

BC youth's sense of safety on public transit



In 2023, a total of 38,488 students, aged 12–19, completed the BC Adolescent Health Survey (BC AHS) in public schools in 59 of the province's 60 school districts. Results are considered representative of 97.6% of students (aged 12–19) in mainstream public schools in BC.

To read the full results and learn more about the BC AHS, please visit: mcs.bc.ca/about_bcahs.

Background

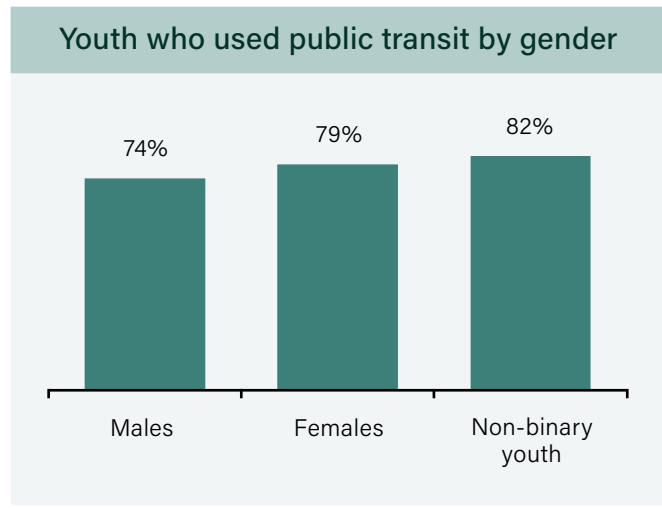
Young people are the most active users of public transit in Canada (Reed et al., 2021). Youth from low-income families are more likely than those from higher income families to use public transit because they are less likely to have access to personal vehicles (Roberts et al., 2019).

Research with Canadian adults has found that those with lower incomes are less likely than those with higher incomes to feel safe on transit (Chiu & Palm, 2022). Adult males are the most likely to feel safe on public transit, and individuals who identify as non-binary are the least likely (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022; Chiu & Palm, 2022; Reed et al., 2021). Also, females are more likely than males to report experiencing sexual harassment and/or assault on transit (Ceccato et al., 2021; Nourani et al., 2020). Individuals with a disability have reported feeling less safe on transit than those without a disability, and women with disabilities are at particular risk for experiencing sexual assault on transit and in transit waiting areas (Ludici et al., 2017).

Previous studies of transit safety have found that feeling unsafe can lead adults to avoid using public transit, which limits their mobility and ability to access employment, health care, and social opportunities (Ceccato & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2022; Nourani et al., 2020). However, research on Canadian youth's experiences of feeling safe on public transit is sparse (Loh et al., 2024; Reed et al., 2021). This fact sheet shares findings from the BC AHS about BC youth's experiences using public transit, including their feeling of safety on transit.

Youth who used public transit

A little over three quarters of BC youth aged 12–19 (76%) used public transit. Youth in 2023 were more likely to use transit than those in previous survey years (76% vs. 75% in 2018 vs. 73% in 2013). Males were the least likely to use transit and non-binary youth were the most likely.



Some parts of the province do not have access to transit, and others have inconsistent access. Transit use was more common among youth in urban areas (78% vs. 61% of youth in rural areas), and in the Vancouver Coastal region (e.g., 88% used transit vs. 68% in the Interior vs. 59% in the North). There was also variability in transit use within most regions. For example, within the Fraser region, 88% of youth in Fraser North used transit, compared to 72% in Fraser South, and 64% in the more rural Fraser East.

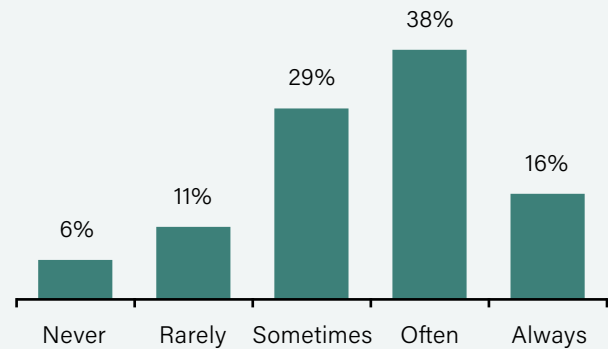
Across BC, older youth were more likely than younger ones to take transit (e.g., 80% of youth aged 15 or older used it vs. 75% of 14-year-olds vs. 70% of 13-year-olds vs. 66% of those aged 12 or younger), as were youth with a health condition or disability (81% vs. 74% of those without a health condition or disability).

