



Edmonton Transit Service Advisory Board: Youth and Their Perception of Safety on ETS

RECOMMENDATION

That the March 21, 2023, Edmonton Transit Service Advisory Board report EXT01719, be received for information.

Executive Summary

In recent years, the Edmonton Transit Service has focused on safety and security as a particularly important aspect of the ridership experience. There have been numerous reports and consultations into the perception of safety on transit and it has become a key aspect of transit strategy. Safety and security are ongoing and important considerations for ETS and Edmonton Transit Service Advisory Board (ETSAB), as they are key indicators of the services' functionality and accessibility.

ETSAB chose the topic of safety and security for our subcommittee. In discussion with members of the subcommittee, we decided to focus on a group of people that we felt were underrepresented when it came to discussions on safety and security on transit: children and young people.

REPORT

Introduction

"Historically, youth (13-25) have been one of the most active user groups of public transit in Canada, accounting for one-third of ridership nation-wide, and up to two-thirds in cities such as Moose Jaw, SK and Red Deer, AB" (Canadian Urban Transit Association, 2004). Despite their high usage of public transportation, youth as a specific category of riders have received an underwhelming amount of focus by academics and transit authorities."¹

We defined this group of people between the ages of 11 and 20. We were aware that, the younger the children, the more influence parents and guardians would have on their

¹Youth and Public Transit. <https://summit.sfu.ca/item/31846>

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experiences, so we also chose to include the opinions of parents and caregivers when it came to young people and their perception of safety on transit.

Are the safety concerns of children and young people the same as adults? We decided to apply the lens of a responsible adult concerned both about safe journeys and a future where public transit can safely be relied upon in a world that is attentive to climate change issues. One of the things that we noted was that there did not seem to be a lot of research on the experiences of youth in Canadian transit centres and this subcommittee chose to address this issue, by developing this report.

Riders for Life: Youth, Fitness and Transit for the Future

Studies have shown that the younger people start using transit, the more likely they are to use transit as adults. Young people are also more likely to use transit to get to school or work.

“Public transit services allow (young) workers to expand the geographic scope of their job search and commutes to work. For this reason, public transit can be crucial for bridging spatial mismatch and connecting young workers to jobs. Moreover, by reducing the need for people to drive private vehicles, public transit helps to ease the congestion and environmental impact caused by commuting.”²

Another recent study from California, shows that young people who use transit regularly are more likely to be physically active than those who didn't, as transit-related walking accounted for a significant portion of their activity. The study³ claims that “... overall, utilization of public transit as a percentage of all trips among children is similar to that of adults, at about 3%, and active travel to public transit is a significant source of physical activity for some children. Given the median transit-related walking time of 21 minutes, at least one-half of children who use transit can be expected to achieve approximately one-third of their daily recommended time of physical activity through transit use alone.”

It has also been noted that young people today tend to spend fewer hours driving and more on public transit⁴. Young people are also likely to choose future cities of residence based on the quality of public transit and are more likely to move to cities with a robust transit service.

Children, Transit Use and Parental Supervision – Methods

“The issue of transit use among children is, of course, more complex than among adults because it is likely that for many of the children, the decision to use transit is not under their control; it is rather more likely that they are using transit under the direction of their parent or guardian. Therefore, future research is needed regarding how parents feel about their children using public transit, especially if they are unaccompanied; at what age it is acceptable for a child to use public transit alone; and what environmental factors can influence or be changed to promote safe use of public transit by children.”⁵

²Why public transit helps young people get to work.

<https://scholars.org/contribution/why-public-transit-helps-young-people-get-work>

³ Transit Use by Children and Adolescents. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5502534/>

⁴ The role of residential choice on the travel behavior of young adults.

<https://www.worldtransitresearch.info/research/9001/>

⁵ Transit Use by Children and Adolescents. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5502534/>

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To get a better understanding of young people and their perception of safety on the ETS, we at ETSAB conducted two informal surveys, the first one targeting young people between the ages of 11 and 21 and the second survey asking parents, adults and caregivers their opinion on children and young people on transit. We also had a focus group of trustees from Edmonton Public Schools, with the intention of getting input as to what the key barriers for youth to take transit. We also canvassed young people and their caregivers on social media, in order to better understand the issues that they face, particularly in terms of safety on ETS.

