

Getting Around to Age in Place

Meeting Older Canadians' Mobility Needs
via Public Transportation

Greater Vancouver

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 amongst 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 Vancouver (N = 642). 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 Vancouver believe that daily travel contributes positively to their **quality of life**, and state that continuing to travel **independently** is very important to them. However, many older adults are concerned about whether they will be able to remain in their current neighbourhood due to changing mobility needs as they age.
- Whilst driving remains the main mode of transport for many older adults, two-thirds of Vancouver respondents believe the public transit system allows them to satisfy their **daily needs**. Around one-third of respondents are **frequent transit users**, taking transit at least once a week.
- Older adults in Vancouver commonly consider **30 minutes** as the most reasonable travel time for a public-transit trip. These trips tend to be taken during **off-peak times**.
- The most common **destinations for public-transit trips** are recreation and leisure activities, medical appointments, and visiting friends and family.
- Amongst transit users, overall **satisfaction** with the service is generally high, however there are some **concerns** about the comfort, convenience and safety of public transit in Greater Vancouver.
- One-third of older adults report having some type of **disability or health condition** which limits their mobility. A large number of respondents who identify as having a disability feel that the transit system does not meet their needs.
- One in five older adults in Vancouver lack **knowledge about how the public-transit system works**, and knowledge about paratransit services is particularly lacking.
- In open-ended questions, many Vancouver residents praised their transit service. The main sources of **concern** centred around the frequency and reliability of transit services, access to basic amenities such as covered shelters and benches at stops and washrooms at transit stations, 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 Vancouver 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 Vancouver

Greater Vancouver is the third-largest metropolitan region in Canada, with a population of 2.6 million residents. In 2021, 17.4% of the population were aged over 65 (Statistics Canada, 2023). This figure is forecast to increase to 22% by 2050 for the Vancouver Metro area (Metro Vancouver, 2022, p19).

The majority of Vancouver residents commute using private vehicles (75%), while 15% use public transit, 6% walk and 2% cycle (Statistics Canada, 2023). Buses are the most frequently used transit service comprising almost two-thirds (63%) of boardings system-wide (TransLink, 2024). The three SkyTrain lines represent around one-third of boardings, whilst the SeaBus, West Coast Express commuter rail service, and the HandyDART paratransit service each represent 1% or less of boardings.

Seniors aged 65 years and over are eligible for discounted fares on transit in Vancouver.

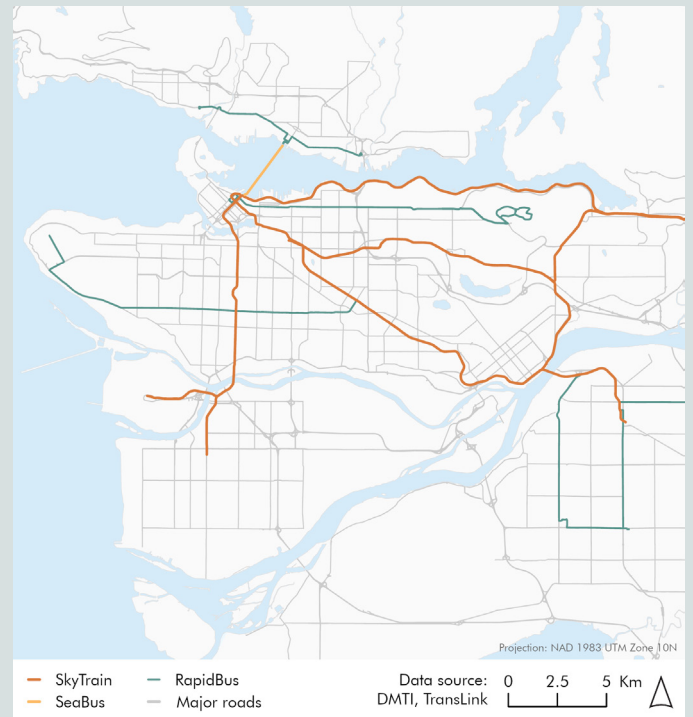


Figure 1 Study area: Greater Vancouver CMA, with main public-transit routes highlighted

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](#).

