
Measuring the Impact of Transit Benefits on Ridership in King County



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Introduction

The greater Seattle-King County region has a broad system of public transit options ranging from nearly 200 bus routes, two link-light rail lines, two water taxis, and streetcars. Between King County Metro and Sound Transit, the system connects hundreds of thousands of riders daily to activities and jobs. However, despite the growing system, Seattle does not break into the top 20 cities with the highest transit ridership per capita. In cities like New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., well over a quarter of daily commuters use public transit, while in 2024, just 15% of Seattle commuters used it.

Ridership in Seattle-King County was significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, dropping by more than half from 382,396 average daily riders in 2019 to only 184,715 in 2020.¹ The decline continued in 2021, but in 2022 and onward, ridership has been increasing slightly each year. As of 2025, ridership is still down by about 100,000 daily riders from its 2019 peak.

In mid-2025, the Transit Riders Union (TRU) secured a one-time \$35,000 grant from the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) through its partnership with Front and Centered, a diverse and powerful coalition of communities of color-led groups across Washington State who come together to advance equity, climate justice, and environmental justice. TRU was awarded the grant to complete a rider-centered survey project that assessed how transit benefits align with city and regional priorities: improving transit affordability, safety, and service reliability, while building leadership capacity among riders.

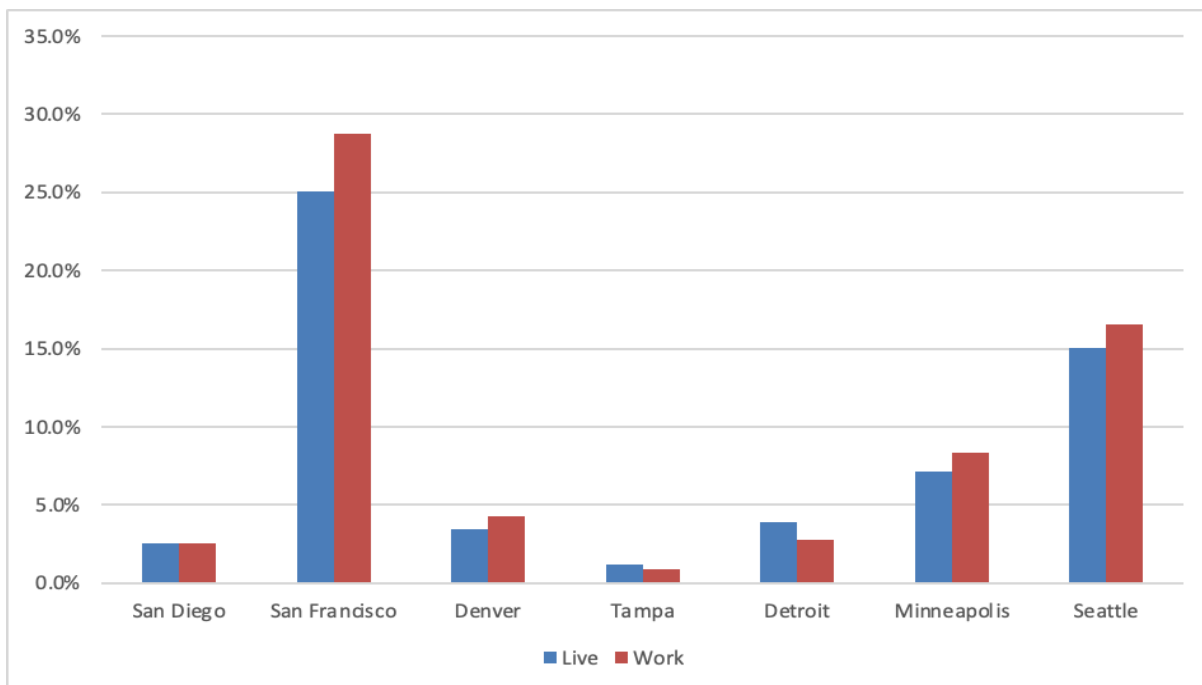
TRU's project was, and remains, critical due to several considerations impacting transit ridership and access. At the time, King County Metro had started its process of making critical decisions about its fare structure and payment systems through its Fares Forward Initiative. Second, since the COVID-19 pandemic, while many higher-paid workers are still working from home, lower-paid "essential workers" still have to get to work at grocery stores, hospitals, hotels, retail, and other vital community hubs. Finally, Seattle was partnering, and continues to partner, with affordable housing providers to subsidize ORCA passes for some of their residents. Thus, the survey project completed during the summer of 2025 was designed to document how fare policy, employer commuter benefits, and subsidized ORCA programs affect travel behavior for lower-income workers, essential workers, and residents of subsidized housing. TRU targeted two priority groups: (1) workers who may or may not receive employer-paid transit passes, and (2) affordable-housing residents who may or may not receive subsidized ORCA passes.