Our questions for both groups ranged broadly from how safe they felt on transit, to what age would parents and caregivers feel comfortable sending their children on transit. With trustees and other stakeholders, we asked what the major safety barriers were for students to take transit as part of their school commute. The specific questions we asked are attached in Appendix 1.*

Subcommittee Findings and Recommendations

The ETS must prioritize safety and security for children and young people.

A key theme that emerged from our surveys is the perception that transit is unsafe for children and young people, particularly when they ride alone. There is no direct quantitative measurement of safety. Safety is a perception from the users. Elements like cleanliness/lighting, visible security, timely arrival/departure of transit and a psychological perception of transit as a 'safe space' contribute to developing an overall perception of a safer space.

The surveyed parents in Edmonton, however, still had some concerns about safety. While many parents are aware that avoiding the costs and GHG emissions from driving makes the use of transit more appealing, convenience played an important role for children and young people in traveling to schools, activities or to workplaces. Many parents who responded preferred to drive their children where possible.

Parents whose children used transit regularly brought up several issues with their perception of their children's safety. For example, there is a stigma directed towards people who take transit as 'poor' or 'vulnerable'. Concerns were raised about the number of 'homeless people', 'addicts' and 'mentally ill' on transit, and this was a concern that kept coming up in conversations with guardians on social media as well.

"I'm nervous. I take transit and have seen a rise in homeless men using the bus station as a shelter. They sleep there on the floor. Some are ok, others less so."

"Father of a 13 yr. old: I refuse to send my child ETS from all the horror stories from other parents and kids. Instead, we made up a car pool and a parent for every child shares driving duties. We started this grade 7, and we'll keep doing it."

"Out of the last 5 times I've been on the LRT I was in an altercation of some sort 3 times. My youngest won't go to Millwoods transit centre because he doesn't want to get stabbed."

Responses such as these highlight the perception of safety concerns on ETS, and that young people and their parents/guardians whom we surveyed do not feel that ETS is doing a good job of

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keeping them safe.

Women and people from minority communities reported feeling particularly vulnerable and unsafe and would have preferred if their children took alternative means of transport.

"I am 4'11 and a visible minority. I had 3 men follow me from the station and threaten to rape me and my child. One alluded to having a knife. It wasn't until 2 nearby construction workers heard the men so they walked me and my kid until I could get to a bus safely. I have a 15 year old who currently has to take the bus because I don't drive. I worry about him because some of the passengers are very aggressive and drivers seem hesitant to throw them out ... honestly, if I had other options I would take it. It seems to be really bad since the pandemic started and because I'm an essential worker there was no option to stay home"

"It's been awhile since I rode, but my friends used to joke that I had a "bus story" every time I saw them. As a petite, young looking female, I felt uncomfortable more often than not."

These voices also highlight the perception that transit was a last resort, rather than a viable option for everyday commutes and life and that the ETS really needs to address the perception of safety among young children, youth and their adults.

Our question to young people was specific: If you are between the ages of 12- 21, how safe do you feel on Edmonton Public Transit? The responses ranged from 'unsafe' to 'somewhat safe'. There were very few young people who felt completely safe on transit and their concerns ranged from "people fighting, knives, doing drugs and screaming."

While School Specials were seen as relatively safe, younger riders did not feel comfortable approaching drivers when they felt unsafe. They also felt unsafe when there were fewer people on the bus and during nights. Larger community routes like the four or eight were seen as being relatively safer to travel on, particularly as they tended to be busier. The lack of visible security was also perceived as an unsafe situation.

1. Who do you call?

Over half of the people that responded to the young people's survey stated that they would turn to the driver for help if they were feeling unsafe. This is problematic for a number of reasons, including:

1. Difficulty reaching the driver during unsafe situations (e.g. if someone is blocking them in their seat, or if they are unable to safely get to the front of the bus).
2. Limited ability of the driver to respond.
3. Situations where driver is not available (e.g. LRT).
4. Additionally, one respondent stated that they would turn to the driver, but that drivers don't like to get involved (from the point of view of the driver – it isn't their job or what they are trained for).

