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Mobilizing Justice:
COVID-19 and Equitable Transportation

Researchers from the University of Toronto, in collaboration with multisectoral partners across Canada, are helping transportation decision-makers better understand how COVID-19 has impacted transportation systems.

The Mobilizing Justice Partnership, a national intersectoral research partnership, is working to advance transportation equity through research and knowledge mobilization, including a recent investigation into the equity impacts of COVID-19 on public transportation systems.

Supported by the School of Cities, project leads **Steven Farber** (Project Director), **Judy Farvolden** (Knowledge Mobilization Lead), **Jasmine Mohazab** (Project Lead), and **Matthew Palm** (Research Coordinator) are leading research that investigates how the pandemic and policy responses to it have alternately aggravated or ameliorated existing barriers to travel for people with different lived experiences. These include seniors, Indigenous people, newcomers, and people with disabilities, amongst others. Mobilizing Justice involves over 30 multisectoral institutions across Canada, including academic and industry partners, NGOs and government agencies across jurisdictions.

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Recent work by the Mobilizing Justice network, published in their forthcoming report *A Review on the Implications of COVID-19 for Delivering Equitable Transportation* (authored by **Matthew Palm**; **Hannah Dos Santos**, University of Toronto; **Laysa Abchiche-Lima**, University of Toronto; **Kate Hosford**, Simon Fraser University; **Élyse Comeau**, Hollard Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital; **K. Bruce Newbold**, McMaster University; **Tim Ross,** Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital; **Meghan Winters**, Simon Fraser University; and **Michael Widener,** University of Toronto), suggests that COVID-19 amplified social inequities in Canada. While some neighbourhoods and groups of people found it easier to travel, others experienced greater challenges than before the pandemic.

In this issue of City Research Insights, we explore the key policy recommendations that surfaced from this report, as well as central findings about the relationship between equitable transportation infrastructure and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mobilizing Justice's COVID-19 and Equitable Transportation report is based on an in-depth review of over 290 academic, white and grey papers, and book chapters focused on COVID-19 and transportation systems in Canada. This review was bolstered with data from Transit App's quarterly **Rider Happiness Benchmark Survey,** which includes responses to questions on transit experience and service priorities from over 9,400 app users in Canada.

The report offers 8 key recommendations for policymakers based on their research that support the movement towards greater equity in Canadian transportation policy and systems. These recommendations are summarized below, followed by an exploration of some key findings across three thematic areas: systems; society; and people. Some neighbourhoods and groups of people found it easier to travel, others experienced greater challenges than before the pandemic.

Policy Recommendations for Post-COVID-19 Transportation

1. TRANSPORTATION PLANNING MUST CONSIDER DIVERSE LIVED EXPERIENCES WHEN MAKING DECISIONS. PLANNERS MUST ANTICIPATE AND ADDRESS THE LIKELY DIFFERENTIAL IMPACTS OF THEIR DECISIONS ON EQUITY-DESERVING COMMUNITIES. The pandemic revealed the extent to which changes to transportation infrastructure can impact social groups differently. Policymakers' assessments of proposed infrastructure and policies – now and in preparation for future disruptive events – should explicitly consider and incorporate the lived experiences of and differential impacts on communities including people with disabilities, Indigenous people, people on lower incomes, older adults, and others.

2. THE ROLE OF PUBLIC TRANSIT SHOULD BE RE-EXAMINED AS MORE THAN JUST A MEANS OF SERVING PEAK HOUR COMMUTING. THE PANDEMIC PROVED THAT PUBLIC TRANSIT IS AN ENABLER OF EVERY ASPECT OF DAILY LIFE. Policymakers should broaden an understanding of public transportation infrastructure as a key way that many people access important destinations beyond just their workplaces, including grocery stores, healthcare, and social supports. This means that investments in and changes to transportation infrastructure also impact other policy domains like economic development, education, healthcare, and social services.