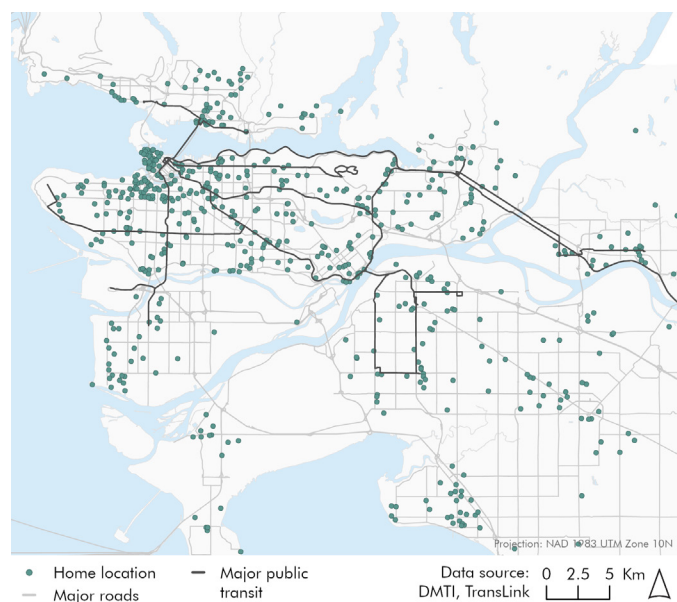


Figure 2 Home locations of survey respondents within the Greater Vancouver CMA

Sample Characteristics

A total of 642 responses were collected from Greater Vancouver 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 80% of respondents were retired or not in the workforce.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics compared with the older population in CMA

		Survey Respondents		Greater Vancouver	
Total N		642	100.0%	460,795	17.4%*
Gender	Man	245	38.2%	211,065	45.8%
	Woman	383	59.7%	249,725	54.2%
	Other	14	2.2%	-	-
Age	65 to 74	437	68.1%	265,515	57.6%
	75 to 84	177	27.6%	136,135	29.5%
	85+	28	4.4%	59,145	12.8%
Household Income (CAD)	< 30k	95	14.8%	-	-
	30k - 60k	157	24.5%	-	-
	60k - 90k	114	17.8%	-	-
	90k - 150k	94	14.6%	-	-
	> 150k	53	16.7%	-	-
Work Status	Employed	125	19.5%	-	-
	Not in WkF	517	80.5%	-	-

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

SURVEY RESULTS

Older Adults Travel Behaviour

Older adults in Vancouver use private vehicles in large numbers. 88% of respondents held a valid driver’s licence and 80% felt confident driving. Over half (57%) of respondents had driven a car in the last two days. Still, public-transit remains an attractive option for older residents, with 53% of respondents having made their last trip by public transit. Indeed, over one-third (37%) of respondents are frequent transit users, taking public transit at least once a week in the previous year. On the other hand, 23% 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).

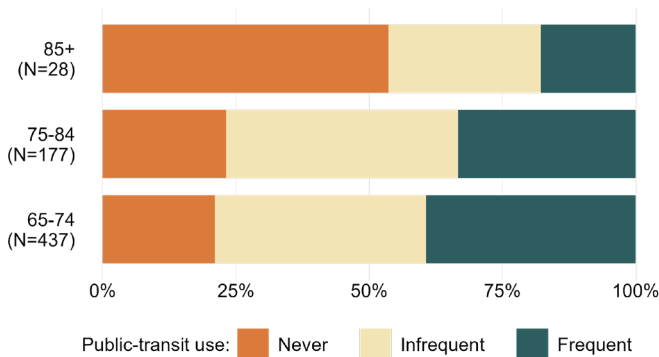


Figure 3 Frequency of public-transit use in previous 12 months by age

Independent Travel and Wellbeing

The results highlighted the importance of daily travel to older adults’ wellbeing and continued independence. In Vancouver, almost all respondents (93%) 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. 70% of older adults in Vancouver 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 (73%) 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 (31%) 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, 38% agree that there would be “no adequate travel alternatives” around their home if they had to stop driving.