¹ King County Metro. [\[link\]](#)

Transit Benefits in the Workplace

Seattle has a strong culture of commuters using public transportation. Despite a steep decline in commuter use since 2020 and the subsequent rise of working from home, Seattle trailed only San Francisco in share of riders commuting by transit for similar sized cities in 2024 (ACS, 2024). Those who work in Seattle are moderately more likely to use transit to get to work than those who live in Seattle (many of those who work in Seattle also live in Seattle, and are part of both samples).

Figure 1. Commuters Using Transit, Primary Cities in Seattle-sized Metro Areas, 2024



Source: US Census Bureau, ACS Table S0802 and B08406

While there are many reasons for this, Washington's Commute Trip Reduction Act is one aspect of it. The act requires large employers in certain counties - including Seattle's King County - to take action to reduce the number of single-occupancy vehicles on the roads at peak hours.² One way that employers can meet Commute Trip Reduction requirements is by providing employees with transit passes. The ORCA Business Passport Program, available to all companies who employ at least five people, offers all-access transit passes at a steep discount depending on employer location. This rate ranges from \$37.80 per employee per year in the Snohomish County suburbs to \$405.72 per employee per year in Seattle's central business district.³ If an employee receives an unlimited ORCA card as a benefit from their employer, their usage is not limited to commute hours only.

² King County Metro [\[link\]](#)

³ King County Metro [\[link\]](#)

Having access to high-quality transit is correlated with improved quality of life.⁴ It is also associated with reduced CO2 emissions, with studies indicating that a public transit ride saves about 2/3 of emissions compared to an automobile over the same distance.⁵ Programs like the ORCA Business Passport and the low-income ORCA LIFT program, which offers steep fare reductions for those who qualify, help improve access to transit by reducing economic barriers to use.

- 36.8% (98 of 266) of respondents in our survey indicated that they receive some amount of employer transit benefit.
- 25.9% (69 of 266) of respondents indicated that they have an unlimited ORCA card.
- 19.8% (93 of 473) of respondents reported earning \$30,000 or less, approximately the maximum amount a single-person household can earn and receive ORCA Lift benefits.

⁴ Mattson, et. al. (2021). *Transportation, community quality of life, and life satisfaction in metro and non-metro areas of the United States*. [\[link\]](#)

⁵ Welle, et. al. (2023). *Post-Pandemic, Public Transport Needs to Get Back on Track to Meet Global Climate Goals*. [\[link\]](#)

