

Why London's Free Bus Travel for Under-18s Represents the Best of Climate Policy

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Introduction.

Since 2005, people under the age of 18 in London have been able to access free bus and tram travel through the use of a Zipcard. Purchased for a small fee, it is a card that functions similarly to an adult Oyster card. This report will look at the impact that this policy has had on London since then. The impact is not only in terms of the increase in bus usage, but also in terms of creating the next generation of public transport users in the wider context of London's Ultra Low Emission Zones (ULEZ) reforms, and the socio-spatial inequalities this free bus travel alleviates. On assessing the literature about this free travel scheme, I have found little research that is directly assessing the direct impact of free bus travel for under-18s; hence, it is not only useful to evaluate this policy, but it also removes an important lacuna.

Background to the Policy.

Free bus and tram travel for all under-18s who live in London was introduced by Ken Livingstone as London Mayor in 2005. Since then, all 11–18-year-olds have also been able to access reduced fares on the London Overground and London Underground. As this policy is specifically targeted at travel to and from school, the free bus travel and discounted tube-train travel continues until the end of the school year during which a young person turns 18. In 2020, the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson required the scrapping of this policy as part of a bail out deal for TfL, but widespread backlash led to this condition being scrapped.

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¹ Transport for London. *Sustainability Report 2021*, 2021.

Why Public Transport?

It is important to remember that public transport is not by default zero emission; it still contributes to global carbon emissions. However, this is changing, not least in London, which has the largest electric bus fleet in Western Europe.¹ Even where public transport is not low or zero emissions, however, it is much less carbon intensive per person than the use of private vehicles, because of the number of individual journeys that can be combined within one vehicle. Discussions around travel-related emissions are often centred on aviation, but road travel—both cars and buses—accounts for a larger proportion (15%) of global emissions.² Public transport also serves a socioeconomic purpose, which I will go on to explore in this report, as it allows people who do not have the means to access private vehicles to still take the journeys that they require.

Creating the Next Generation of Public Transport Users.

One of the major successes of free public transport usage for young people, in this case buses, is that it helps to develop the next generation of public transport users. As young people increasingly come to rely on bus travel as they begin to gain independence for the first time in their lives, it creates a culture of public transport usage that continues into adulthood. By 'culture of public transport usage', I refer to a system in which people choose public transport even when other options—such as private car usage—are available to them. Furthermore, where there is a culture of public transport usage, it is not stigmatised or negatively associated with particular economic or social groups; instead, public transport is used across socioeconomic demographics.

Amongst bus users in London, 17% are 5–16-year-olds, and 13% are 17–24-year-olds.³

² Ritchie, Hannah. "Cars, Planes, Trains: Where Do CO₂ Emissions from Transport Come From?" Our World in Data, Global Change Data Lab, 6 Oct. 2020.

³ London Travel Watch. *Who Uses the Bus?* 2021.

Though bus usage does decrease amongst young people once they begin to pay full fares, young people in London are not immediately switching to car usage. There is a trend of reduced car usage amongst young people across the UK, which is partly as a result of pandemic-related driving test backlogs, but the reduction in car usage amongst young people is much greater in London than the rest of the UK.⁴ London has the highest proportion of households without access to a car, which includes 42% of households. With that said, this varies across the capital, as in outer London, where public transport access is poorer, 69% of households have access to a car or van, in comparison with the better connected 42% of households in inner London.⁵ This disparity is particularly acute between 17–24-year-olds in inner and outer London. Just 25% of 17–24-year-olds in outer London have no access to a car, yet amongst inner Londoners of the same age bracket it is a much higher 58%.⁶ Rather than reflecting that young people are choosing to drive instead of using public transport, this reflects that cultural change in terms of attitudes towards public usage can only occur where public transport provisions are adequate. Thus, while free bus travel for under-18s does create a system of public transport usage amongst young people as they get older, this is only one facet of public transport solutions.

