

## 02 Executive Summary

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Toronto Public Health COVID-19 data indicates that 73% of locally reported cases were racialized peoples and 67% of Torontonians hospitalized from the virus identified as coming from a racialized group. This suggests that Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) individuals in Toronto have been more exposed to COVID-19 infections.

Early in the pandemic, it became evident that essential workers were bearing the brunt of overcrowding conditions on the TTC. The key question of our research is: What does transit in Toronto look like during and after COVID-19? Questions about what public transit looked like during and after the pandemic will be explored in this report. Thus, understanding and highlighting the transit riding experiences of essential workers are this report's key focuses. We identify essential workers as individuals employed in retail, janitorial and cleaning, industrial and manufacturing or healthcare settings. We defined regular TTC riders as individuals who took more than three round trips per week.

Ridership in 2021 was impacted by the pandemic resulting in a 72% drop in June 2021 compared with pre-COVID-19 figures. The pandemic has seen a growing concern from riders about station and vehicle cleanliness, crowding and masks. An uncertain part of the data are the bus overcrowding metrics that shifted for network optimization as crowding definitions have gone upwards to allow for higher passenger loads.

Our team interviewed essential workers to hear about their transit experiences during the pandemic. Using digital channels, we received responses from 72 postal codes across Toronto. We then screened the respondents against our criteria: that they were essential workers and regular transit riders during the pandemic. Six individuals met our research criteria.

In our interviews, "Experience", "Cleanliness", and "Overcrowding" were the top three themes and they were respectively mentioned 18, 20 and 24 times. Regarding "Experience", participants noted the emptiness in the system and the separations felt between customers and employees. We mostly heard riders complain about a lack of enforcement of passenger limits on vehicles, but praise when it did occur. Several riders had problems with the lack of enforcement of physical distance as well as unmasked passengers and vehicles with sub-par disinfection.

We then analyzed TTC budget items related to COVID-19 incremental expenses and ventilation upgrades. We see expenses like the \$25.8 million dedicated to vehicle disinfection and \$5.8 million for facility disinfection as important for retaining riders and attracting new ones. We see prioritizing capital investments

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for HVAC upgrades on the subway as long overdue. The TTC's issues are similar to those of transit systems globally with overcrowding, drops in transit ridership as well as hygiene and disinfection concerns. Below are our recommendations:

- **Continue prioritizing cleanliness:** This makes riders more comfortable regarding the spread of COVID-19. It can also help to reduce infections related to other illnesses. Cleanliness was a top issue for interviewees, who were supportive of disinfection actions.
- **Prioritize subway system ventilation upgrades:** The TTC's 15-Year Capital Investment Plan and 2019-2028 Capital Budget included \$32 million for upgraded subway/bus platform air ventilation. We recommend prioritizing this investment immediately, especially given that COVID-19 is a respiratory illness.
- **Apply COVID-19-related crowding and on-time bus performance practices:** We recommend that the TTC trial models optimizing trade-offs between passenger and operational costs while accounting for reduced vehicle capacity and revenue losses. The TTC can decide to have busses skip certain stations or stops when they become overcrowded utilizing real-time data on passenger loads at the station or vehicle levels.
- **Maintaining public subsidies:** The agency has long been dependent on fares to recoup costs and fund its operating budget. The silver lining to the Safe Restart Agreement is that it allows us to see how the system can function with a federal subsidy. This funding arrangement should be considered on a permanent basis. However, the system should still be incentivized to run efficiently.
- **Improving enforcement of public health measures:** We heard multiple participants express frustration at times when masks were not worn by passengers or employees and such actions not being penalized. We ask that TTC management works with employees' unions on actions to address vehicle crowding and masking.
- **Using bond proceeds to fund disinfection capital expenses:** The City can issue debt for capital projects, but is prohibited from borrowing for operating expenses under the The City of Toronto Act. Given the drop in fare revenues, investments in capital equipment can be made using proceeds from City of Toronto bonds. We propose that the TTC request being able to dedicate general use of proceeds for this. These amounts should be a part of the agency's 2022 capital budget.