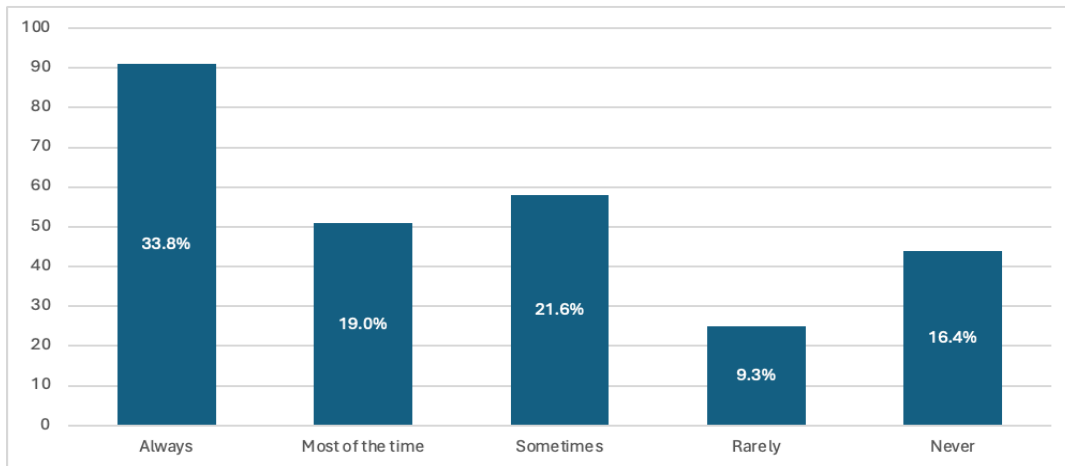
Survey collection and results

The transit benefits survey was collected mostly online, with some in-person surveys conducted near transit hubs. For the online survey, posters were made and posted at a variety of transit stations, housing buildings, and other high traffic community locations. TRU and other related partners sent out social media posts as well.

Results

The survey itself received 487 responses. Of these, 269 responded to the question of how often they ride public transit, which is the primary point of analysis. The distribution of frequency of riding public transportation to work is shown in Figure 2. 52.8% of respondents take public transportation to work at least most of the time, while 25.7% take it rarely or never.

Figure 2: Frequency of Transit Use to Work, Population Surveyed



Source: TRU Transit Commute Survey

Respondent results vary a great deal by income. Those surveyed who earn less than \$30,000 per year take transit the most often, followed closely by those who earn between \$30,000 and \$60,000 per year. Commute preference falls off noticeably for those who earn more than \$60,000 per year. Those who make over \$100,000 per year are most likely to never or rarely use public transit to get to work.

Figure 3: Distribution of Transit Commute Preference by Income, Surveyed Population

	Under \$30,000	\$30,001–60,000	\$60,001–100,000	Over \$100,000
Always	42.2%	38.9%	20.0%	28.6%
Most of the time	20.3%	18.9%	26.0%	12.5%
Sometimes	17.2%	23.2%	28.0%	19.6%
Rarely	3.1%	5.3%	12.0%	19.6%
Never	17.2%	13.7%	14.0%	19.6%

Source: TRU Transit Commute Survey

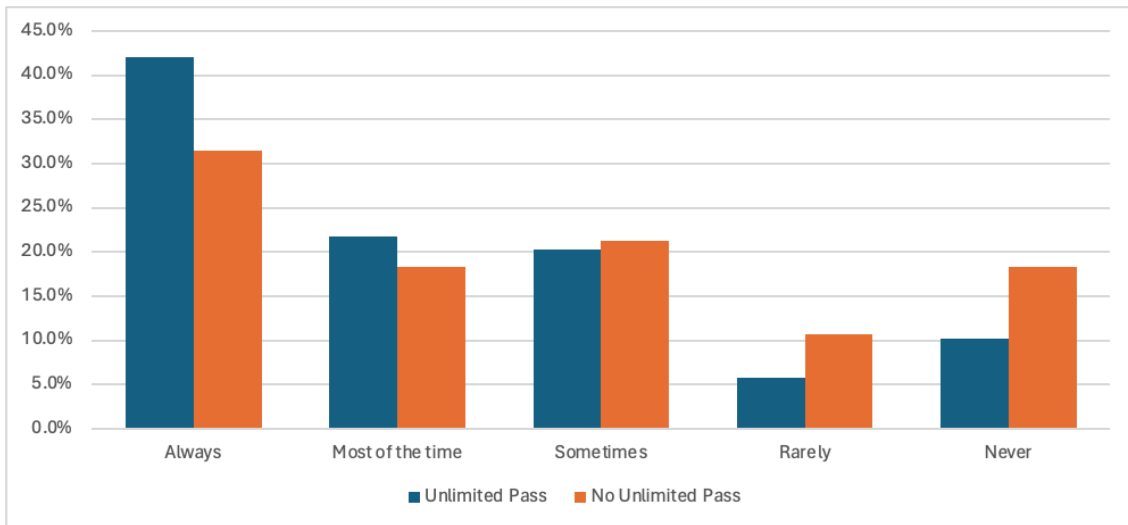
There are only small differences between those who earn under \$30,000 and those who earn between \$30,000 and \$60,000. \$30,000 per year is also the approximate cut-off where a single-person household is no longer eligible for the ORCA Lift program, the eligibility for which is set at 200% of the Federal Poverty Level.