However, driving is neither the only nor even the most important aspect of transport usage amongst under-18s in London. In 2012, under-24s were almost 20 percentage points more likely than Londoners as a whole to travel as a passenger in a car rather than a driver at least once a week.⁷ Nonetheless, since the implementation of free bus travel for under-18s, the proportion of young people travelling by car has decreased alongside the increase in young bus passengers.⁸ This demonstrates that parents are less likely to be driving their children to and

from school, or to other activities, when they have access to free bus travel for their children. As outlined previously, this shift away from parents driving children to school in particular is more pronounced in inner London. However, in general it is much more difficult to get someone who is already a lifelong car user to start to use public transport than it is to encourage a culture of public transport usage amongst young people by creating the conditions in which they can easily access it from early on in their lives.

This reduction in car usage amongst young Londoners also has knock-on effects on the wider population. Data from Transport for London (TfL) clearly shows that one of the most important factors in the “competitiveness” of bus travel in comparison with other modes of transport (i.e. what makes people choose to or not to use the bus) is traffic speed.⁹ In fact, the slow decline in bus usage between 2015 and 2018 was attributed to the growing impact of roadworks on London’s roads, decreasing traffic speeds. If policies like free bus travel disincentivise young Londoners from switching to car travel once they are old enough to drive, in conjunction with policies like ULEZ, this can reduce traffic congestion, thus decreasing bus travel times, and making bus travel a more competitive mode of transport for all age groups.

Moreover, a proportion of the difference between the 5–16- and 17–24-year-old age groups in terms of bus travel can also be attributed to young people shifting to other types of public transport, such as the London Overground or Underground. As the price difference evens out between bus travel and other means of public transport, especially with the use of a 16-25 railcard on the London Underground, the bus and other forms of public transport begin to become more comparably attractive options in terms of cost. Whereas just 11% of 0–11-year-olds—who are able to travel

⁴ Chatterjee, Kiron, et al. *Young People’s Travel - What’s Changed and Why? Review and Analysis*. 2018.

⁵ Transport for London. *Understanding the Travel Needs of London’s Diverse Communities - Young People*. 2012.

⁶ Transport for London. *London Travel Demand Survey*. 2020.

⁷ Transport for London (n 5) *supra*.

⁸ Edwards, Phil, et al. “Health Impacts of Free Bus Travel for Young People: Evaluation of a Natural Experiment in London.” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, vol. 67, no. 8, 2013, pp. 641-647.

⁹ Transport for London. *Travel in London: Report 10*. 2017.

free of charge on all TfL services—use the London Underground once a week, 50% of 16–24-year-olds do. Although, as outlined previously, under-24s are much more likely to be car passengers than other Londoners, this is again concentrated amongst 0–11-year-olds, which shows that as young people begin to make travel decisions for themselves, they are increasingly choosing public transport.¹⁰

Ultimately, free bus travel for under-18s has a substantial impact in facilitating a culture of public transport usage amongst young Londoners that extends into adulthood. This is reflected in lower car usage amongst 16–24-year-olds in London than amongst 0–11-year-olds. Where their parents belonged to a generation that promoted a culture of car usage, incentives to use public transport mean that young Londoners increasingly use public transport long after it stops being free. Moreover, if young people are less likely to drive, thus reducing London’s congestion, bus travel will become more attractive for Londoners across all age demographics.

Reducing Socio-Spatial Inequalities.

The free under-18s bus travel has evidently helped create a generation of young public transport users. However, all good climate policies solve other social issues too, not only because these policies are more likely to enjoy wider popularity and thus be implemented, but also because the impact of the climate crisis disproportionately affects already marginalised groups. Despite this, many climate policies, such as carbon taxes, can hit these same marginalised groups hardest, rather than those who are the main perpetrators of the climate crisis. In this section, I will look at how free bus travel for under-18s in London has helped to tackle socio-spatial inequalities within the capital. Here, socio-spatial inequalities refer to social inequalities that occur

because access to resources is not evenly distributed across an area. I will assess this across two metrics in particular: access to educational opportunities and access to cultural opportunities.