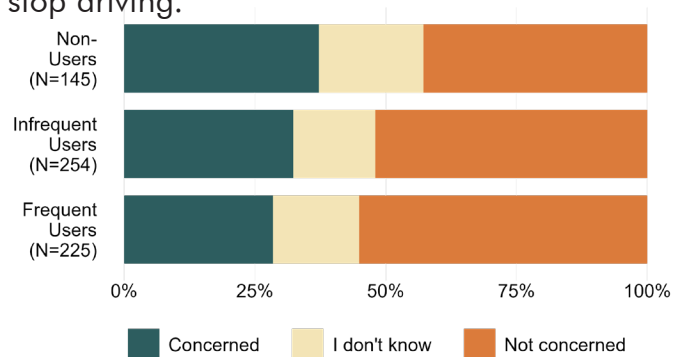


Figure 4 Concerned about ability to remain in current neighbourhood as they get older?

Intention to move

Around 32% of older adults indicated that they are considering moving in the next five years. Affordability was identified as the main factor in this consideration, chosen by 56% 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 31% of those who are considering moving. Desires (or needs) to live in a more walkable environment (47%), and being in closer proximity to parks and nature (43%) 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 Skytrain (87%), followed closely by the bus (80%). The ferry/seabus service was used by 35% of transit users compared to 3% each for the commuter rail and paratransit services.

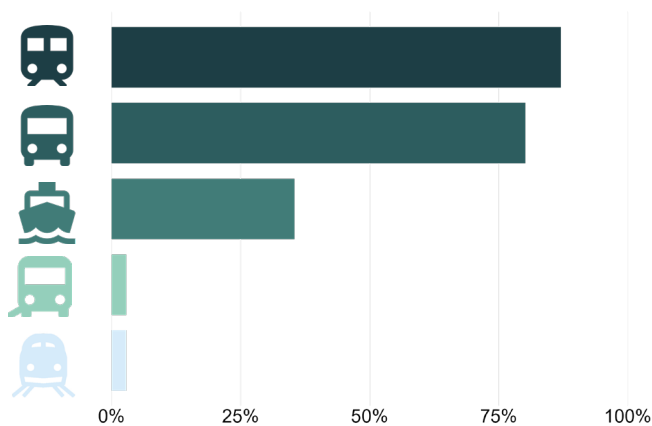


Figure 5 Transit modes used at least once in the past year in Vancouver (transit users only)

Destinations Reached using Transit

The most common destinations for older adults using public transit are recreation activities and medical appointments (both cited by over 50% of transit-users), followed by visits to friends and family and shopping.

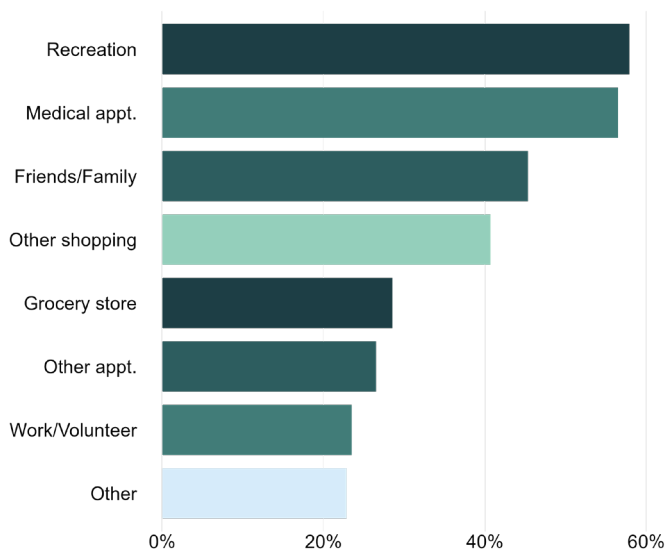


Figure 6 Destinations reached using transit in the past year in Vancouver (% of transit users)

Travel Times

The survey data reveals that older adults in Vancouver primarily use 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.

