

More Places, Better Connections:

Transit Priorities for Residents of South Seattle and South King County

June 2020

INTRODUCTION

This report, and the research findings behind it, provides evidence for planning regional transportation based on the idea of community-centered mobility. By community-centered mobility, we mean prioritizing transportation solutions for people with the least options and most barriers to mobility. It means both communities as a place, such as concentrations of low-income households, and as groups that face common barriers, such as people with disabilities. Community-centered mobility is a key that unlocks the promise of public transit, and transportation planning in general, to create a sustainable region.

As a region, we are investing billions of dollars in public transit infrastructure over the next thirty years as a strategy to reduce carbon emissions, sustain our economy, and connect people to vital services and opportunity. We argue that the most effective way to maximize our public investment in transportation is to center racial equity and ensure that Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), people with low-incomes, and people with disabilities are the most direct beneficiaries of these investments. Our current public transit system does not meet the needs of these communities in our region. Often, transit planning focuses on maximizing ridership by connecting dense urban areas, where many people may already have other transportation options. In contrast to catering to riders with many options, centering mobility solutions for those with the greatest barriers to getting where they need to go, we'll actually create a public transportation system that works for everyone.

While our research was completed long before COVID-19, this public health crisis has amplified the findings and principles of our research. More than ever, we depend on the essential services provided by frontline workers, people who educate our children, provide child care, clean our hospitals and office buildings, who transport our goods, and stock the grocery stores, many of whom rely on public transit to get to work. A recent CityLab article explains, “the goal of transit, right now, is neither competing for riders nor providing a social service for those in need. It is helping prevent the collapse of civilization.” What’s more, the article notes, “transit has always been doing that. Those ‘essential service’ workers, who are overwhelmingly low-income, have always been there, moving around quietly in our transit systems, keeping our cities functioning.”¹ We need a public transit system that functions best for those who are the backbone of our society and economy and have the fewest choices when commuting.

Widespread, accessible, and affordable public transportation also has the power to remedy historic inequities. According to a 2015 article in The Atlantic, “access to just about everything associated with upward mobility and economic progress—jobs, quality food, and goods (at reasonable prices), healthcare, and schooling—relies on the ability to get around in an efficient way, and for an affordable price.”²

The underlying study referenced in that article

¹ Walker, Jarrett. 2020. “In a Pandemic, We’re All ‘Transit Dependent.’”

<https://www.citylab.com/perspective/2020/04/coronavirus-public-transit-subway-bus-ridership-revenue/609556/>

² White, Gillian. 2015. “Stranded: How America’s Failing Public Transportation System Increase Inequality.” <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/05/stranded-how-americas-failing-public-transportation-increases-inequality/393419/>

identifies access to transportation as the most significant indicator of social and economic mobility, but if transit doesn't actually take people to where they need to go in a timely, safe, reliable way then transportation is not actually supporting a path to opportunity.³

And, as displacement pressures intensify in our region and push those most dependent on transit away from transit rich areas, we continue to actively undermine the ability of people of color, people with disabilities, and low-income people to access the jobs, services, and education that define those opportunities.

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To actually deliver community-centered mobility, those most reliant on public transportation - and with the fewest transportation choices - must drive decision-making around transit service and affordability. We surveyed people with the greatest barriers to getting where they need to go—low-income people, people of color, people with disabilities—to better understand how to address their mobility needs.

Throughout the fall of 2018 we partnered with five community-based organization in Seattle and South King County to better understand mobility and transportation priorities through a survey of their members. Their members are predominately Black, Native, people of color, low-income, immigrants and refugees, which are typically not the focus of transportation surveys. Over the course of four months our partners collected 532 surveys. Here are our results.

WHO TOOK THE SURVEY

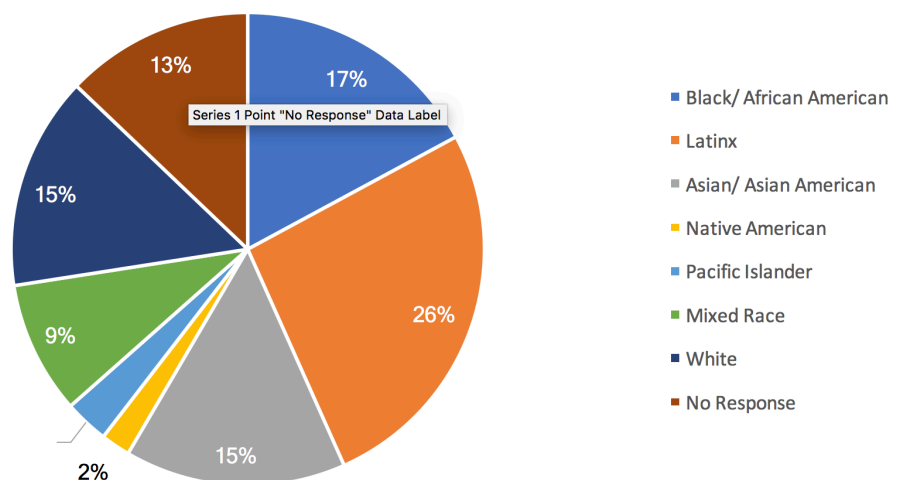
A total of 532 people responded to the survey. Be-

low we show that we reached people of color, people with disabilities, people with low-income, and people who are likely immigrants or refugees in proportions higher than reflected in the population of King County. We also identified that all of these characteristics correlate to higher than average transit use.

Overall, 84% of respondents identify as people of color. Further breakdown of race/ ethnicity of respondents shows one quarter identify as Latinx, 17% as Black or African American, 15% as Asian or Asian American, and 15% White. Only 2% of respondents identify as Native American (Figure 1). Of the respondents identifying as a person of color, close to half use transit as their main mode, more than 40% report living outside Seattle, and 20% have a commute longer than an hour (Figure 2).

