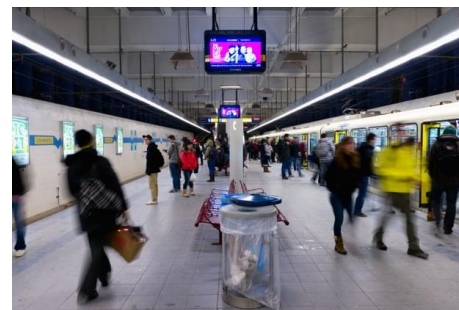


# ROUTES TO HOMES: TRANSIT AND SOCIAL SUPPORT INTERVENTION FOR HOMELESS YOUTH

NOVEMBER 2013



## Background:

Previous research conducted by the Old Strathcona Mapping and Planning Committee indicated that youth who engage in high-risk behaviors depend on public transit to access services, seek employment, and follow court orders. The youth have limited ability to pay transit fares, and using the transit system without payment causes considerable stress and anxiety. Accessing transit without payment is the introduction to the criminal justice system for some. The estimated process cost of ticketing and court appearances is \$1200.

OSCMAP partnered with the Social Support Research Program at the University of Alberta to pilot a transit and social skills intervention, funded by **Homeward Trust Edmonton**.

## Research Questions:

1. What is the impact of public transportation assistance (i.e., bus tickets; bus passes) and a pilot social skills training-support intervention on homeless youth: (a) interactions with transit authorities, (b) safety (c) exclusion, and (e) access to support, supportive services, and housing?
2. What are the implications for improved practice, programs, and policies?

## Participants:

40 youth, 15-22 years of age

- 25 males
- 15 females
- 10 were parents of young children (ages 3 and under)

Self-reported ethnicity:

- First Nations (15)
- Metis Nations (6)
- Urban Aboriginal (2)
- Caucasian (16)
- Biracial (1)

## Methods:

Homeless youth were randomly assigned to receive either: 1) a monthly bus pass, or 2) 30 bus tickets every 2 weeks. The transit intervention was over 3 months (January - March 2013).

Youth were asked about previous housing and services, involvement with transit and city police, and they completed a short exploratory survey of perceived support, support seeking, community belonging, and safety

Post-intervention youth interviews were conducted, as well as a post-intervention interview with staff from the participating agencies serving homeless youth.

## Research Team

Co- Principal Investigators: Miriam Stewart, PhD (Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta); Joshua Evans, PhD (Social Geography, Athabasca University), Cheryl Currie, PhD (Public Health, University of Lethbridge); Sharon Anderson, MSc, MEd.; Amanda Almond, MAPS Alberta; Catherine Broomfield, Executive Director, iHuman Youth Society; Karen Drynan, Executive Director, Old Strathcona Youth Society

Thanks to: Youth Empowerment & Support Services, Inner City Youth Housing Project, iHuman, and Old Strathcona Youth Society

*[Having a transit pass] was the best feeling in the world, like liberation, being able to go where you can or need to go. It got me to my school. I did temporary jobs; it got me to my workplace in the morning. It is like the difference between being normal and homeless.*