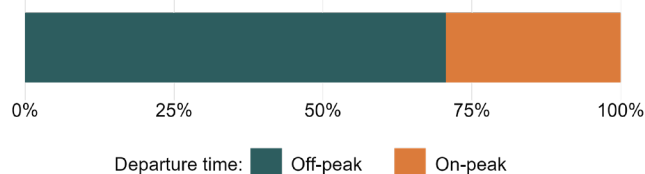


Figure 7. Time of most recent public transit trip

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 (34%) of respondents (Figure 8).

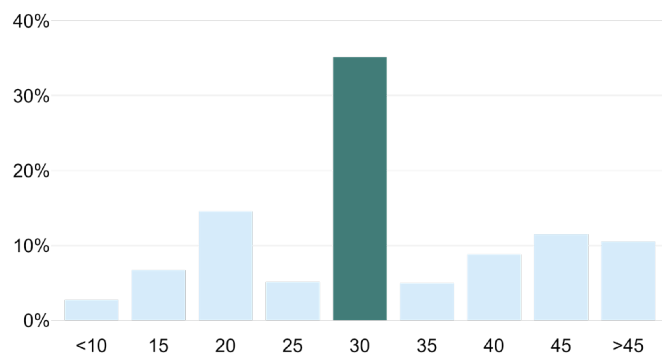


Figure 8 Reasonable public-transit travel time for older adults in Vancouver

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 Vancouver. Two-thirds of older adults agreed that public transit in Greater Vancouver meets their needs, and three-quarters (75%) were willing to recommend public transit to a friend or family member. Of those using the public transit system (n=494), 72% 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 two most frequently used services, bus and SkyTrain, are presented in Figure 9.

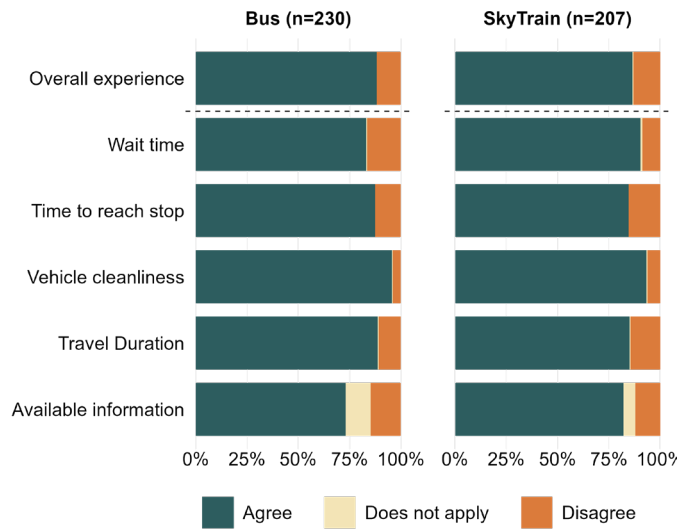


Figure 9 Satisfaction with last public-transit trip by bus and SkyTrain

Older adults who took the bus or SkyTrain on their last transit trip were highly satisfied with their overall experience. Bus users were slightly less satisfied with their wait time (83%) compared to SkyTrain users (90%). Users of both modes were generally satisfied with the time it took them to reach stops or stations, and were highly satisfied with the cleanliness of transit vehicles. SkyTrain users were slightly less satisfied with their travel duration (85%) compared to bus users (89%). Many respondents indicated that information about transit schedules, announcements etc., was not easy to understand, or was lacking.

Accessibility to Destinations by Public Transit in Vancouver

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 Vancouver. 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 Vancouver, where the number of activities tends to be the highest, as well as those living along major rail transit lines (Figure 10).