Nearly half of all respondents speak a language other than English at home, with more than 30 different languages reported in the survey. Of languages other than English, Spanish was the most reported at 20% and the combination of Asian languages accounted for 17%, including Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Cham, Korean, Toisanese, and Cambodian. African languages account for 6%, including Oromo, Amharic, Swahili, Igbo, and Somali. Pacific Islander languages included Tongan, Palau, Tagalog, and Samoan. Of respondents who speak a language other than English at

Figure 1: Race/ Ethnicity of Respondents



³ Bouchard, Mikayla. 2015. "Transportation Emerges as Crucial to Escaping Poverty." Accessed: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/07/upshot/transportation-emerges-as-crucial-to-escaping-poverty.html>

Figure 2: Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	% who use transit as their only mode of transportation	% who live outside Seattle	% who commute longer than 60 minutes
People of Color	48%	42%	20%
Use Public Assistance	45%	36%	30%
Have a Disability	54%	45%	33%
Speak language other than English at Home	50%	33%	25%

home, half reported using transit-only modes to get to their main destination, one-third reported living outside of Seattle, and one-quarter had a commute longer than 60 minutes (Figure 2).

Fifty-seven survey respondents (about 10% of our pool) report having an accessibility need, and of those, over 50% also identified as a person of color. More than half of respondents with a disability use transit as their main mode, 45% report living outside the Seattle City Limits, and one third report having a commute longer than 60 minutes (Figure 2). Nearly 80% report leaving home outside of normal commute times.

To identify households facing economic hardship, we asked respondents if they received any kind of public assistance, to which 30% responded that they did. However, we suspect this statistic undercounts the number of people we surveyed who experience economic hardship. In retrospect, we realized that many respondents were either not comfortable identifying that they receive public assistance or understood the question differently than we intended. For this reason, we do not report results by income in the report. That said, given who we surveyed and how we reached them, we believe that the proportion of low-income people in our survey sample is fairly high. Looking exclusively at respondents who did report using public assistance, close to half use transit as their main mode, more than one third live outside Seattle, and 30% have a commute longer than an hour (Figure 2).

BASIC FINDINGS

MODE OF TRANSPORTATION

In our survey, we asked respondents to identify the transportation mode(s) they use to get to their most frequent destination. Most people report using a car—either as a driver or passenger—or taking the bus as their main modes of travel (Figure 3). Many people indicated that they use several modes in a given trip to get to their destination. For example, a respondent may bike to the bus, or walk to the LINK light rail, or use modes depending on circumstance, such as taking the bus some days and driving personal vehicle other days.

TRANSIT ONLY:

Taking a deeper look at respondents who reported using transit modes only, 80% identify as people of color and 64% report speaking a language other than English at home. Nearly 70% of transit-only respondents report living outside of the Seattle City limits. More than 25% report having a commute longer than 60 minutes. Nearly 60% of transit-only respondents report leaving home for their most frequented destinations outside of normal commute hours. Longer and reverse or off hours commutes in addition to a wider geographic spread hint that the transit-only respondents of this survey are core riders who have no other reliable transportation riders.

⁴ Downtown Seattle zip codes include downtown Seattle and other highly accessible central neighborhoods: 98101, 98102, 98104, 98105, 98109, 98119, 98121, 98122, 98134, 98103

ORIGIN/DESTINATION:

Transit planning and service in King County largely reflects a hub and spoke model, which connects suburban transit centers and neighborhood arterials directly to the major employment hub of downtown Seattle. However, our respondents show a different pattern of travel to their main destinations.

Overall, 73% of respondents commute to a destination outside downtown Seattle⁴. 40% of these respondents use transit-only modes to get to their main destination.

Two in five (40%) of all respondents live outside

of Seattle, the vast majority (80%) of whom report commuting to a destination outside of downtown Seattle (Figure 4). Half (50%) of the total respondents who live outside Seattle also use transit-only modes to travel to their main destination.

And even for the 60% of respondents who live within Seattle zip-code, two-thirds (66%) percent report commuting to a destination outside of downtown Seattle (Figure 4).

The fact that there is a mis-match between our respondent’s commute patterns and the design of our regional transit system may not be a surprise for transportation planners. Many planners assume

Figure 3: How Do People Get To Their Most Frequent Destinations? (n=530)

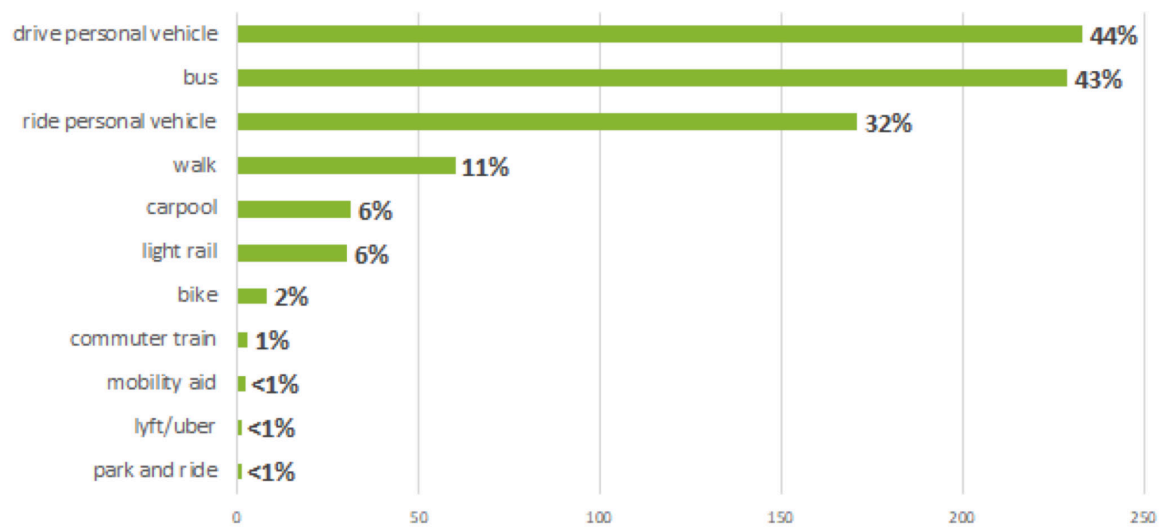
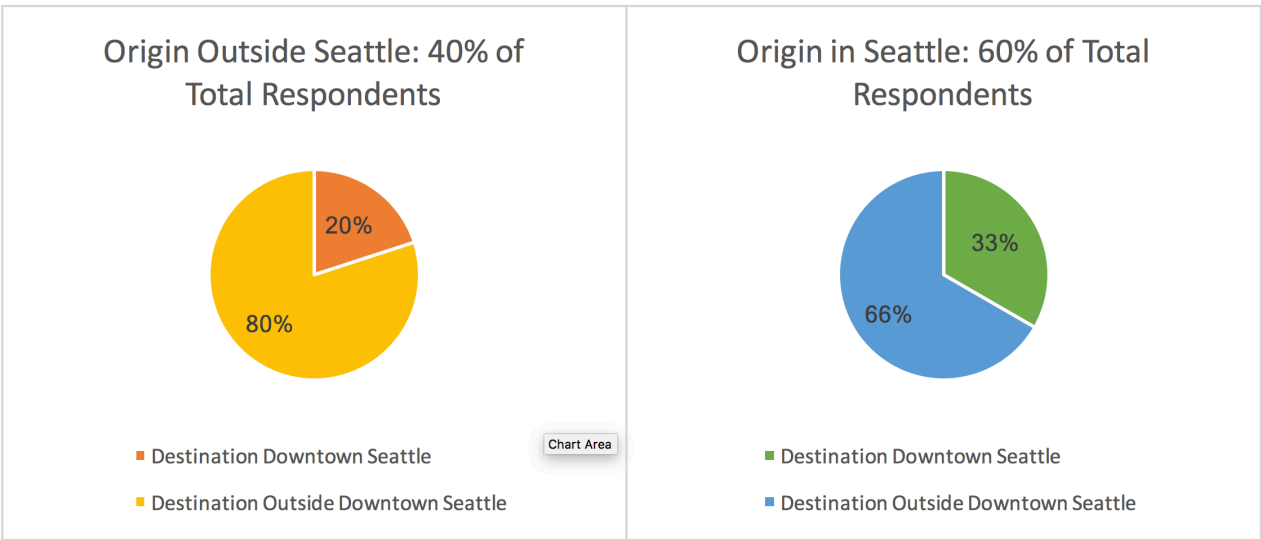


