Some of the most common responses related to the frequency, reliability and difficult connections of services. Buses not arriving, long waits and long trips were often mentioned. Several respondents noted that they need to go downtown to then travel to less central areas.

"Frequency of buses should be shorter. Bus routes need to cover more areas [...]"

"I would prefer to use public transit, but I tend to drive because subway is inconvenient and buses are low frequency. "

"Streetcars and buses cannot seem to keep to a schedule of any sort. We need reliable subway service to a far larger proportion of the city."

"We need more transit. It needs to be affordable, reliable, clean and above all safe."

Less service interruptions due to construction

A very common complaint was disruptions to service and travel patterns due to construction and poor infrastructure maintenance. Respondents noted that construction projects led to longer travel times, more transfers, and uncomfortable travel conditions.

"If the city improved the roads and got rid of the mega potholes that make riding the bus a miserable experience."

"Ongoing construction whether in the area or closer to downtown affects my time on the ttc. I have to plan out my routes. ."

"Having to transfer from a bus to a street car due to construction but not having a connection causing a walk of 1 1/2 blocks... It's unacceptable."

A safer experience

Respondents addressed safety concerns at bus stops and transit stations, unruly behaviour and violence, as well as concerns about the prevalence of unhoused people residing in subway stops. Health and particularly Covid-19 were widely mentioned, as many did not feel safe travelling when other unmasked passengers.

"Public transit has felt unsafe in Toronto since the COVID pandemic, and it is getting worse."

"The TTC has eliminated most of the 'manned' positions at subway stations and the bus and streetcar drivers do not interact at all with the riders leaving all of us to pretty much fend for ourselves."

" I don't feel comfortable on a crowded bus or subway any more, as few people are wearing masks."

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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Summary Report: Greater Toronto**



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McGill