Transit use was more common among youth who were living in poverty. For example, the more items youth felt deprived of on McCreary's 11-item Youth Deprivation Index, the more likely they were to use transit (83% of those who were deprived of two or more items used transit vs. 77% who were deprived of one item vs. 75% who did not experience material deprivation). See *Smith et al., (2022)* for more information about the Youth Deprivation Index.

Food insecurity is another indicator of poverty. Most youth (87%) who went to bed hungry at least sometimes because there was not enough money for food at home used transit, compared to 75% who did not experience this level of food insecurity.

Among youth who used public transit, the majority felt safe doing so. However, they were less likely to feel safe than in previous survey years. For example, 54% of transit users often or always felt safe doing so, compared to 60% in 2018; and 6% never felt safe which was an increase from 5% in 2013 and 2018.

Youth's sense of safety using public transit (among those who used it)



Youth's sense of safety on transit

Note: Findings in the remainder of this fact sheet are among youth who used public transit.

"I live in a really safe neighbourhood, and I take the bus all the time, but I just hate it, it's so scary."

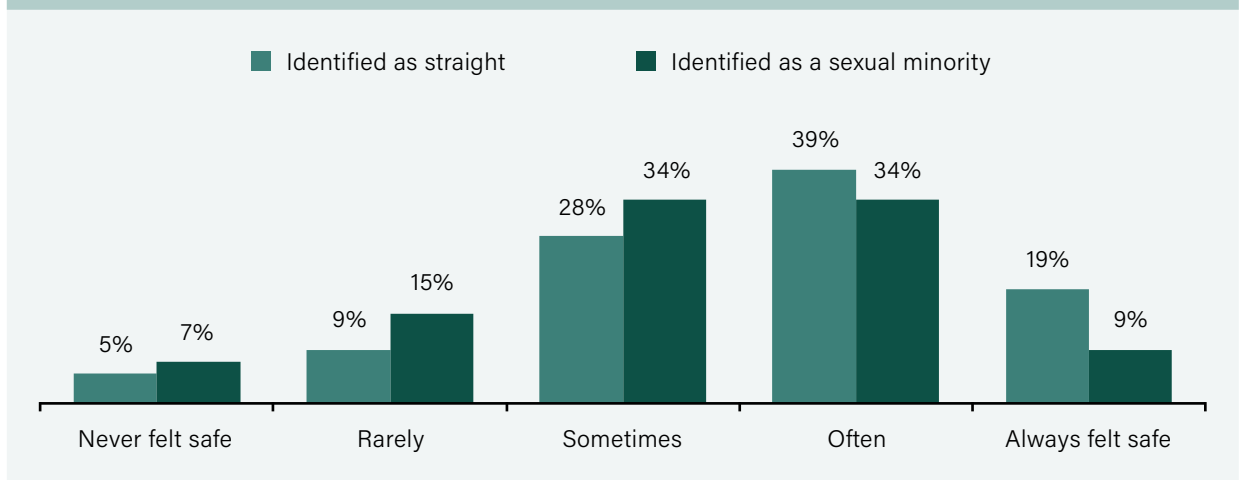
12-year-old youth

Gender identity and sexual orientation

Around two thirds of males (66%) often or always felt safe using public transit, compared to 43% of females, and 37% of non-binary youth. Cisgender youth were more likely to often or always feel safe using transit than their transgender peers (55% vs. 43%).

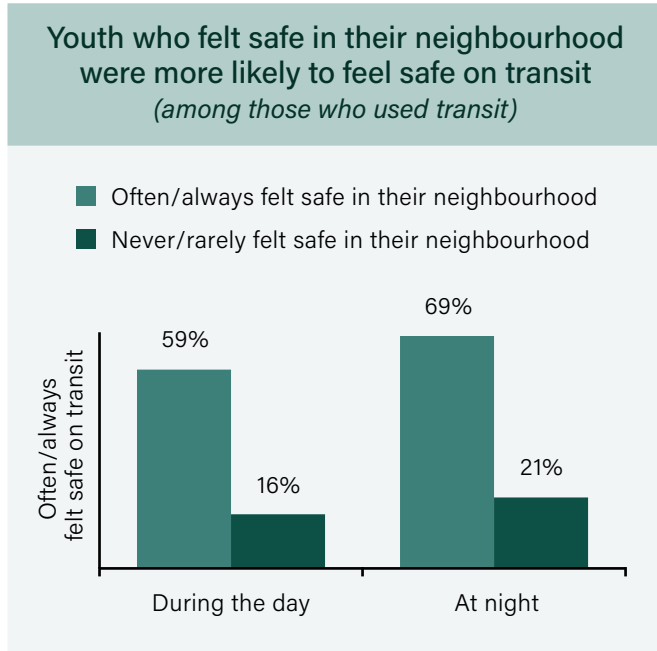
Youth who identified as straight were more likely than those who identified as a sexual minority to feel safe using transit (58% often/always felt safe vs. 43%).