Figure 4: Origin Data



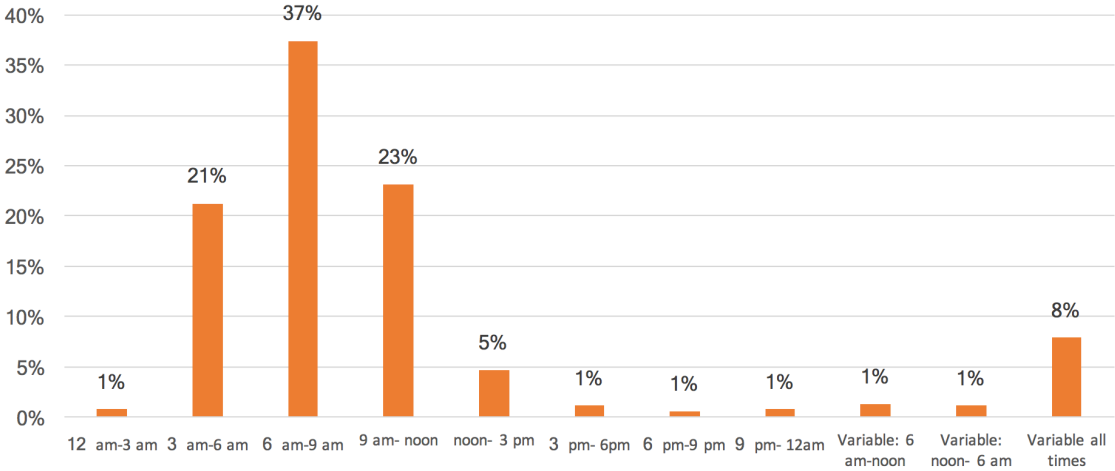
that people with fewer choices will just have to figure out how to make transit work for them, regardless of the tradeoffs they have to make. In the rest of this report, we explore the trade-offs our respondents are making and examine the other side of the coin –if transit service was designed around community mobility, would more people use it?

COMMUTE TIMES:

The time of day - when you need to make a given trip - can have a great impact on your mode choice, as well as travel times (due to congestion-related delay). This has to do with availability of traditional bus service, level of roads congestion, and comfort and safety conditions due to weather and darkness. Overall, our largely BIPOC respondents' schedules do not fit with traditional peak commute hours, which has implications for developing improved commute-related programming, bus service hours and safety measures for active travel.

Nearly 40% of respondents report leaving home to get to their most frequent destination outside of normal commute hours, meaning before 6 am and after 12 pm, or had variable schedules with more than one normal commute time (Figure 5). Currently, our transit system does not support convenient commuting during off-peak hours. In fact, we found that while respondents report taking the bus at all times of the day (Figure 6), it is proportionally - and absolutely - less during off-peak hours, pre-

Figure 5: When do You Leave Home?