For those who earn more than \$100,000 per year, there is a larger portion of riders who always use transit than for those who earn between \$60,000 and \$100,000 per year. This suggests that the type of jobs easily accessible on public transportation are somewhat likely to be higher paying, which matches with Seattle’s downtown core being the most transit-accessible part of the city and region, as well as an area with a high concentration of higher paying jobs. In the middle of the income range (\$60,000 to \$100,000), jobs are likely to be more widely dispersed geographically, which can make transit use more difficult. At the lower end of the income range, respondents are much more likely to use transit to get to work, but are also more likely to report longer travel times. 34.7% of respondents earning \$30,000 or less report travel times over 45 minutes compared to 26.0% of those earning \$100,000 or more. This indicates that lower income respondents are transit reliant, as they endure longer travel times, and that they likely have no other option.

Impact of Work-Provided ORCA Passes on Ridership

Unlimited ORCA passes certainly impact the likelihood of ridership for commuters. About 65% of commuters who had an unlimited ORCA pass used transit for their commute most of the time or always, compared to under 50% of those without. Only 10% of individuals with unlimited passes never used transit to commute, compared to nearly double that for individuals without.

Figure 4: Transit Commute Preference, Unlimited Pass versus No Unlimited Pass



Source: TRU Transit Commute Survey

Apart from the quantitative measures, respondents who received workplace ORCA benefits shared personal experiences with the card. 70 people mentioned that having an unlimited pass eased their financial worries.

"I never have to second guess taking public transit. It removes a lot of stress knowing I can always get on the bus or train without thinking about fares."

Lou, renter and union organizer

"Having an unlimited ORCA pass has been an absolute game changer! I am way more willing to take transit and it makes it way less stressful - I don't have to think about the cost every time I ride transit because it's free!"

Sam, homeowner and nonprofit employee

Additionally, another 40 respondents said that having a work-provided ORCA pass has encouraged them to ride transit more often for recreation as well. Many people discussed their increased use of transit for weekend activities, visiting friends, going to appointments, running errands, and many other daily activities.

"It motivates me to take the bus to concerts [and] events when I know I won't have to pay, it makes taking the bus or light rail to work an easy option, it allows me to take fast ferries to visit friends on Vashon or get to a work event in Bremerton. It makes getting to the airport a breeze when I can take lightrail."

Anonymous, renter and government employee

“Having an unlimited ORCA pass allows me to do EVERYTHING I need to do: get to work, get to dr appointments, run errands, visit friends in other parts of the city, etc. If it weren't for the pass, I wouldn't be able to do as much on my own without spending a lot more money.”

Michael, homeowner and UW employee

Of the respondents who did not receive workplace transit benefits, 89% said they would commute more by public transit if they did. Additionally, over 50% said they would use transit to get around outside of work if they had an unlimited ORCA pass.

Barriers to Commuting on Public Transit

Of the 487 survey respondents, only 7% said that they drive most of the time or always, but over 40% drive occasionally. This sample provides an opportunity to analyze the major barriers to transit usage. Across all respondents who ever drive to work, for the vast majority (69%), something related to transit service was the primary barrier. The top three specific barriers were

1. Transit is too slow compared to driving
2. The routes don't serve their commute locations
3. Service is too infrequent

Respondents cited several issues such as the time waiting for multiple transfers, the inconsistency of bus schedules, and routes with 20 to 30 minute wait times between services.

“I do not use public transit as often as I'd like because the bus line from home to work is too inconsistent to ensure that I always get to work on time; buses often arrive 10-15+ minutes off of schedule, and regularly not at all. If the buses were to arrive more frequently, I would be able to rely on them to commute to work every day.”

