

TEENAGE ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS REGARDING TRANSIT USE

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Teenagers are an important market segment to the transit industry. They are directly important because, as a mobility impaired group, they are a prime transit user market, which research shows is currently underdeveloped. Indirectly, they are important because, while many young people experience travel by school bus in their daily lives, only a small proportion currently go on to become adult transit users. Only by understanding how teenagers perceive public transit within the wider issue of youth mobility can the transit industry provide for their current transportation needs and increase the likelihood of transit use in later life. A review of research literature found that there was only limited documentation of youth mobility issues in the United States.

OBJECTIVES

This project was designed to obtain an understanding of teenagers' perceptions of public transit within the wider context of teenage mobility. Project objectives included the following:

- study the current level of transit use among teenagers
- study the underlying attitudes and perceptions of teenagers towards public transit and transportation in general
- study the different ways in which parental views and restrictions affect teenage mobility
- collect information from the transit industry on the experiences and challenges faced in engaging this market segment
- synthesize all the acquired information into a best practice summary for transit agencies interested in implementing or improving programs that target teenage riders

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

There are over 28 million teenagers in the United States, of which over 1.4 million reside in Florida. As with other age group, teenagers rely heavily on automobiles for their travel needs, with transit accounting for only around one to three percent of teenagers' aggregate person trips. Data limitations make it difficult to isolate teenage transit ridership, although observations suggest that teenagers constitute anywhere from 9 to 21 percent of total U.S. transit ridership, depending on urban area size. Given that people aged 18 and under comprise over one quarter of the country's total population, researchers concluded that this age group is underrepresented in the transit user population. On-board survey data suggests that transit ridership in Florida is comparable to the national average, with some locations experiencing higher than average youth ridership due to local circumstances (i.e. college town). A major problem in assessing teenage ridership is the fact that teenagers tend not to be isolated from other age groups in data collection efforts. This makes it difficult to track teenage ridership and obtain a quantitative understanding of teenage mobility needs.

The study found that there are a number of significant restrictions on teenage mobility in the United States, including driving age regulations, travel costs, parental safety concerns, and low-density urban development patterns that limit walking and cycling. A series of mobility themes that play a major role in determining teenagers' mode choice decisions were identified during a series of eight focus group sessions attended by teenagers and parents in Miami and Tampa; they included safety, cost, access/availability, reliability, and image. Independent mobility was found to be an important issue for teenagers and their parents, relating primarily to the availability, safety, and cost of different travel mode options. On many of these issues, the private vehicle was perceived as holding a distinct advantage over transit. However, some areas were identified for which transit could potentially hold a strategic advantage, either from a teenage or a parental viewpoint. These issues were used to develop marketing messages, as shown below.

Underlying Issue	Teenager	Parent	Potential Marketing Message
Independent Mobility	Dependent on parents for transportation	Transporting children is time-consuming	Teenagers: Independence afforded by transit Parents: Don't have to spend time providing child's transportation
Safety	Concerned about the responsibility of driving	Concerned about child driving unsupervised or traveling with other teenage drivers	Parent / Teenager: Highlight the safety benefits of using transit
Cost	High cost of car travel	High cost of car travel	Teenagers: Highlight how much money could be saved for other more important things (proms, etc) Parents: Highlight how much money could be saved by not having to provide a car for their child

A survey of transit agencies across the country was conducted to assess industry experience with promoting transit to teenagers. This survey showed that there were three main promotional program types: educational, reduced fare, and transit pass programs. Major challenges identified in marketing transit to teenagers included addressing transit's negative social image, gaining the co-operation of the school system, gaining the co-operation of parents, and retaining the program budget.

The study concludes with a series of recommendations for transit agencies interested in implementing or improving programs that target teenage riders: (i) Track Teenage Ridership, (ii) Explore External Funding Options, (iii) Form Partnerships with the School System and Other Local Organizations, (iv) Use a Strategic Approach to Developing Marketing Messages, and (v) Consider Teenage Mobility Needs in Transit Service Provision.

BENEFITS

This report lays out the key issues that a transit agency needs to address to establish a successful youth mobility program, drawing on best practice experience from around the country and abroad. The marketing messages that have been developed relate directly to generic youth mobility problems in the U.S. and may be applied in a variety of different scenarios. If such efforts attract younger customers to transit services and translate some percentage of those riders into adult customers, then they will contribute to the Department's goal to increase transit ridership to improve the overall efficiency of the State's transportation system.

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