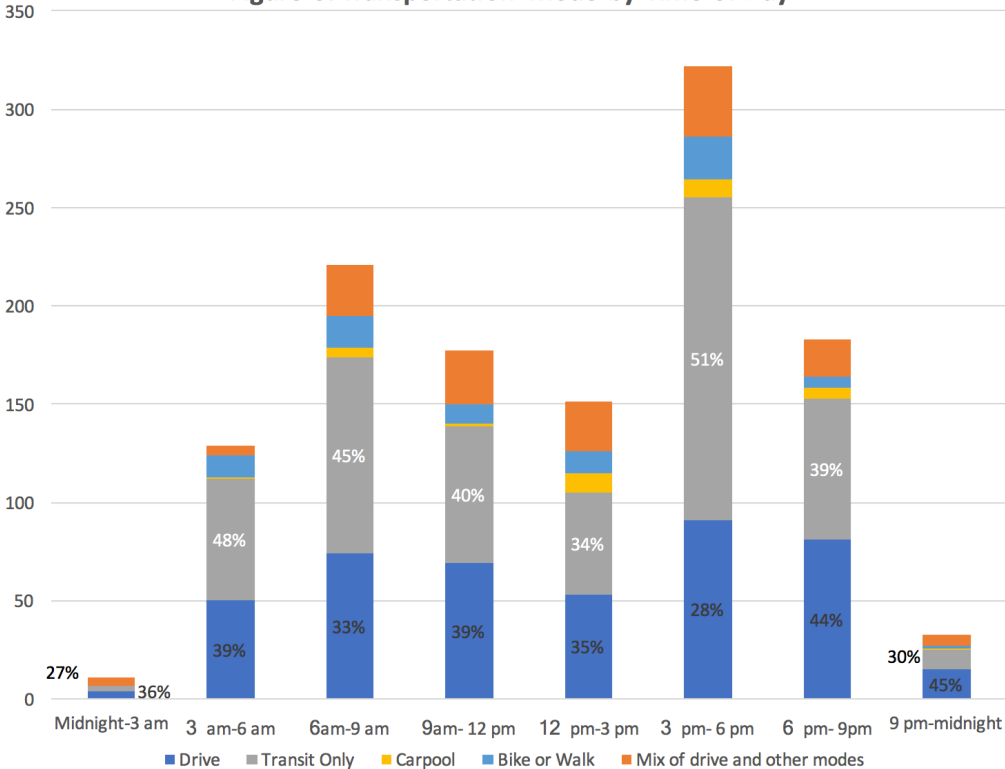
sumably since frequency drops during these times. During these off-peak commute times, cars were a much higher share of the mode split.

If we want to build a transit system for workers on the frontlines of crises, the caregivers, cleaners, grocery workers who keep our economy moving, we must prioritize service that meets their needs rather than service that caters to those with transportation options.

ACCESS TO TRANSIT

To better understand mobility concerns and barriers to riding transit, we asked participants a series

Figure 6: Transportation Mode by Time of Day



of questions about the proximity of their home to transit stops, transit reliability, transit timeliness, whether there are direct transit routes to destinations, and transit affordability. In other words, what factors determine the usability of our current transit system?

For this analysis we broke down the data by groups: people who don't speak English at home, people who only use transit for transportation, and people with accessibility needs. (Note that the groups overlap - that is, respondents can be part of several groups.) Across all groups, more than 60 percent of all respondents report living near a transit stop (Figure 7). Of respondents who report using only transit to get around, 90% said they live near a transit stop (Figure 8).

This data shows that proximity to transit was not a barrier for most respondents, compared to other

mobility concerns. However, as we explore further, just living close to a transit stop is not a sufficient measure of how well transit will work for people.

Generally, respondents report that transit takes them to their desired destination- but not in the most timely or reliable manner (Figure 9). This was true across all groups. For example, while more than most (64)% of respondents report living near a transit stop, only 29% and 38% of respondents feel that transit got them places on time and on a day-to-day basis, respectively.

This trend holds true across all survey respondents, but we should note that respondents who are 1) people of color, 2) have an accessibility need, 3) speak a language other than English at home, or 4) who use transit as their main mode of transportation were more likely to report that transit takes them where they need to go in a reliable and timely manner (Figure 10, Figure 11, Figure 12). For these