Anonymous, renter and student

Conclusion & Recommendations

While work-provided benefits are not a panacea to improving transit ridership, they do have a positive relationship with transit ridership. Because of this, making it easier for businesses to provide employees with transit benefits, and removing any existing loopholes in the system which prevent them from doing so should be a policy priority. The current Business Passport Program works well when transit riders have access to the benefits.

Recommendation 1: Non-employment Passport Program opportunities

However, tying lower-cost transit access to employment has its limitations. As employers who provide transit benefits often offer higher salaries, the people who receive these benefits are frequently higher income. This leaves a gap for workers who earn too much to qualify for the ORCA LIFT program, but whose primary earnings come from part-time work, gig work, or from a full-time job with no transit benefits.

At \$108 per month (\$1,296 per year), the cost of an unlimited transit pass is a significant burden for many Seattle area residents already squeezed by some of the highest costs of living in the nation. It is also important to note that this is more than *25 times* the cost of the most expensive street parking permit in Seattle (\$96/two years). Creating opportunities for individuals or community groups to buy yearly passes at a discount could help alleviate part of this burden and would align with city and regional goals around expanding affordable access to transit.⁶

Recommendation 2: Expand the ORCA LIFT program

For those surveyed for this report, transit ridership to work had no significant difference between those earning less than \$30,000 per year and those earning \$30,001 to \$60,000 per year. This is despite the fact that based on current eligibility requirements for ORCA LIFT, all of the former are eligible while few, if any, of the latter are. The current maximum income level of 200% of the Federal Poverty Level presents practical issues within a very high income region like Seattle. Just 13.4% of Seattle area residents earned that little income in 2024, the third-lowest of any large metropolitan area in the US, as shown in Appendix A.

Tying ORCA LIFT benefits to local wages such as area median income (AMI), rather than the Federal Poverty Level, would result in local and regional agencies providing low-income fares that match the needs of people in the region. Since riders identified the cost of transit as a major benefit to employer-provided cards in this report, expanding access to lower fares (not tied to employment) for more residents should be a policy priority moving forward. Our preliminary recommendation based on the findings in this report would be to align the program with many of the city's

⁶ City of Seattle. [\[link\]](#)

affordable housing programs and offer it to all individuals making under 80% of the AMI (\$84,850 per year for a single person household).⁷ Additionally, expanding the Annual Subsidized Pass program to all who make under 30% AMI would reduce administrative burden and eligibility gaps for the most low income residents in the region. This would make between 300,000 to 400,000 households newly eligible for ORCA LIFT (Estimated from S1901).

Additional, service-related recommendations

As our survey showed, a primary reason for the lack of ridership is convenience. Thus, we recommend investing in overall transit systemwide improvements, particularly those that would improve ridership experience. Directing the revenue generated from our other recommendations toward systemwide improvements ensures that investments in one part of the network multiply benefits across the region. Funds generated should be used to expand service frequency and hours, increase route options, and the placement of dedicated bus lanes. They will produce immediate, tangible improvements in convenience for riders. Moreover, higher service quality attracts more riders, which in turn will stabilize revenue and allows for further reinvestment.

Increase service frequency

Increasing service frequency is a critical step to making transit useful and reliable for more people. Frequent service, during peak daytime, as well as evening and nighttime, hours reduces wait times and increases the perceived convenience of transit versus driving. Metro, SDOT, and Sound Transit should set and fund frequency targets for core corridors and protect those frequencies through operational priorities like bus lanes and signal priority. To sustain higher frequency, revenue should cover both additional operating costs and contingency reserves to avoid service levels being cut during downturns.

Expanded route options

We also recommend expanding and diversifying route options. That includes a clear structure of routes—express lines, frequent local routes, crosstown connectors, and neighborhood feeders, so riders can easily understand and consistently rely on the network. As part of these improvements, planning and implementation should include community-driven design, travel pattern data, and equity analyses to ensure that new routes respond to actual ridership needs and preferences.

