SSHRC’s Imagining Canada’s Future initiative mobilizes social sciences and humanities research to address emerging economic, societal and knowledge needs for Canada, and help guide decision-making across all sectors toward a better future. This evidence brief addresses the Future Challenge Area of: *Mobility and Public Transit*

**Public transit and equity-deserving groups: Understanding lived experiences**

**About the project**

Investments in public transit have the potential to increase accessibility; support and connect communities; and improve employment, health and social outcomes. However, a lack of attention to the equity impacts of transportation policies and investments results in the continued marginalization of equity-deserving groups, and exacerbates structural barriers to full participation in society.

The objective of this project was to examine the existing academic and community-based research on the transportation barriers that limit full participation in society for equity-deserving groups in Canada, and to understand strategies to reduce these barriers. This study uses a lived experience lens, which incorporates analysis of how aspects of a person’s identity relate to experiences of discrimination or privilege. We analyzed 175 sources, 80% of which focused on Canadian communities, and fairly evenly covered equity-deserving groups. We also conducted roundtables with community-based stakeholders to ensure that our findings reflected the experiences of organizations that serve equity-deserving groups.

**Key findings**

- The lived experiences of equity-deserving groups with public transit have been well documented, both in the academic literature and in work by community-based organizations, non-profits and advocacy groups.

- Four cross-cutting themes were observed across equity-deserving groups:
  - Poor or absent transit service
  - Unaffordability of transit fares
  - Racialized policing and enforcement
  - Safety issues on transit, getting to transit and due to a lack of public transit options

- Transit-related barriers impact equity-deserving groups in wide-ranging ways, such as restricting access to health care, education and employment; limiting support for people experiencing domestic violence; and reducing the ability to access social services, visit with family and friends, and participate in cultural activities.

- Many members of equity-deserving groups still cannot easily access transit services in ways that fully meet their needs without fear of harassment or harm. Members of these groups are excluded from the social, economic and health benefits that are available to those not dependent on public transit.

- Stakeholders suggested *dignity* be used as a framework for understanding policies and practices related to public transit. This lens can be applied to a variety of lived experiences with public transit, such as:
  - lack of value placed on peoples’ time, with the assumption that transit trips would be much longer and more inconvenient than trips in private vehicles;
  - lack of basic services for transit users, such as bus shelters and washrooms;
  - lack of support for trips deemed non-essential; paratransit trips or transit fares provided by social services agencies are often limited to certain kinds of trips; and
  - lack of respect for the lives of people from equity-deserving groups, such as policies that require people with disabilities to be evacuated last in emergencies and racist enforcement of transit policies.
Much of the literature focuses on documenting the challenges faced by equity-deserving groups, with less focus on identifying the “desires” of communities or the strength-based approaches that communities may be engaging in to solve problems.

We found little research on the evaluation of implemented policy programs aimed at reducing disparities and barriers for equity-deserving groups.

Policy implications

- While the experiences of equity-deserving groups are well documented, there are few funding programs to address the specific challenges faced by these groups. This points to the need to address the misalignment between funding programs and community needs, including addressing the unaffordability of transit fares, programs to support transit operations, and community-based alternatives.
- Applications for infrastructure funding should include assessment of potential to improve services for equity-deserving groups.
- The unaffordability of transit as the most common barrier—combined with the negative impacts of fare enforcement—requires serious evaluation of programs to reduce or eliminate transit fares.
- There has been significant research and consultation, yet—according to stakeholder participants—this attention has not been accompanied by programs or funding to address identified needs. A dedicated funding stream is required to respond to community-identified priorities, including through support for non-traditional transit providers and programs.
- Guidance should be provided to transit providers on the collection of equity-based demographic data, including models for partnering with community-based organizations, meaningful ways to include qualitative data, and the development of indicators that respond to community needs.
- Transportation barriers impact access to numerous types of services, requiring co-ordination with other agencies.

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