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However, there needs to be an examination of why there is a perceived lack of responsiveness. Is there a deficit in training of drivers, transit police, commissionaires? Why do we continue to hear and to read that, “there is nothing I can do”?

When adults/guardians were asked how they would prepare their child/ward to take transit safely, several respondents mentioned a group strategy – taking the bus with their child/ward, encouraging them to ride with friends, approaching adults with children or teaching their child/ward to ask the driver for help when required.

In combination, these two points lend support for a mentorship program; having someone on the bus trained to watch out for new riders, so that the driver can focus on their job and there is a visible safety presence.

Additionally, more work needs to be done to clearly define the driver’s/operator’s role to the public and clearly articulate exactly who it is that passengers can contact in a time of trouble or trauma. Clearly defined roles for Peace Officers and Transit Watch would also help to this end. And, to what degree can a passenger enlist the help of Edmonton Police Services? Information gathered in our survey uncovered that most young people have some uncertainty in knowing who to contact when they need help while driving on ETS.

2. Better planning from the ETS

For school going kids, making connections to buses is stressful (both for parents and kids) as they aren’t confident wandering around and be sure to catch the right bus at the right time. This causes safety concerns as they feel/ get lost, taking wrong buses, specially transit centres are overwhelming (inbound versus outbound buses) so if ETS can consider this as part of planning that buses going to schools have many direct routes.

Some younger people also talked about how they felt vulnerable alone at poorly lit bus stops or unpoliced transit stations. ETS Drivers also need more reminders about their actions, for example, some drivers neglect to stop on certain stops especially in winter months, when it's dark and they probably don't see kids/ youth waiting for the buses. This creates serious concerns – kids missing their one bus means impacts to other connections, and causes other concerns such as missing other buses, getting lost, taking wrong connections etc. Parents and guardians highlighted this as a particular concern. The Transit App is a very useful way to determine a route. Encouraging its use for transfers and school specials might help assuage some of these concerns.

There were also several requests for more School Specials, which were perceived as being safer for younger riders. It needs to be noted that School Specials are targeted towards high schools and older students, and this leaves a significant gap for Junior High students (several parents we talked to would send their child on buses/transit between the age of 12 – 15) who do not have the same access to these buses.

The School Special buses could also do with an assessment of whether “supervisory” staff need to be added and whether “bad” behaviour could result in banning. This was highlighted by a response from a parent about these buses being an additional venue for bullying, which would need to be addressed.

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Other solutions may be a partnership program between the ETS and schools whereby parents accompany their children on rides to schools on different occasions. A ride-along is not feasible nor convenient every day but scheduled ride-alongs throughout the school year would allow parents to see, firsthand, what the students encounter on a routine day and may assuage some fears and biases about transit safety.

We note that there were some respondents in the survey who do have children that take the bus and with small exceptions, they feel that there is a reasonable level of safety on ETS vehicles and feel safe allowing their children to take both school specials and regular transit routes.

3. What is Transit Watch and why does no one know about it?

Even though ETS seems to have invested significantly in Transit Watch, of all the respondents to our questions, only one person had heard of/used the program. The majority of responses by young people and adults/guardians indicate they do not know the number for Transit Watch. One respondent indicated dissatisfaction with Transit Watch's response to a call (did not take any action after a robbery). The comment that "there is no follow up or apparent response" is a common one. ETSAB members share in this experience with no explanation even after a formal enquiry.

Another serious issue is that there continue to be blind spots in the LRT tunnels for cell phone users. Will 5G technology address this issue? Are there some other communication remedies that would address the issue? The recent stabbing at the University station illustrates the dilemma. No one had the ability to report it. Which leads us to ask, how do we improve the coordination and communication between the control centre and Transit/City police?