Figure 7: There is a Transit Stop Where I Live

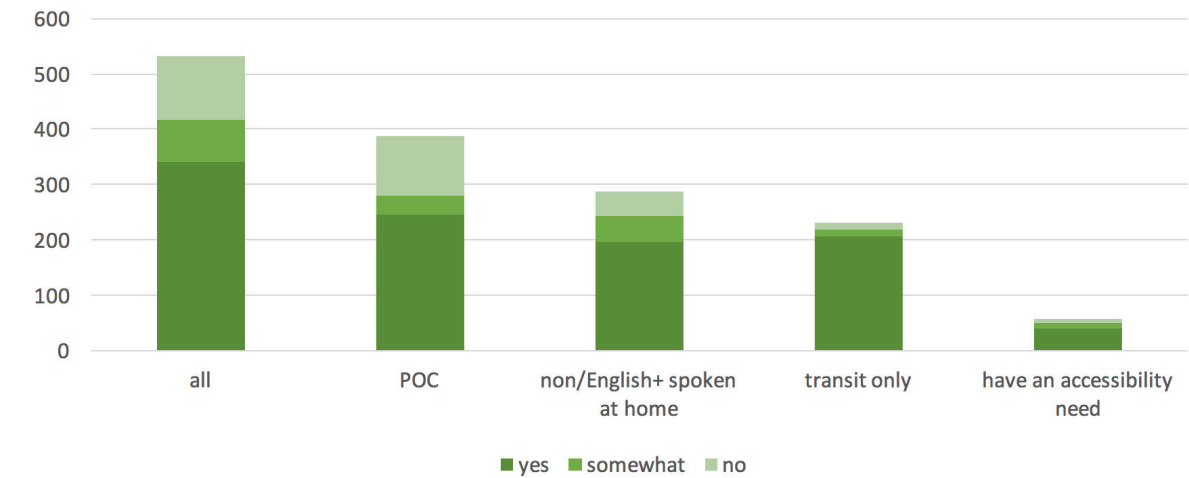


Figure 8: There is a Transit Stop Where I Live

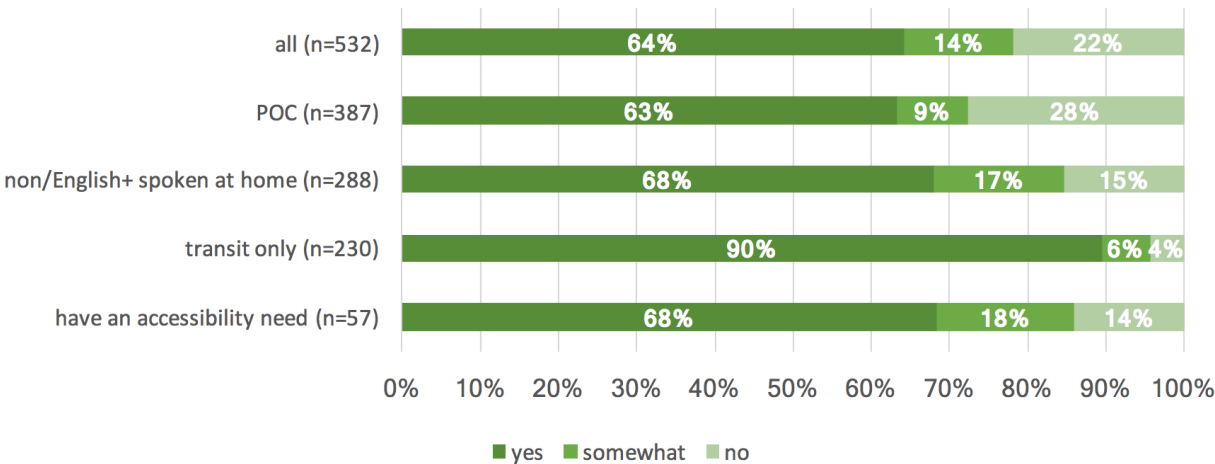


Figure 9: Access to Transit: Comparison of All Respondents

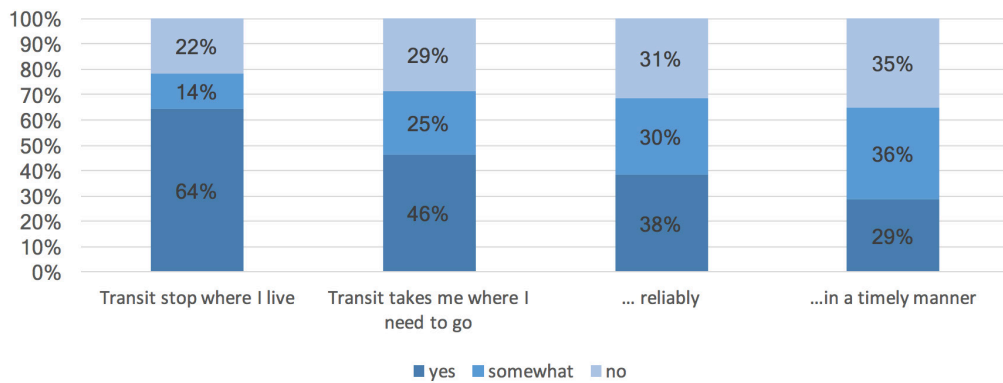


Figure 10: Transit Takes Me Where I Need to Go

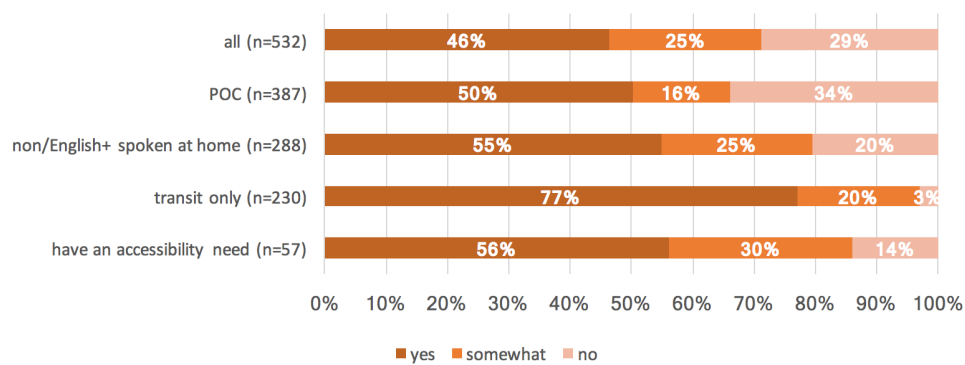


Figure 11: Transit Takes Me Where I Need to Go, *Reliably*

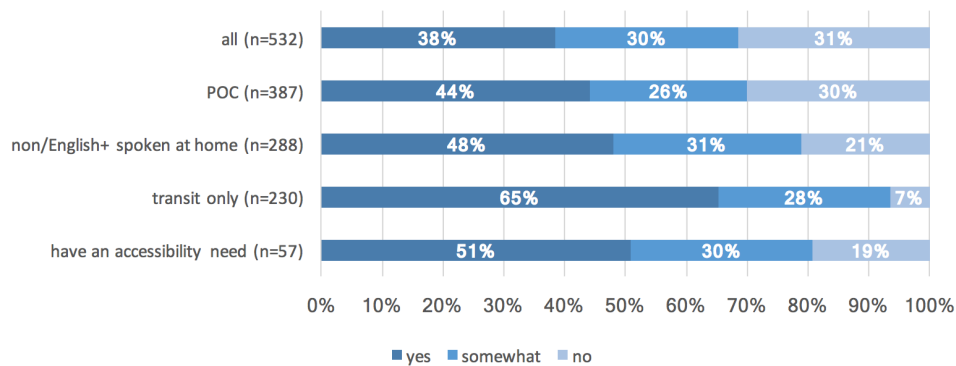


Figure 12: Transit Takes Me Where I Need to Go, *in a Timely Manner*

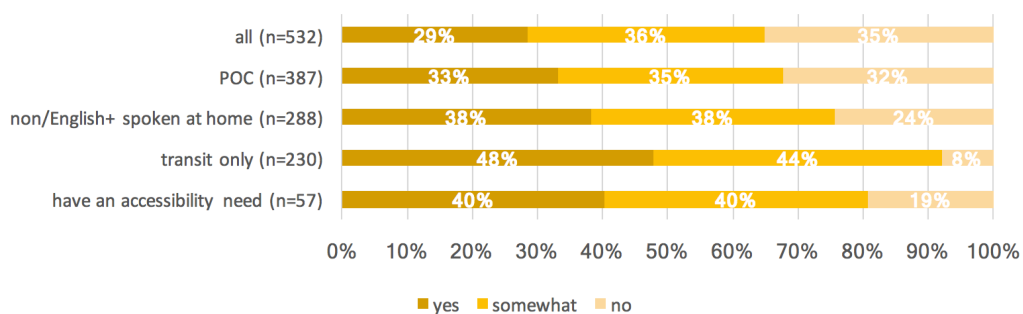
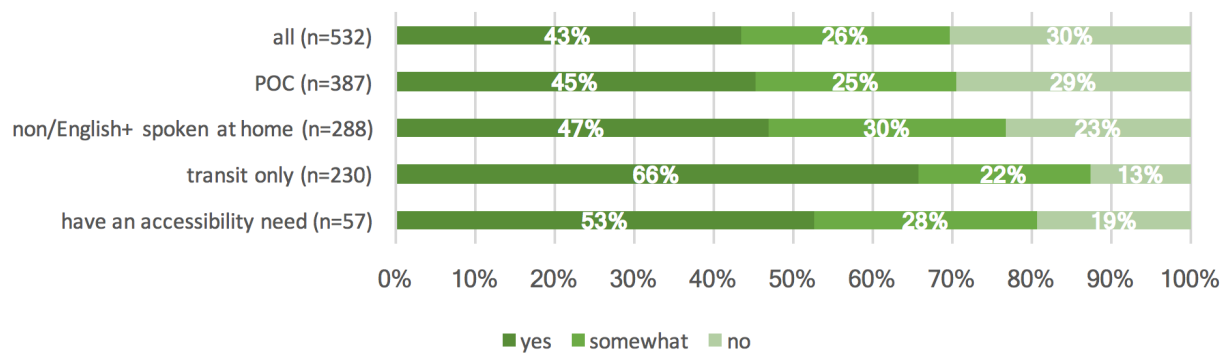