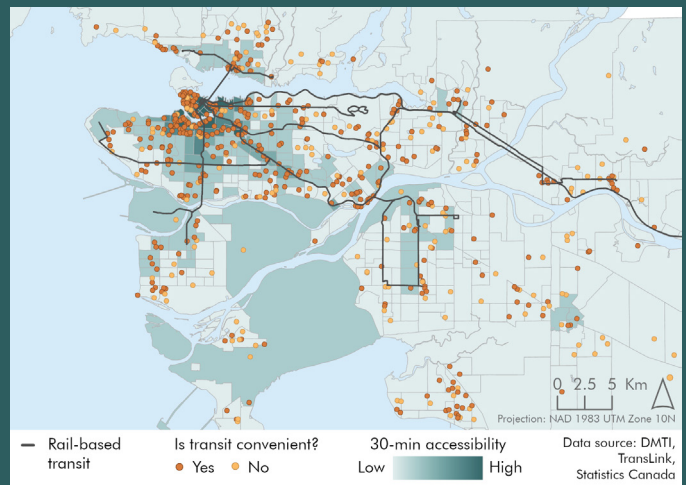


Figure 10 Accessibility of jobs by public transit (30-minute travel time, departing at 10am)

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, 88% agreed to the statement "I can comfortably take public transit from my home to reach my desired destinations". On the other hand, for those living in census tracts with medium and low accessibility, agreeance was 74% and 52% respectively.

Challenges for Public–Transit Use

A perceived lack of convenience (30%) and poor comfort (30%) were the largest causes of concern for older adults regarding the public-transit system in Greater Vancouver. In comparison, only 14% of respondents believed public transit to be unaffordable in Vancouver and 19% thought the service was unreliable. Among existing public-transit users (n=494), safety was also a key concern, with 29% of respondents stating that they do not feel safe “from crime and unwanted attention” on public transit in Vancouver.

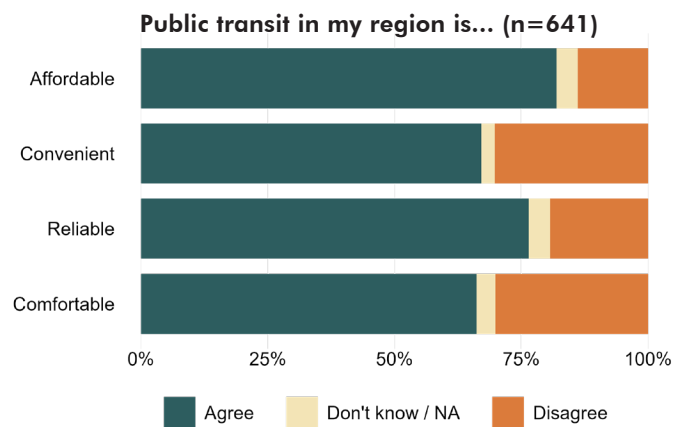


Figure 11 Older adults perceptions of the public-transit system in Vancouver

Amongst those who were not currently using transit (n=147), there was a prevailing opinion that transit is not capable of transporting them to their required destinations. Only 18% 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 was apparent. Over 1 in 5 (22%) of older adults in Vancouver 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, less than half (48%) 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. 39% 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 Vancouver, only 77% of transit-users in the survey sample reported receiving a reduced fare. Targeted information campaigns could therefore yield important benefits to older adults in Vancouver.

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, one-third of respondents reported having a disability or health condition that limits their mobility. Among those, 68% reported their disability to be permanent while 27% stated their condition to be recurring. The most reported forms of disability are presented in Figure 12.

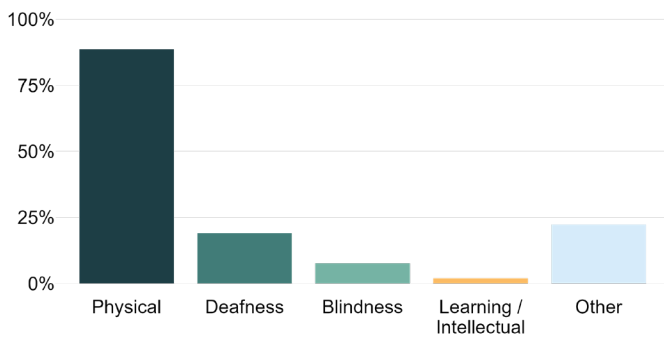


Figure 12 Most common forms of disability (as % of respondents reporting a disability, n=211)

Over 1 in 10 (13%) 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:

“I use a cane so I do not feel safe getting to and from transit. I feel vulnerable.”