Recommendations for improving Transit Watch

- Have the Transit Watch number visibly posted in each ETS bus and on the bus stops.
- Improve the Transit Watch response time, so riders trust it and use it more often.
- ETS can market Transit Watch more efficiently through social media, billboards, online and TV commercials and focus on creating awareness in public. This would also have the effect of increasing trust in the service, as well as a perception of safety.
- Run campaigns encouraging young people to save the Transit Watch number on their phones, so they have access to it when required.
- The ETS needs to be more transparent about the nature of responses to Transit Watch calls and who takes responsibility for these responses.
- Ongoing training and support for security people would also be useful.
- Introduce a mobile phone app that helps track safety issues in real time. If an incident happens, sometimes it can't be reversed but we can get help fast and ensure that we protect passengers, deter bad behaviour, and have a credible record of what happened. The app may have video capabilities that transmit data in real time. Social media tools and other applications offer this already, but the direct feed would go to Transit Watch/ETS Security or another division that would be able to respond immediately to hurt or distressed young people on transit at the time of any incident.

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- OC Transit developed an attractive poster and created the Know Campaign⁶, promoting reporting incidents without your personal details. This could be something that ETS could consider.

4. Toolkits, information, education and awareness for younger riders

We like to believe that we are all in this together, and we are building a community of people who are present and look out for everyone. But building such a community is a task that needs to be taken on by more of us, and there needs to be an awareness about social responsibility.

Edmonton is an urban centre and there should be an expectation that there will be some interaction with transient/homeless/street persons from time to time. This interaction, to some degree, is ineluctable. For most transit users, identifying these persons is obvious but how do we address the perception of these individuals as a threat to safety for children and youth? Some transient persons and homeless can have nefarious ambitions or may be likely perpetrators of crimes on transit but there are others who become an object of fear or potential nuisance simply because of their presence. Their life and travels are a function of their socioeconomic status, a systemic disposition. For the latter group, solutions need to focus on how we can give them support and assistance. Solutions should target finding ways to help them find personal residences rather than bus and train shelters. They need safe areas to cohabit and congregate rather than ETS property. We reiterate that some transient/homeless persons can be problematic but perhaps we need to educate youth about the realities of homelessness and work with government, agencies, and other entities to curb and ultimately, eradicate homelessness. In this sense, fear may just be a lack of understanding and systemic problem.

Toolkits and templates:

Ottawa's OC Transit developed the Transecure Program⁷ - a mobile community watch program where all employees are trained to respond to safety and security situations. It includes an annual reward program. OC Transit also developed a Ten Point Travel Safety Plan for their system. Adding a safety lens to all their work including designing of stations and stops, the ongoing roll out of the above. It also included stronger community partnerships and a continuous review of progress being made.

Another transit system, Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) developed a poster for buses and trains that illustrated that you can approach anyone about safety and security and there will be an appropriate follow up.

Awareness campaigns:

There are several awareness campaigns that could increase the perception of safety among young ETS riders.

- Create awareness programs in partnership with schools (junior high through post-secondary) for communicating advantages of taking ETS; and address their concerns

⁶ OC Safe Travels. <https://www.octranspo.com/en/our-services/safe-travels/>

⁷ OC Transecure. <https://www.octranspo.com/en/our-services/safe-travels/transecure/>

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such as longer routes, long waits, long rides, crowded buses, fare, and safety. There is also the concern of bullying on transit, whether it is from adult to youth, or youth on youth.