Figure 13: Riding Transit is Affordable



groups, and especially for those who are in the transit only group, there is likely a positive correlation between their perception of adequate service and their residence near high capacity transit stops.

In light of this, rising rents and broad desirability of living near high capacity transit threatens the ability of BIPOC, low-income people, and people with disabilities ability to access transit. Those who rely on transit will be pushed to neighborhoods with poor transit connectivity and prior research has shown that the residents who replace them actually drive more despite proximity to transit⁵. If we want to protect accessibility for those with the fewest choices, we must preserve and create new affordable equitable development opportunities near transit.

Another reason that transit only respondents may rate service as more reliable and timely than other respondents is simply that they have no other transportation options and have made choices about organizing their lives to make it work.

TRANSIT AFFORDABILITY

Across all groups, nearly 60% of respondents said transit was unaffordable or somewhat unaffordable. However, respondents with an accessibility need (53%) and transit-only respondents (66%) report that transit was more affordable than for other respondents (Figure 13). It is important to note that the transit-only group also reported the highest utilization of ORCA LIFT (58%), which could figure into this result (Figure 15). 75% of transit-only riders did not receive transit passes from employers (Figure 14). It is clear from our data that while many re-

spondents are benefitting from programs like ORCA LIFT, they are not able to reap the benefits of other subsidies either from their employer/ bulk purchasing or from purchasing a monthly pass. Even with ORCA LIFT subsidies, a majority of respondents felt that transit was not affordable.

Though we did not collect specific information on income, we can infer from use of public assistance and ORCA LIFT usage, that respondents are likely of lower incomes than the general County population. A large majority are not provided employer subsidized ORCA passes: fewer than 20% of respondents get those benefits. ORCA LIFT utilization for our sample, at 35-40%, is higher than ORCA LIFT regular usage in King County (approximately 6% according to King County Metro).⁶

Fewer than 30% of respondents pay for transit using a monthly ORCA pass (Figure 15), which can result in significant savings over paying fares as you go. Those who can't afford the upfront cost of a monthly pass will end up paying more if they take more than 36 rides per month. This points to a potential need for fare capping in which each single ride pays toward a monthly pass so riders who are unable to afford the upfront costs of a monthly pass receive the same benefits as those with monthly

⁵ Puget Sound Sage. "TOD That's Healthy, Green, and Just." 2012. <https://www.pugetsoundsage.org/research/research-equitable-development/healthy-green-just-tod/>

⁶ King County Metro "Income-based Fare Program Implementation Plan Attachment A." December 2019. Accessed: <https://mkkclegisearch.kingcounty.gov/LegislationDetail.aspx-?ID=4286505&GUID=6C4AE9B5-C48F-4E94-8C1B-BB5880617FF2&Options=&Search=>

passes.

WHAT WOULD HELP ME RIDE TRANSIT MORE?

Across all groups we identified as being most impacted by current mismatches with the transit system, respondents indicated three major priorities that would increase their use: reducing overall commute times (61%), investing in improvements that reduce the number of transfers or create a more direct route to most frequented destination (53%), and ensuring that the places people need to go, like work, childcare, healthcare, and groceries are, are co-located near transit (45%) (Figure 16).

People with accessibility needs also prioritized improved special access (Figure 17), and for those who only take transit to get around, affordable fares also ranked high (Figure 18).

The top priorities for improving our public transit

system are in some way connected to the length of time spent commuting, which relates back to the limited choices BIPOC households with low-incomes, and people with disabilities face in our transportation system. When multiple, unstable connections or lack of service all together make a transit commute impossible, people will take on the major expense of owning and maintaining a vehicle in order to get to their main destinations. A poorly connected public transit system, paid for by all taxpayers, that mainly serves commuters coming to downtown Seattle imposes a time-cost to commuters with fewer options, compounded by the additional financial burden of car ownership. For our respondents, time spent on transit is money, both in the literal sense work time, but also additional travel time lost getting to the grocery store, to childcare, to school, to care for elders and family, time our communities cannot afford.