“I can only use bus stops that have benches. Many main transfer points don’t have them therefore I can[’t] use that route...”

Transit Use and Disability

Older adults in Vancouver who stated having a disability or mobility-limiting health condition were more likely to be non transit users (31%) compared to other respondents (19%).

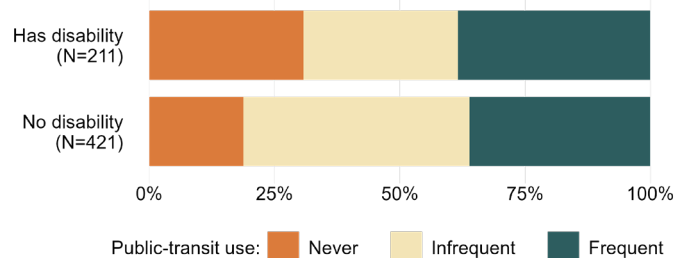


Figure 13 Transit-use frequency by disability status

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, 56% of Vancouver respondents who stated having a disability state that the public-transit services in their region met their daily travel needs, compared to 71% for those who reported no disabilities. This disparity indicates a need to better grasp the transit needs of older adults with disabilities.

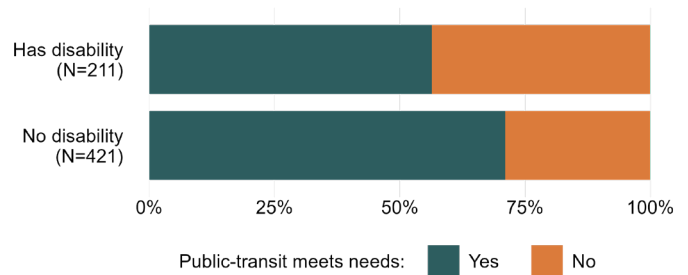


Figure 14 Perception that public transit meets older adults’ needs by disability status



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



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

The survey results suggest that older adults are generally quite satisfied with the transit system in Greater Vancouver. 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:

For many, the system works well

As suggested by the relatively high levels of satisfaction, many respondents expressed how the transit system benefits their lives.

"I enjoy my weekly trips by Handy Dart and recommend the service to other seniors."

"The transit is great for me but I live in Vancouver inner city."

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 also noted that they needed to go downtown to make connections.

"more frequent buses, more reliable buses (buses often just don't come)"

"If I have to take a 2nd bus to get where I am going, I am likely going to take my car [...]"

"Frequency outside of rush hours would help."

"Our current and planned system only will give us fast access to downtown Vancouver, not an area seniors would want to go."

Improve basic amenities

A very common complaint was a lack of basic amenities at transit stops and stations. Respondents noted a need for benches, covered shelters at bus stops, washrooms at stations, clearer signage and accessible timetables.

"Signage is difficult to understand and I can't figure out where the buses or transit goes."

"Washrooms are essential but nonexistent."

"There are not nearly enough covered shelters at bus stops. The existing ones are often in disrepair..."

A safer experience

Respondents addressed safety concerns at bus stops and transit stations, unruly behaviour and violence, as well as the speed of boarding processes, and concerns about falling if seating is unavailable. Health and particularly Covid-19 were mentioned by several respondents, saying they did not feel safe travelling when other passengers were unmasked.

"clean and safe buses/skytrain/bus stops and train stations"

"It is quite daunting to get on and off the buses, and skytrain. The doors close too quickly [...] not all drivers wait until we sit down and it can be quite scary for us..."

"There is an increasing, atmosphere of fear, from unruly passengers and I feel afraid."

Improving the service for older adults will benefit all users

Whilst 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](#).

**Getting Around to Age in Place
Summary Report: Greater Vancouver**



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McGill