3. GOVERNMENTS MUST INVEST IN AND BETTER COORDINATE RURAL AND INTERCITY TRANSIT SERVICES. A pre-existing lack of transportation options within and between rural and remote communities has been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, when many routes reduced their service options. These changes have been particularly impactful in Indigenous communities. Governments at every level must make a sustained effort to invest in rural and inter-city transit, with a priority placed on exploring better integration of existing local and inter-city services.

4. GOVERNMENTS SHOULD SUPPORT PUBLIC TRANSIT OPERATIONS UNTIL RIDERSHIP RECOVERS. Governments at all levels should support transit operations as ridership levels climb out of the pandemic. This support is designed to prevent a "ridership spiral" which can happen when service cuts implemented in response to ridership loss trigger further ridership declines.

5. CITIES SHOULD BUILD TOWARDS "EVERYWHERE-TO-EVERYWHERE" ACTIVE TRAVEL NETWORKS THAT CAN PROVIDE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO SAFE INFRASTRUCTURE. Governments at all levels should strive towards addressing the patchwork nature of active transport systems in Canada by building a permanent, contiguous "everywhere-to-everywhere" network of safe and convenient travel infrastructure. Achieving this goal would mean providing a sufficient level of safe infrastructure in every neighbourhood regardless of demographics.

6. (PARA)TRANSIT SERVICES SHOULD EMBRACE PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS TO DELIVER BETTER SERVICES DURING CRISES. (Para)transit services should explore partnerships with food banks, grocery stores, and restaurants to support delivery services to (para)transit users, particularly during crises like the pandemic. Government agencies can also partner with transportation technology companies (eg. Pantonium, Via, Uber, Lyft) to provide supplemental or alternative services for people with disabilities. the workplace. This means that investments in and changes to transportation infrastructure also impact other policy domains like economic development, wellbeing, and social services.

7. GOVERNMENTS SHOULD SUPPORT REMOTE WORK WHEN AND WHERE IT ADVANCES BROADER SYSTEM-WIDE GOALS. Pre-pandemic, many Canadian cities faced worsening congestion that harmed public health and wellbeing through air pollution and lost time. Supporting remote work in car-dependent communities can help mitigate this problem. It can also contribute to reducing pollution in metropolitan areas, which disproportionately impacts equity-deserving residents.

8. BETTER DATA IS NEEDED TO TRACK EQUITY IMPACTS IN TRANSPORTATION. Policymakers should invest in data infrastructure that can support equitable transportation planning and rapid decision-making. This data might include automated bike and pedestrian counters, and/or appropriately aggregated and anonymized regional flow data based on cellphone traces. Mobilizing Justice's upcoming national survey aims to fill the gap that currently exists in Canada for accurate data that reflects the reality of transit system use by equity-deserving groups.

SYSTEMS:

How the Pandemic Altered the Availability, Affordability and Utility of Different Forms of Travel

During the pandemic, Canada's ridership bottomed out in mid-2020 at 85% below per-pandemic levels. Many people who were regular riders lost their jobs, started working from home, or switched to walking, cycling, or driving to avoid crowds. However, transit remained an essential service for essential workers and people from equity-deserving groups, such as older adults with limited alternatives, households on lower incomes, racialized residents and newcomers, and riders without access to a vehicle.

New public health guidelines unintentionally created new barriers to riding public transit. For instance, the cancellation of cash ticket sales and reductions in ticket purchasing hours made it more challenging for some low-income riders to purchase fares with cash. Further, the introduction of backdoor-only boarding and the closure of some subway station entrances created greater barriers for many older adults and people with disabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic also had some positive impacts on mobility, however, sparking greater active travel uptake, including walking, cycling and using micromobility options like e-bikes, electric scooters, and bike sharing services. In response, many local governments reallocated road space from private motor vehicles to people walking and using bicycles. Who benefitted most from these shifts varied considerably by city, however. More research is needed to create equitably accessible spaces for active travel, hopefully building towards an "everywhere-to-everywhere" micromobility network usable by every resident in every neighbourhood.