Generally, economically disadvantaged areas tend to have poorer access to services like schools or hospitals. Following the suggested removal of free bus travel in 2020, 43.8% of young Londoners said that the loss of free bus travel would change the school they go to, and 30.4% would not go to areas outside of their own borough.¹¹ Generally, the higher Ofsted rating a school receives, the more likely it is to be located in an area with a higher Index of Multiple Deprivation.¹² Though the link between these two factors is less pronounced in London than in the rest of the UK, free bus travel makes it much easier for economically disadvantaged young people to travel to better performing schools outside their local area. Across London as a whole, one third of all bus journeys are taken by people living in households earning under £20,000 annually,¹³ and only 35% of households in this income bracket have access to a car.¹⁴ Evidently, it is the poorest Londoners who have to rely on public transport the most, meaning that in the absence of this free bus travel it is children from the most economically disadvantaged backgrounds who would have the fewest alternatives in terms of home-to-school travel. In fact, the removal of the free bus travel for under-18s would have cost an additional £37 million for parents across the capital just in terms of home-to-school travel.¹⁵

The free bus travel also has a cultural element to it. A majority of young Londoners said that in the absence of free transport, they would no longer visit art galleries (52.8%), museums (49.4%), or sports clubs (37.5%).¹⁶ Similarly to education, these cultural activities tend to be concentrated in wealthier areas. Cultural capital—

¹⁰ Transport for London (n 5) *supra*.

¹¹ Walsham, Matthew. “Free Travel Means Everything to Me”: *Understanding the Impact of the Suspension of Free Travel on Under-18s*. Partnership for Young London, July 2020.

¹² Trust for London. *School Performance and Income Deprivation*. 2023.

¹³ London Travel Watch (n 3) *supra*.

¹⁴ Transport for London (n 6) *supra*.

¹⁵ Transport for London (n 1) *supra*.

¹⁶ London Travel Watch (n 3) *supra*.

the familiarity an individual has with so-called 'high culture' such as visiting art galleries—is an important driver of social inequalities within the UK. Though policies such as making museums and art galleries free are an important step towards redressing this, they mean little if individuals are unable to access their location. Free bus travel enables young people to travel to these institutions and access cultural capital they would not have been otherwise able to. Considering that some 64% of young Londoners would worry how their parents would make ends meet without free bus travel,¹⁷ cultural activities such as these would likely be the first cutbacks parents would make in the absence of free bus travel.

In an ideal world, all public transport would be free regardless of age. However, in cities as large as London this is financially challenging. The largest city to introduce free public transport for residents thus far is Dunkirk,¹⁸ but it has only 200,000 inhabitants on London's almost 9,000,000. Therefore, it is important to target those who would have the most financial barriers to accessing public transport in the first place. Given that 33% of London's children live in poverty, young people are an important group to target with policies such as these, not only because their attitudes towards public transport shape the future cultures of public transport usage but also because they are often the demographic that rely on it the most.

Conclusion.

There are many lessons that policymakers can draw from the success of London's free bus travel for under-18s. By creating the next generation of public transport users, policies like these shape a culture of public transport usage that lasts long into adulthood. Not only does this policy increase public transport usage and disincentivise driving, but it also helps to tackle London's socio-spatial inequalities. By allowing young Londoners to access

opportunities outside of their immediate locality, we are taking a step towards reducing the inequality between the capital's most disadvantaged young people and their more privileged counterparts. That said, there is a clear disparity between inner and outer Londoners in terms of the public transport that they can access, showing that there ultimately needs to be public transport links available to all. The best climate policies do not shift the burden of the climate crisis onto those who are already most likely to be disproportionately affected by it. Instead, they help tackle the inequalities that climate change will only exacerbate, just as how free bus travel for young people in London has, in addition to curbing carbon emissions.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Symons, Angela. "This European City is Making Public Transport Free for All Citizens Free from December." *Euronews*, 21 Dec. 2023.