Figure 14: My Employers Pay for or Subsidize My Transit Pass

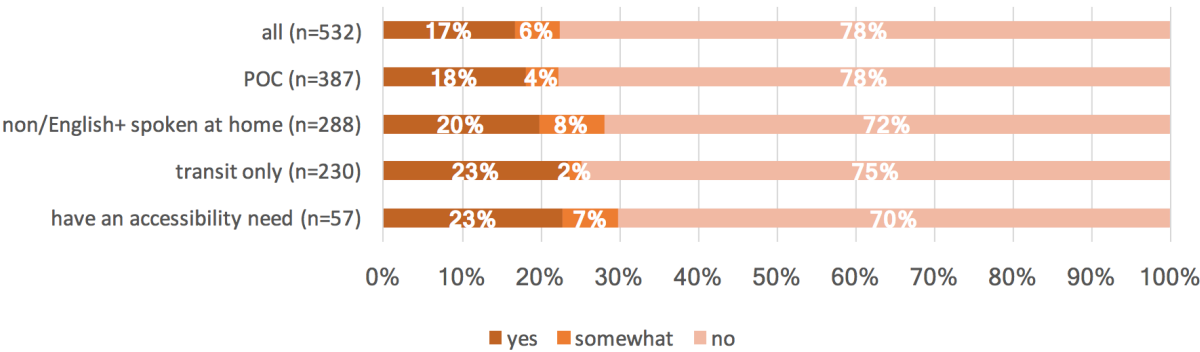


Figure 15: I Pay for Transit with a Monthly ORCA Pass

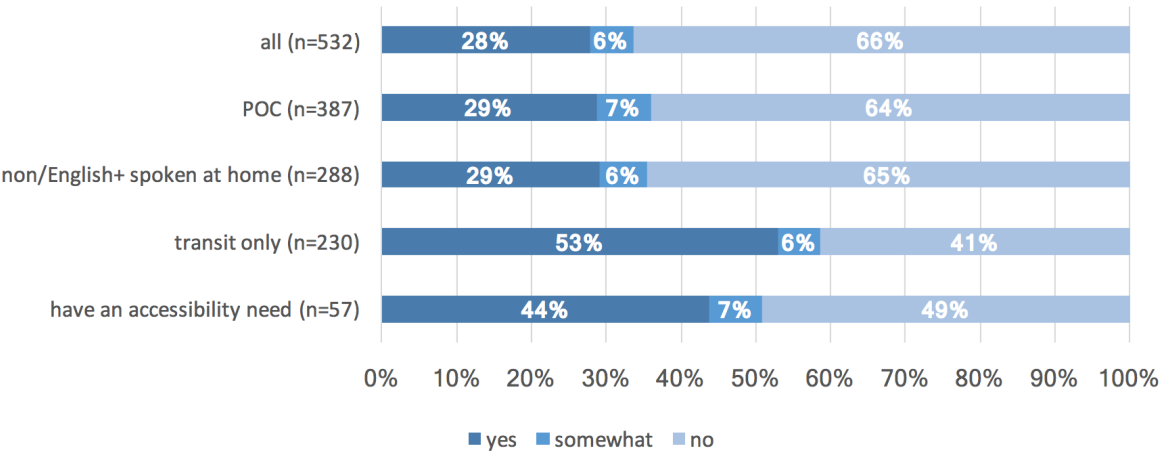


Figure 16: What Would Help me Ride Transit More? (Percent of Respondents)

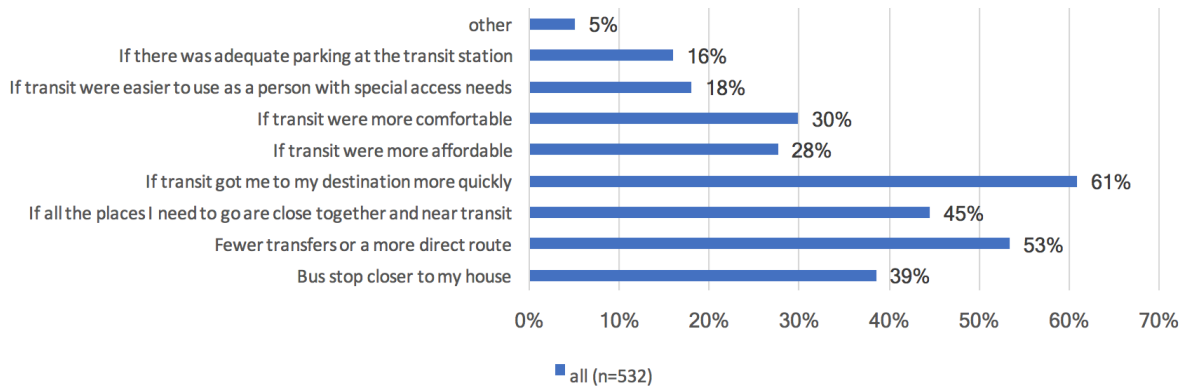


Figure 17: What Would Help Me Ride Transit More as a Transit Only Commuter (% respondents)

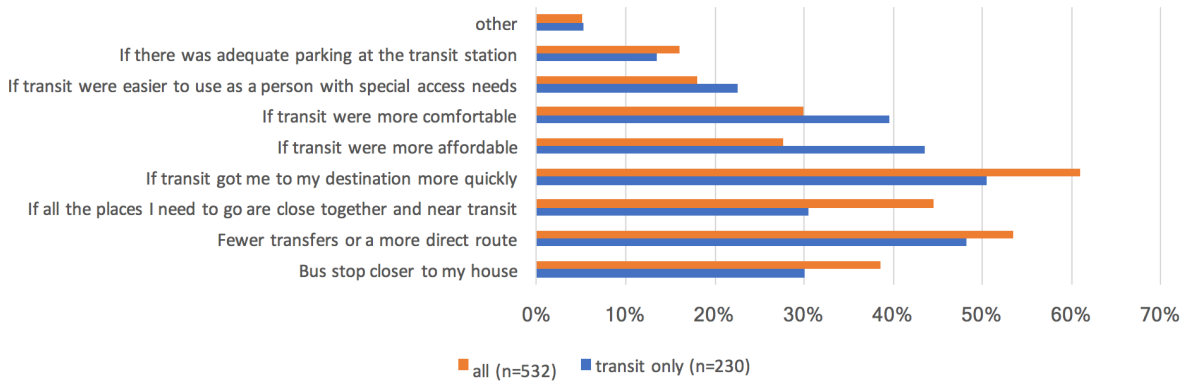
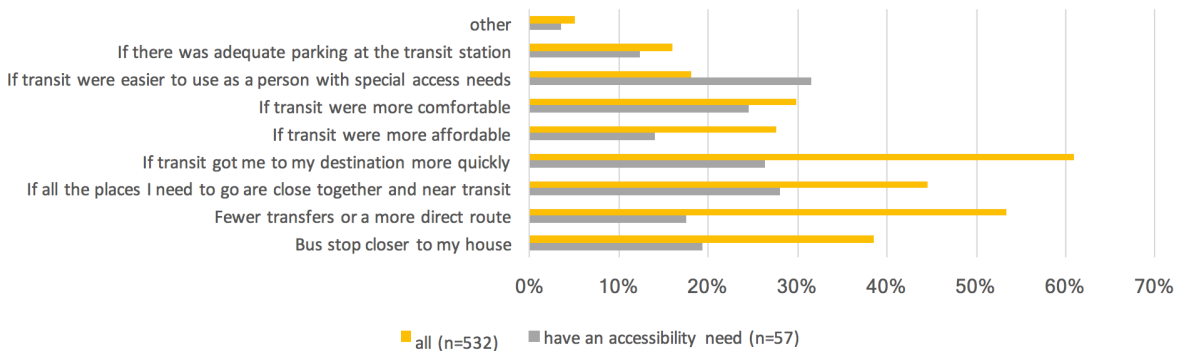