SOCIETY:

Broader Social Changes Instigated by the Pandemic and their Implications for Delivering Equitable Tranportation in the Future

Despite some decreases in housing prices in urban cores during the pandemic, data shows that rents in urban cores have not declined enough for low-income households to be drawn back into transit-rich areas. Because housing is more expensive near public transit and urban employment centres, many lower-income households have been priced out of neighbourhoods with high-quality transit services in many cities, and have settled in suburban areas with less public transit despite their high reliance on transit. The pandemic hasn't mediated this impact. In fact, in suburban areas where low-income households often live, home prices have grown with new interest in suburban construction as many families move out of the core with the increase in hybrid work arrangements.

While many people transitioned to working from home during the pandemic, there are significant differences in telework capacities across industries and income groups. The industries with the least capacity for telework are essential services, where newcomers, people on lower incomes, and other equity-deserving people are more likely to be employed. The promotion of job security for people working in industries with lower telework capacities is key to supporting equitable work arrangements as the demand amongst many workers for more flexible work arrangements continues to increase post-pandemic.

PEOPLE:

How the Pandemic Altered the Transportation Needs of, and the Barriers Faced by, People with Different Lived Experiences

The pandemic has disproportionately impacted many people with different lived experiences, including Indigenous people, newcomers, older adults, and people with disabilities.

COVID-19 also compounded the social and economic challenges facing newcomers, as well as their mobility and transportation challenges. Newcomers were one of the groups who were least likely to give up public transit during the pandemic despite the health risks, in part because of their greater reliance on public transit and their overrepresentation amongst essential workers. Their access to critical information about transit was challenged during the pandemic, however, since most transit agencies only provide information in English and French.

Indigenous communities' economic and mental health has been heavily affected by the pandemic, particularly those who live in rural and remote communities. Inadequate technological infrastructure in many of these areas (e.g. inadequate internet bandwidth, and a lack of cellphones) as individuals transitioned to online work and school was a major challenge. The deficit of intercity travel options aggravated by the loss of Greyhound services also put many remote and Indigenous residents' transportation access at risk.

The public transportation options of older adults have also been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, especially considering their greater risk of severe illness from COVID-19 and their common lack of other transportation options such as a car or active travel options. For older adults reliant on public transit, the loss of public transportation services has meant increased risk of social isolation and loneliness due to the lack of safe travel options and the fear of exposure to COVID-19. The challenges and negative impacts of COVID-19 on transit use are increased amongst older adults who are disabled, experience low income, are racialized, or otherwise marginalized.

COVID-19 has also exacerbated existing transportation barriers and created new ones for people with disabilities. Pandemic-era transit barriers for people with disabilities include severely reduced (para) transit service availability, distrust and fear concerning the safety of these services, and difficulties obtaining accessible, up-to-date communications about transportation and public health measures. These and other barriers have negatively impacted the physical and social-emotional wellbeing of people with disabilities.

Racialized people in Canada face unique challenges in their daily travel, such as street discrimination, that were heightened by the pandemic. Racialized people were also more likely to have difficulty reaching some amenities, including groceries and pharmacies, while avoiding public transit. However, the total impact of these and related issues on racialized peoples' travel behaviour and wellbeing is under-researched in the Canadian context, as it was before COVID-19. The pandemic has further illustrated why this gap is problematic, and why we need to consider race and racial justice in transportation data collection, planning, and research.

What's Next for this Project?

The Mobilizing Justice project is continuing to push their work on transport equity forward with several exciting upcoming activities. These include:

- Designing and implementing the National Transportation Survey, the first-ever survey of transportation poverty in Canada. The team will utilize the survey data to understand and provide recommendations to set standards, guidelines and performance indicators needed by municipalities to enable equitable access to transportation systems.

- Working with the equity advisory table to incorporate their lived experiences into the development of future streams of work.

- Developing tools to support the municipal implementation of transportation plans that help cities to perform highly on measures of transportation equity.

- Developing key definitions around marginalization specific to the experience of transport poverty to support municipal partners to undertake equity analyses of transportation services.