Sense of safety on public transit and sexual orientation (among those who used it)

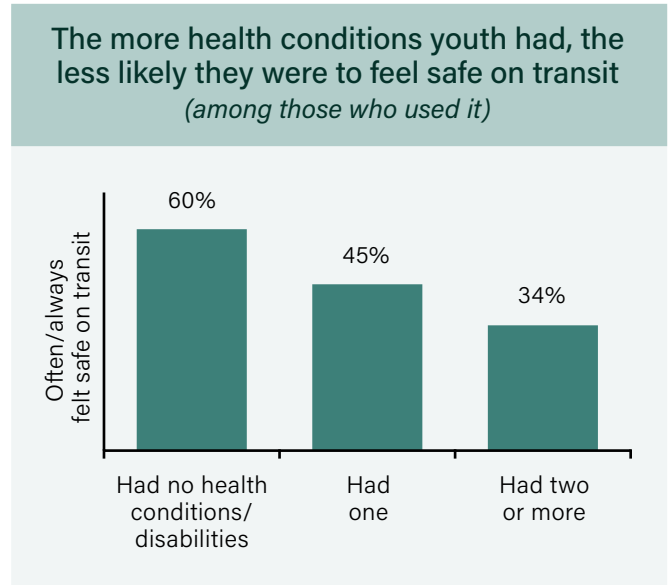


Geographical location

The percentage of youth who often or always felt safe on public transit ranged from 48% in the North to 59% on Vancouver Island. Youth who felt safe in their neighbourhood were more likely to also feel safe on transit.



The more health conditions and disabilities youth experienced, the less likely they were to feel safe using transit. Additionally, among youth with a health condition or disability, 35% of those who did not have what they needed to overcome the barriers they experienced often or always felt safe on public transit. This percentage was lower than among those who had what they needed to overcome the barriers (47% often/always felt safe), and those who did not experience any barriers (53%).



Health conditions and disabilities

As noted earlier, those with a health condition or disability were more likely to use transit. However, they were less likely to feel safe doing so. For example, 42% often or always felt safe (vs. 60% of youth without a condition or disability), and 8% never felt safe (vs. 4%).

Youth who often/always felt safe using public transit (among those who used it)

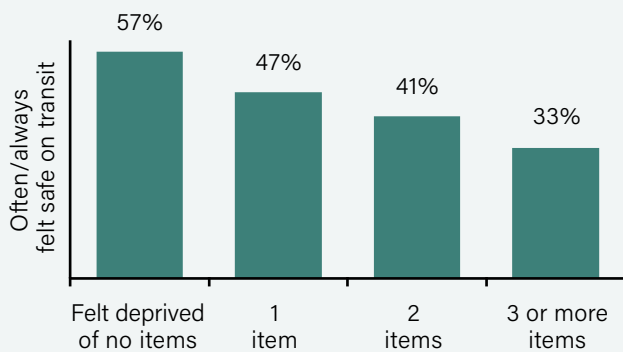
	Had this condition/disability	Did not have this condition/disability
Physical disability (e.g., cerebral palsy, used a wheelchair)	37%	54%
Mental health condition (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder, eating disorder, OCD)	37%	59%
Deaf/hard of hearing	39%	54%
Learning disability (e.g., dyslexia)	42%	55%
Long-term/chronic medical condition	45%	54%
Blind/visual impairment which cannot be corrected with glasses/contact lenses	46%	54%

Note: Youth could mark all health conditions or disabilities that applied.

Economic well-being

Reflecting the pattern seen with youth who had a health condition or disability, young people who experienced material deprivation and food insecurity were more likely to use transit than their peers, but were less likely to feel safe doing so. For example, 37% of youth who went to bed hungry at least sometimes because there was not enough money for food at home often or always felt safe on transit, compared to 56% of those who did not go to bed hungry.