Bus lanes

Finally, we recommend investing in protected, well-enforced bus lanes, which are critical to making buses fast, reliable, safe, and competitive with private cars. Dedicated lanes when paired with transit signal priority, curb management, and consistent enforcement cut travel times and reduce schedule variability, which in turn improves on-time performance and rider convenience. To maximize impact, bus lanes must be integrated into broader street design that balances freight,

⁷ Seattle Housing Authority. [\[link\]](#)

bike, and pedestrian needs, and agencies should monitor outcomes and adjust lane hours or routes based on measured performance and community feedback.

Conclusion: Why We Invest in Transit

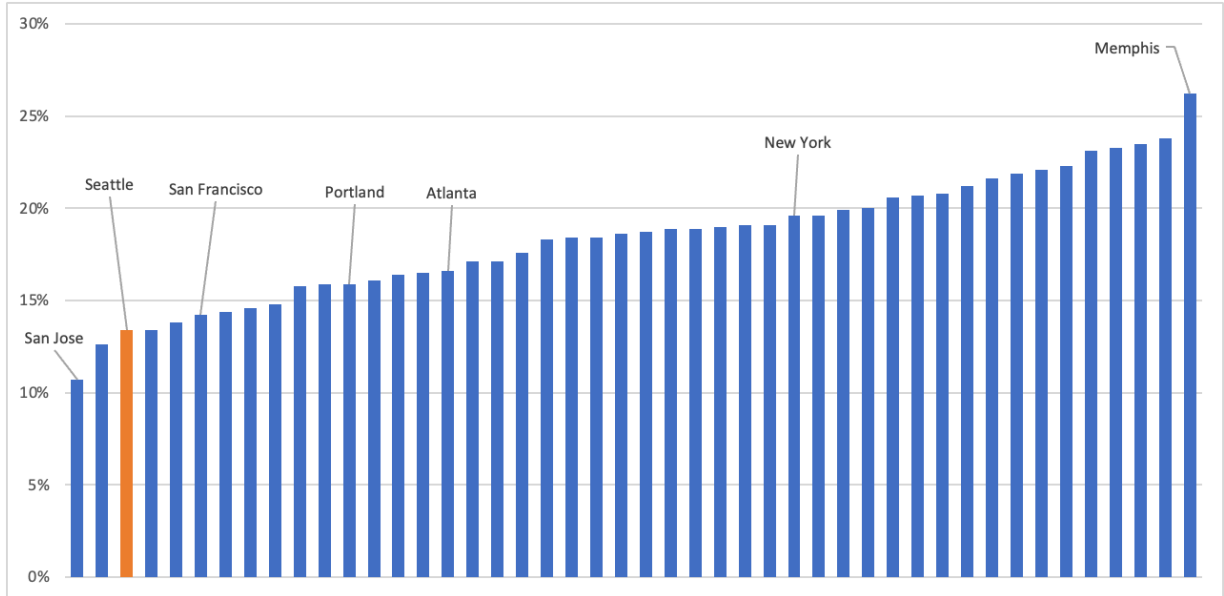
Transit is essential for low-income residents to access healthcare, participate in the workforce, and support local economies. Furthermore, numerous Seattle-area transit riders cite improved quality of life when compared with driving private vehicles or utilizing rideshares. It expands mobility for riders of all income levels, transit access aligns with climate change mitigating goals, and prevents an increase of vehicles on King County's already over-burdened roads.

While there are documented disincentives for transit ridership, especially for those with higher incomes, these disincentives may wane when we invest in transit infrastructure and operating dollars, resulting in additional service hours and ongoing maintenance through initiatives such as the 2026 Seattle Transit Measure (STM). This measure aims to subsidize annual passes for 12,000+ low-income Seattle Housing Authority residents. However, the STM is limited in scope, and future ongoing policy work is necessary to further incentivize employer use of the ORCA Business Passport program.

Continued transit subsidies made available to more of Seattle's low- and moderate-income residents will provide better access to Seattle's public transportation network for those who need it most. Above all else, Seattleites of all incomes - but especially those with low incomes - deserve public transportation that gets them where they need to go.

Appendix A

Figure 5: Percentage of Households Earning Less than \$35,000 per year in Large Metropolitan Areas, 2024



Source: US Census Bureau, [ACS Table S1901](#)