- Piloting and evaluating conventional and innovative solutions to alleviate the risks of transport poverty and increase social inclusion amongst marginalized communities.

- Continuing to build a network of local and national organizations that are working on transport poverty to support the development of data products, research, ideas, and tools.

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Learn more about the Mobilizing Justice project here

Interview with Steven Farber, Howaida Hassan, and Meghan Winters

What sparked your interest in understanding how the pandemic has impacted transportation systems in Canada through an equity lens?

Meghan: There were major shifts and disruptions in travel behavior during the pandemic unlike anything we had seen under any other conditions, with massive drops to public transit use, people shifting to driving as well as walking and cycling more. We're interested in who that shift is happening for, and who's impacted more than others. Not everybody has the choice to shift their transportation modes when a crisis like Covid happens. Some people might still need to be on transit and that may carry extra risks.

How would you like your report to be taken up by policymakers? What is the first change that you would hope they'd make?

Steve: One of the goals of the Mobilizing Justice project is to create a community of best practice around equity and transportation planning and to use that momentum to learn from each other. We need to use the momentum of our network to start pushing for more regulation around the necessity to incorporate equity. It's also really important that we get away from a brittle dependence on certain modes of transportation. This time it was a transit shock, but next time it could be a shock to fuel or to automobility.

The Mobilizing Justice network is so broad, involving over 30 multisectoral institutions across Canada. How has the network been important to the work you've done so far?

Howaida: The day I received the email to come and participate in the workshop [that sparked the project] was a good day. This is the thing that I love – the intersection of cities, mobility, and equity. I never imagined it would grow into this nationwide network that brings together practitioners and researchers in this very collaborative way. Every stream of work in the network is co-chaired by a researcher and a practitioner. To me that is true collaboration. It allows us to make the research practical and applicable.

[Read the full interview here.](#)

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About the School of Cities

The School of Cities is a solutions incubator for urban-focused researchers, educators, students, practitioners, and the general public to explore and address the complex global challenges facing urban centres. A living laboratory, the School leverages urban data and lived experience to improve policy and decision-making, and collaborates with communities around the world to make cities and urban regions more sustainable, prosperous, inclusive, and just.

About City Research Insights

Mobilizing Justice: COVID-19 and Equitable Infrastructure is the fifth in our series of City Research Insights, designed to link the urban research being conducted at the University of Toronto with the public, other institutions, and decision-makers.

With this series, the School of Cities seeks to leverage our extraordinary community of urbanists and urban-oriented researchers to create a rich, multidisciplinary community of urban faculty, researchers, and students across disciplines and perspectives. In addition to facilitating interdisciplinary research projects, partnerships and funding opportunities, we provide a hub for urban-focused interdisciplinary and collaborative learning.
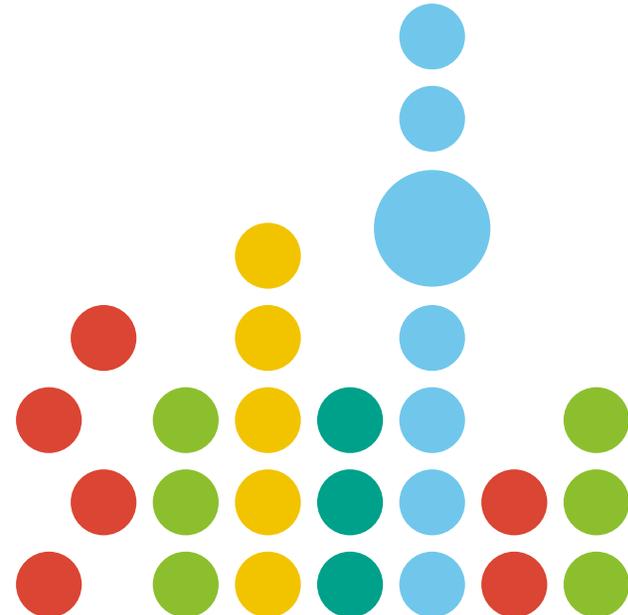
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Learn more about the Mobilizing Justice project here