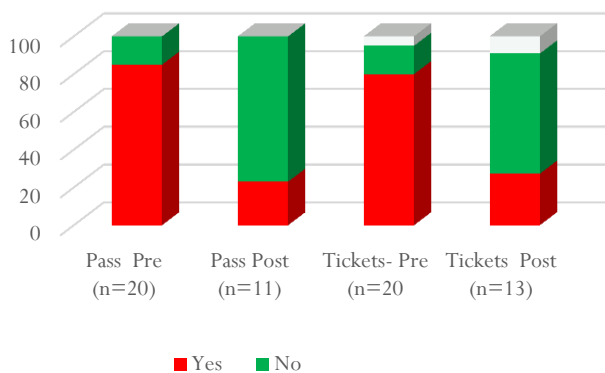


### Impact of receiving public transportation assistance (bus tickets; bus passes) for homeless youth:

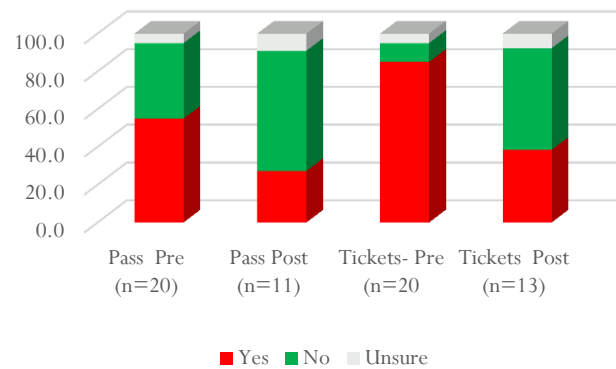
The impact of receiving public transit or tickets was overwhelmingly positive for these youth. This pilot intervention reduced negative interactions with transit authorities, made youth “feel normal”, increased safety in some situations, and enabled youth to access services and supports beyond their normal walking range. During the three-month intervention, there was an increase in employment and stable housing for youth.

**Interactions with transit authorities and city police:** Youth self-reported that they had significantly fewer encounters with transit police and city police when they had access to monthly transit passes and tickets than before the intervention.

Encounters with City Police



Encounters with Transit Police



### Transit Passes vs. Transit Tickets

**Youth who received bus passes had significantly fewer encounters with transit and city police than group receiving tickets.** All group interview participants pointed out that an average of three tickets per day did not offer the same transportation options and flexibility as a bus pass. Youth reported needing to go to two or three different places a day, and they felt obligated to share tickets with friends who did not have transit access.

### Impact of receiving public transportation assistance on Social Exclusion:

In the group interviews, youth believed exclusion was a root cause of their stressful situation. They talked about how they ended up on the street and how entrenchment happens. Several intimated that things “weren’t good at home” or there was little for them at home.

Youth thought they were on the streets because they didn’t fit in and conversely that they don’t fit in because they are on the streets. Exclusion was long-standing. They explained how they had problems fitting in at school and then in society and how being surrounded by like-minded people (“who are like, jobs are for losers”) made it harder to get off the streets. Most believed they were discriminated by their ethnicity and appearance, including clothing.

### Impact of receiving public transportation assistance on Safety:

Safety remains a significant issue for these street-involved youth. There was a trend for homeless youth to feel they were safer on the transit system and during the day while receiving transit assistance. Safety remains a significant issue for these youth. Almost a third reported they felt unsafe on the transit system once a day or more. Half of the youth reported they felt unsafe once a day or more, both during and after the intervention.

In the interviews, youth described safety as a complex problem. They reported that risks of being homeless included being taken advantage of (manipulated, used) by adults and other youth, survival sex, prostitution, and drug addiction. Having tickets or passes let them escape from unsafe circumstances as they could get on transit and leave, but at times they were targets of violence on transit. Youth contended that the downtown area in which homeless shelters are located was unsafe. Some youth noted that it was better to use transit at night, because you could be assaulted on the street or harassed by police while walking.

In the post- intervention interview with youth workers from the participating agencies, they reported that many of the youth were anxious and that feeling unsafe increased their anxiety. They explained that without tickets and passes, youth had a limited travel range and less access to positive role models. As a result, inner city homeless youth tended to associate with the same people, within walking distance of agencies serving homeless youth. Both the area and associating with higher-risk youth increased their perceptions of risk.

*"If they have tickets or a pass they are going somewhere, they aren't just hanging out at the transit station to keep warm. If they have nowhere to go in winter, they do hang out there, but if they could access transit, I think there would be a lot less personal robberies. If they stay out of trouble it makes it a lot easier for them to go home or stay housed."*  
Program Staff

*"Drug wise and people wise, it's not safe [where we live]. I almost got stabbed because I had a cigarette. If you want to walk on the street at night, like you have to make sure you have a friend with you."* Youth