The more items youth felt deprived of the less likely they were to feel safe using public transit (among those who used it)



Discrimination

Experiencing discrimination while using transit decreased youth's sense of safety. For example, 26% of youth who had been discriminated against on transit in the past year often or always felt safe using it, compared to 55% of youth who had not been discriminated against on transit.

Experiencing homophobia, racism, and other types of discrimination in any setting in the past year was also associated with a decreased sense of safety on transit. For example, feeling safe on transit was less common among youth who had experienced discrimination due to a health condition (29% often/always felt safe) or disability (31%); how much money they or their family had (34%); and their race, ethnicity, or skin colour (42%), compared to those who had not experienced discrimination in the past year (64%).

Also, youth who had experienced discrimination on a regular basis in the past year were less likely than those who experienced it rarely to feel safe using public transit (35% often or always felt safe vs. 47%).

Potential consequences of not feeling safe on public transit

There appeared to be additional negative experiences when youth felt unsafe using transit.

"Too many stabbings, I will never go [on transit] again."

18-year-old youth

Foregoing needed mental health services

The less safe youth felt using public transit, the more likely they were to miss out on accessing mental health services they felt they needed in the past year. Around two thirds of youth (68%) who never or rarely felt safe on transit had missed out on these services, compared to 62% who sometimes felt safe, and 58% who often or always felt safe (among those who needed mental health services in the past year).

Also, 9% of youth who had missed out on needed mental health services identified lack of transportation as a reason for missing out. Those who never or rarely felt safe on transit were the most likely to identify transportation as a barrier to accessing needed services (14% vs. 10% who sometimes felt safe on transit vs. 7% who often/always felt safe).

Poorer mental health and well-being

Not only were youth more likely to miss out on mental health services when they felt unsafe on transit, but not feeling safe on transit was associated with lower mental health and life satisfaction ratings. For example, youth who never or rarely felt safe on transit were less likely to rate their mental health as good or excellent (36% vs. 48% who sometimes felt safe vs. 68% who often/always felt safe), and to feel they had what they wanted in life (36% vs. 42% vs. 58%).

Missed out on extracurricular activities

Not feeling safe on public transit was associated with decreased participation in extracurricular activities, including regular participation in organized sports such as soccer and swim teams (41% who never/rarely felt safe on transit played these types of extracurricular sports at least weekly vs. 52% who often/always felt safe), and exercising at a gym or rec centre (33% vs. 40%).

Also, the less often youth felt safe using transit, the more likely they were to report that transportation challenges were a reason they did not participate in extracurriculars.

School absences

Youth who did not feel safe using public transit were more likely to have missed school in the past month because they did not have transportation to get there or home, and because they skipped school. They were also more likely to have missed multiple days of school. For example, 16% of those who never or rarely felt safe on transit had skipped school on at least 3 days that month, compared to 12% who sometimes felt safe, and 9% who often or always felt safe.

Final thoughts

Some of the results in this fact sheet reflect those in studies with adults, as gender and sexual minority youth, those living in poverty, and those with a disability were less likely to feel safe on transit. Findings also showed that youth who had experienced discrimination were less likely to feel safe on transit, and that those who felt unsafe were more likely to miss out on services, supports, and opportunities.

Federal, provincial, and municipal governments, as well as transit companies all have a role to play in increasing passenger safety, and particularly the safety of youth who are often reliant on transit to get to school, services, appointments, work, and recreational opportunities. There are also steps that young people can take to increase their safety (see [page 6](#) for more details).



Tips for increasing safety on transit

Transit police suggestions for children and youth travelling on public transit include:

- Wear reflective clothing to be seen by drivers as you walk to and from transit.
- Try to stay in well-lit areas.
- Be aware of your surroundings (e.g., keep one earbud out of your ear when listening to music).
- Move away from anyone who makes you feel uncomfortable.
- Know where you are going and the transit schedule for your journey.
- Keep valuables hidden and your belongings close to you (e.g., not on the seat beside you).
- Sit in an aisle seat when traveling alone so you can move quickly if needed.
- Add your local Transit Police contact numbers to your phone if available.
- Call 911 in an emergency.

Learn more at: transitpolice.ca/transit-safety-tips-for-children/.

BusReady youth program by BC transit

BC Transit offers online transit education resources for younger youth, including videos about safety at transit waiting areas and while travelling on transit: busready.bctransit.com/.

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