Figure 18: What Would Help me Ride Transit More as a Person with a Disability (% of respondents)



CONCLUSION & TAKEAWAYS

The results of our research highlight major gaps and inequities in our public transportation system and overall mobility for people of color, transit dependent riders, and people with disabilities.

If we as a region want to build out a transportation system for all people and communities, we need to prioritize the mobility of those whose transportation needs aren't being met. By focusing on outcomes by and for of BIPOC, low-income, and people with disabilities- those with the fewest choices and who are most burdened by poor transportation options- we can deliver a just transportation system. We see several key takeaways and recommendations coming from this research.

Listen to Black, Indigenous, people of color, low-income people, and people with disabilities. Center these voices in decision making, resources these communities as experts, ensure outcomes for these communities.

Trip patterns: Our current regional transit system was developed for the commuter that comes to work in downtown Seattle each day. However, our respondents were more likely to commute to destinations outside of downtown Seattle and aren't served well by a hub a spoke system. If we want a transit system that serves those who need it the most, we recommend:

- Better understanding the travel patterns of BIPOC, people with low-incomes, and people with disabilities.
- Invest in service that connects people to employment, services, and education outside downtown Seattle.

Access to transit: Proximity to transit does not necessarily mean people will take it or that it provides a good transportation option. To address this, we should consider:

- Invest in and preserve low-income housing, community-serving businesses, and cultural centers near transit so that we ensure core riders continue to have access to transit and create more opportunities for those with the fewest choices to live near high capacity transit.

- Transit performance measures should focus on commute time.
- Increase land uses that co-locate different destination types near transit (e.g., childcare, grocery stores, schools, and jobs), centering equitable development outcomes.
- Increased use of bus speed and reliability improvements to help buses compete with car travel times.

Transit affordability: While transit affordability was not the primary barrier to transit, per se, most respondents felt that fares were unaffordable and few had access to employer-provided transit subsidies or use of monthly passes. Jurisdictions and agencies should consider:

- How to make discounted transit benefits available through other means than large employers.
- Bolstering transit pass benefits through schools, small businesses, multi-family or multi-business buildings, or by groups of smaller employers.
- How to incorporate ORCA LIFT subsidies into business passports.
- Adopting monthly fare capping policies to provide the benefit of discounted trips to those who cannot afford the up-front cost of a pass.
- Strategies to improve enrollment in existing reduced fare programs.
- Very low-income/no-income fare programs.
- Stop policing people who cannot afford to pay fares, a failure to pay a \$2.50 fare should not result in bodily harm or civil or criminal charges.

Mitigate Budget Cuts: As agencies scramble to account for anticipated revenue shortfalls due to COVID-19, we must protect hard-won programs and service in support of the above goals. We must also support agencies in using racial and social equity as a guiding principle for cuts – maintaining or protecting transit that serves the essential workers and trips by highly impacted populations.

Just recovery: When we are in a position to re-introduce programs and service, we must use the same principles to ensure benefits first accrue to people of color, people with low-incomes, and people with disabilities. In addition, agencies should maintain accommodations that have been made for these groups to ease the burden during the pandemic. For example, people with disabilities have had expedited and streamlined approval for access to paratransit services that could continue to make it easier for those who need to travel going forward.

Mobility framework, equity policies, and service guidelines. Longer-term policy updates are also a good opportunity to make the service changes suggested above. For example, King County Metro's equity and climate-centered mobility framework will inform service guidelines that determine where and how we grow service. Elected officials, staff, and advocates should ask how goals such as reliability, growth, and geographic value should be prioritized and implemented in order to serve less dense areas, improve speed and reliability for those making off-peak commutes or traveling outside of Seattle. Similarly, Sound Transit's newly adopted equity policy should be galvanized to improve station design and bus service allocation to better serve people of color, people with low-incomes, and people with disabilities.

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Thank you to our community partners who helped us collect the data:

Tenant's Union of WA

Rainier Beach Action Coalition

InterIm Community Development Association

Casa Latina

This project was funded by the Seattle Foundation, COO Systems and Policy Grant.

APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

Over several months, we crafted a survey that would identify the main transportation modes and preferences as well as the gaps in mobility for communities of color. We vetted the survey with South Communities Organizing for Racial, Regional Equity (South CORE, organized by Puget Sound Sage) and adjusted survey questions based on feedback.

We drafted the following communications materials:

- 1-page description of the project, including a request for engagement from POC-led organizations
- the survey itself
- a draft Memorandum of Understanding to be shared with participating organizations
- We also contracted with translation services to have the survey available in Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese.

We contacted 10 organizations about participating in the survey and sent them the 1-page description. Four organizations expressed interest immediately: Interim Community Development Association, Tenants Union, Rainier Beach Action Coalition, and Casa Latina. Interim signed the MOU and started collecting surveys immediately. Tenants Union, Casa Latina and RBAC soon followed. The MOU provided a stipend for the time each organization spent administering the surveys, entering the data, and providing a short summary of their experience throughout the process. Each organization also received funds to provide small incentives to survey-takers, e.g. \$5 coffee cards. In this way we were able to acknowledge the expertise already in our communities and to compensate the organizations for the time they were taking to help administer the surveys.

Each organization conducted the surveys and reported results back to our team.