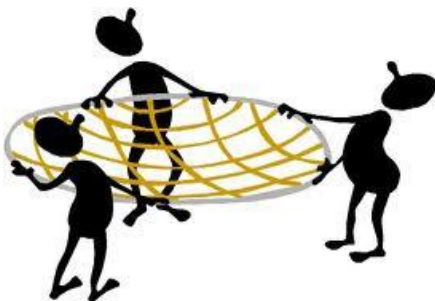


### Discrimination by Transit Authorities

Just over half of the youth believed transit authorities targeted them because they were homeless, or because of their ethnicity. Required to show his proof of payment, one youth explained, *"I was the last one off the train and he [only] asked me... it seems like racial profiling to me."*

### Old Strathcona Community Mapping and Planning Committee

is a partnership of human services providers working in the neighbourhood of Old Strathcona in Edmonton, Alberta. Our mandate is to **improve services and supports to youth through collaborative planning and delivery of services.** Organizations in this collaborative include: Catholic Social Services, Child and Family Services, Edmonton & Area, City of Edmonton Community Services, Edmonton Public Library, iHuman Youth Society, Inner City Youth Housing Project, E4C, MAPS Alberta Capital Region, Old Strathcona Youth Society, and Youth Empowerment & Support Services





## Conclusions:

Transit support interventions increase accessibility to support services and housing. The survey data indicated that four participants, one on social assistance and three without an income, had income from wages following the intervention. Three who had been in rental housing, remained in rental housing and three moved into rented homes. Employment and housing gains were confirmed in the post-intervention interviews with youth and staff. In the group interviews, youth reported that transit tickets and passes facilitated their ability to acquire identification, drop off resumes for employment, and look for accommodation. They believed they accessed more resources and were involved in more productive activities.

*"It's pretty good. I visited my kids. I went to part-time work, sometimes I go downtown or the west side. I got around pretty well."* Youth

Staff suggested that self-efficacy played a significant role in outcomes. Transportation options gave youth control to decide for themselves where they wanted to spend their time.

## Recommendations

1) Through community and/or government referral, youth, who would otherwise not have access to a bus pass or bus tickets, be given a pass similar to a university "One Card" that would also act as identification. This can help facilitate a sense of inclusion, increase safety, reduce involvement with transit police, and help access school and professional services for emotional and physical health. It can also foster a sense of "self-reliance, hope and self-confidence" while helping avoid being taken advantage of and/or sexually exploited. If youth are able to get to such services and jobs (in which youth may then be able to afford a bus pass) they are more likely to follow through accessing help and support, find housing, and increase the level of stability in their lives. This could also serve to reduce the costs of policing,

- court, lawyers, keeping a youth in custody, and, potentially, the services required.
- 2) Regular meetings (two to four times per year) between ETS representatives, other authorities relevant to public transit and transit spaces, and youth representatives to help educate, to build positive relationships, and to collaborate on solving problems as they arise.
  - 3) Training to be offered to ETS personnel (and other personnel relevant to transit spaces) with respect to understanding and interacting with street-involved, homeless, and socially excluded youth. The goal would be to increase understanding, improve positive communication, and eliminate profiling. The current "disability navigator" would be included in the training, with the aim of expanding the mandate to include assisting those struggling with FASD, addictions, and trauma.
  - 4) Address the systemic issue that some youth face in having probation orders stating they must attend school and professional services (such as counselling, addictions treatment, life skills or anger management programs, etc.) while also being banned from public transit. This can place the youth in the predicament of either being fined or breaching the probation order. Youth who are court ordered to attend school and professional appointments should be referred by the court/probation officer for a "One Card".
  - 5) Further research should explore the court orders being made and the cognitive/circumstantial ability to actually carry out the conditions. Are some court orders setting the youth up for inevitable failure, further entrenchment in the justice system, ongoing sense of exclusion, and financial and housing instability?
  - 6) If the first recommendation is adopted, a broad and thorough evaluation be completed to ensure that a "One Card" concept is effective for youth, the transit system and the community, and that overall, there is a social return on investment.
  - 7) Homeward Trust Edmonton continue to support community-based research, and continue to engage community agencies in their efforts to build programs to end homelessness.