- A systematic, proactive, regular process for ETS is to get feedback from schools on a regular basis. Once a year, an ETS staff person calls, not just emails, the school principal and asks “how’s it going? Are the routes working well? Are the bus shelters and signages still working well?” to build trust and get specific feedback, so that better toolkits/information/awareness can be established for the benefit of youth transit riders.
- An idea from Attachment 2, BART partners with students, is to use cool and relatable graphic design principles to spread awareness about taking transit or encourage behaviours in a catchy and humorous way. The current generation are used to seeing high-quality cartoons, marketing packaging, social media campaigns and media content and using these methods can help deliver key messages about transit. Kids and teens would particularly respond to such messaging.
- The Calgary and Vancouver transit systems have developed some video programs⁸ to introduce young people, newcomers, new riders and folks with ability challenges to better utilize their systems and to have a greater sense of awareness about their personal safety. Possibilities exist to approach programs like NAIT and have students develop videos as a class project.
- Making school programs on transit awareness mandatory. This could be a joint-project between the ETS Security and ETS, perhaps even EPS, informing students about the safety and potential dangers of riding transit and letting them know that as passengers, they have advocates and security that is there to protect them.
- Consider a “First Riders Program” similar to what schools already have for the yellow bus. Class field trips on how to ride the bus are impactful for younger children (Grade 4 - 6) who might not have taken the bus ever, which includes the step by step of being a passenger, proper rider etiquette and how to safely ride transit.
- The Edmonton Social Planning Council’s program “Shift to Action”⁹ recently published a little comic to illustrate and encourage bystander intervention at a level appropriate to the incident. It is another important community tool that illustrates that we can promote more action around the needs for safety and security, thus shifting seeming indifference to an appropriate action.
- At key transit locations/busy community buses it might be possible to have a transit mentor, identified with a vest or button who can ensure safe passage during key times like the beginning and end of school. Perhaps parent advisory councils could be approached to identify willing adults. It would be critical to screen these supporters with a criminal record check.
- Currently, the ETS Ride Transit Program, does not accept fax or email applications. Applications must be dropped off at the Edmonton Tower or mailed. In person applications

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/user/CalgaryTransitcom> and <https://www.translink.ca/rider-guide>

⁹ <https://www.edmontonshiftlab.ca/blog/prototype-post-the-de-escalator-guide/>

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are not dealt with immediately. It was observed that at the school level they endeavor to make sure that everyone is enrolled into programs like Ride Transit that will support and assist their families. Many families, supported by one adult working long or complex shifts, have a weak ability to hand in their application forms to City Hall during business hours. The new applicants might not understand what is missing in their applications and delay addressing the concerns to the detriment of their families. Edmonton Public School trustees suggested that ETS develop a means for the local schools to accept and forward applications to ETS. They propose this to ensure that everyone eligible for the program has easy access to it. The local school office staff may also facilitate working out application shortfalls/communication issues by working directly and closely with the families avoiding a trip downtown or working via mail.

- ETSAB or Transit might consider asking researchers/specialists at the Universities or technical colleges to examine the ETS training practices to identify if there are more creative ways to support front line employees in ensuring safety for all.
- Training and awareness for transit employees and passengers alike regarding racism, racial bias and diversity. We have made progress on this in some regard, but a solution starts with knowing the problem. Campaigns and advertisements could target negative racially motivated behaviour.
- Providing information that informs on step-by-step procedures and options for what to do if one encounters an incident or has a safety concern on transit.
- We need safety solutions that consider children and young people who have disabilities and mobility issues. ETSAB would consider working with community support groups like Excel and Catholic Social Services, to determine what that population is dealing with.
- Leadership of children begins in the home. While youth must make the decisions ultimately, minors are accountable to the degree that their parents or guardians have control. We need to connect with parents and have more conversations. We can't tell others how to parent, but we can demand some accountability.

Conclusion

Knowledge is essential. Sometimes the solutions we can offer just involve education and awareness. The trustee conversation highlighted a real need for connection and conversations between transit teams and schools. The ability to convene a representative sample of students, teachers, parents and school leadership with transit representatives will help uncover a lot of concerns, questions, confessions and help to uncover truths while concurrently dispelling fallacies about transit.

Having realistic expectations as there will always be incidents and issues on transit. While our objective is to minimize and eradicate the incidents and roots of the problem, sometimes it may be prudent to channel our efforts into ways to resolve these issues and practical solutions for some of the most common problems.

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The perception of safety observations in this report also apply to other populations that use transit. Improvements described in this report would benefit women, BIPOC riders, transit staff and visibly disabled riders.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Questions for Groups on Youth Safety and Security on ETS
2. BART partners with students
3. Easy to Read Adult Survey
4. Easy to Read Young People Survey