

# IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON SASKATOON TRANSIT

## BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on public transit in Saskatoon. Transit service was altered to adapt to the change in demand and increase in safety measures of the pandemic. There was a reduction in public transit use by almost half in 2020, a stark departure from 2019 which marked the highest transit use in 30 years. A large percentage of transit ridership was lost as a result of the pandemic – stay at home orders meant many people did not need transportation and some users had concerns over contracting COVID-19 while using transit.

INTERACT collected wave 2 data from 265 adults in Saskatoon, between September 2020 and February 2021. Questions on the impacts of COVID-19 were included in the questionnaire.

## INTERVENTIONS TO FACILITATE MOBILITY DURING COVID-19 RANKED FROM MOST TO LEAST EFFECTIVE

- 1 Reduced capacity on buses
- 2 Back door loading / no fares collected
- 3 Public paid parking not enforced
- 4 Extra buses on busy routes
- 5 Changes in routes / schedules

## IMPACTS

**COVID-19 was the primary reason for participants using public transit less in 2020.** During the most strict COVID-19 health measures, 72% of participants used public transit less in a typical week, compared to the fall-winter 2020-2021.

The most important reason for participants using public transit less during COVID-19 lockdowns was from contracting COVID-19 (feeling unsafe). Respondents indicated that the other top reasons for using public transit less was that it was not necessary to access end destinations or because a car was used instead.

**Contracting COVID-19 and using the bus late at night made respondents feel the least safe when using public transit.**

Participants compared a handful of risks associated with public transit use. Situations that were deemed safer or less risky include: waiting for the bus at bus shelters, physical safety from other riders on the bus, and being involved in a collision while riding the bus.

**COVID-19 concerns remain the primary limiting factor of using public transit.**

Concern over contracting COVID-19 remained an important safety risk according to respondents, even in the less restricted phase of the pandemic.

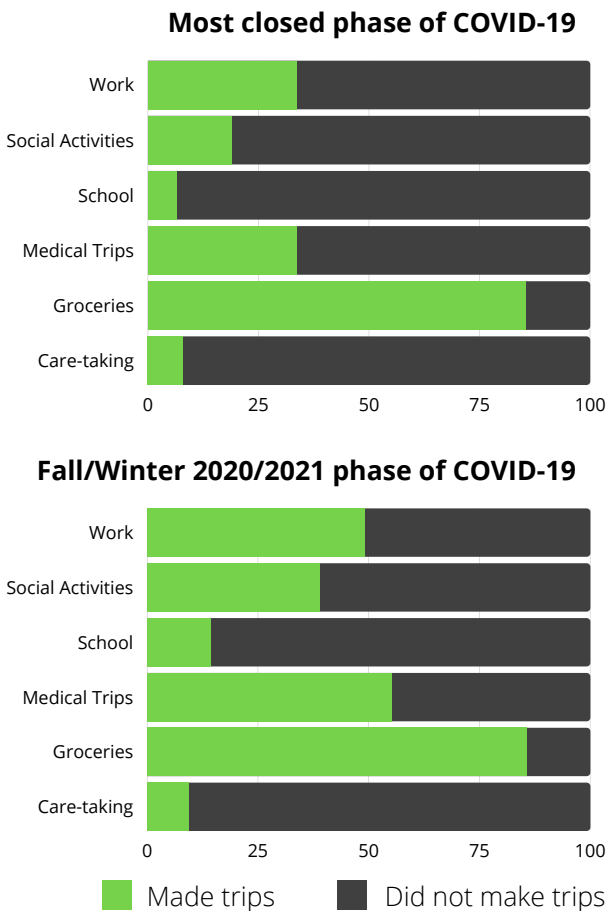
**Saskatoon Transit on the right track.**

Almost half (48%) of participants were satisfied with Saskatoon Transit's response to the lockdown. 40% of participants felt neutral, and only 12% were dissatisfied with Saskatoon Transit's response to the lockdown.

**Committed transit users:** Those who enjoy transit really enjoy it. For those who reported using transit more in the fall/winter 2020-2021, it was because they preferred transit over any other mode of transportation.

## TRIP MOTIVATION

The following two graphs compare the types of activities for which participants reported making trips (green) or not making trips (black) during the most closed phase of the COVID-19 lockdown, and in the fall/winter 2020/2021 phase of COVID-19.



From the most closed phase of COVID-19 to fall/winter 2020-2021 in Saskatoon, the overall number of trips have increased. Trip types that have increased the most include work, medical trips, and social activities. Care taking and grocery trips remained consistent throughout, and trips for school increased only slightly.

## MOVING FORWARD

**Slow increase in public transit use with easing pandemic context.** During the height of the COVID-19 lockdown only 1% of respondents were using public transit more in a typical week than they did prior to the pandemic. In fall/winter 2020-2021, 8% of respondents are using public transit more than they did prior to the pandemic. With over half (54%) of participants reporting that they enjoyed using public transit prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is the potential for a return to historical bus ridership rates in Saskatoon. The rate of increasing ridership will be influenced by factors largely outside of Saskatoon Transit’s powers, such as changes in commuting patterns, rates of telework and unemployment, and school attendance ([Harris & Branion-Calles, 2021](#)).

### Active transportation can complement transit use beyond the pandemic.

Approximately 13% of respondents told INTERACT that their alternative to transit was some form of active transportation. Rather than a threat, the rise of active transportation can be symbiotic for Saskatoon Transit, and represent an opportunity to attract more occasional riders.

Past research has shown that transit operates most effectively when it is well connected to walking and cycling facilities. A high-quality active transportation network around transit stations can maximize transit investments.

In terms of health outcomes, [Brondeel et al \(2017\)](#) have shown that structural transit interventions (e.g., expanding or adding transit lines) could result in a mode shift from private motorized modes to more active modes (i.e., walking, biking, and public transit) that increase overall transport-related physical activity.



The INTERventions, Research, and Action in Cities Team (INTERACT) is a pan-Canadian collaboration of scientists, urban planners, and citizens uncovering the impact of urban changes on health and equity.