

A social network for young Londoners on the buses

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Free bus travel has improved the social lives and independence of 12-18 year olds in London, according to research published today in the journal *Mobilities*.

Researchers from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and UCL (University College London) found that free bus travel – which all young Londoners are entitled to by registering for a Zip Oyster Card – increased young people's ability to travel independently and extended their opportunities through facilitating extra trips, trips further afield and/or exploratory trips with friends.

Travelling together was reported to be a key feature for young people. Researchers discovered that a 'code of honour' for bus travel has developed: travelling as a group is seen as a sign of loyalty and getting on a bus without friends or leaving them on the bus alone seen as a betrayal. While many adult travellers use a range of strategies to avoid others in shared space, young Londoners are embracing free bus travel as a site of sociability.

First author Dr Anna Goodman, Research Fellow at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said: "Free bus travel has improved independent mobility by giving young people the freedom to get about without always having to ask their parents for money. This made a particular difference for social or recreational trips, which even more affluent parents might not always be willing to pay for. But to the young people these trips were important, a way to gain travel skills, spend time

with friends, and come to feel more 'like a Londoner'.

"One key factor in realising these benefits was the fact that free travel is universally available, rather than means tested. Not only did this ensure free travel was not stigmatised, but it also meant groups of friends could travel together without anyone being left out. As such, free travel increased the independent mobility for whole groups of young people, not just for individuals"

The study, funded by the National Institute for Health Research Public Health Research (NIHR PHR) Programme, also found that free bus travel improved confidence because young people could take 'practice' journeys and could feel secure that they would not be stranded far from home without money to get back.

More than 100 young Londoners were interviewed in depth to examine how free bus travel has affected young people's independent mobility. The benefits for young people echo benefits of free bus travel for older people which have also recently been described by the same research group. Published in *Ageing & Society* in late 2012, this second piece of research found that free bus passes for over 60s provided older Londoners with a sense of belonging and visibility in society, improving wellbeing and tackling chronic loneliness.

Professor Judith Green from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and principal investigator of both pieces of research, said:
"When funding is tight, free bus travel looks like an easy target for cuts. But we found many important benefits for the wellbeing of [young people](#) and older citizens that wouldn't have happened if free transport was means tested. Getting people out of cars, and out and about in public is good for their health, and good for the health of our cities. These schemes appear to do that for two age groups at real risk of social exclusion" Ends

More information: Anna Goodman, Alasdair Jones, Helen Roberts, Rebecca Steinbach, Judith Green. "'We can all just get on a bus and go': rethinking independent mobility in the context of the universal provision of free bus travel to young Londoners". *Mobilities*. DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2013.782848](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2013.782848)

Free bus travel was introduced in 2005 for under-17 year olds by Transport for London, and has since been extended to include 17-18 year olds in full-time education. Young people access the free travel by applying for a photo-ID 'Zip card'. This simultaneously functions as a conventional 'Oyster card', the ticket-free electronic card system which all users of London's public transport can pre-load with money for travel.

The research on young people was based on qualitative, in-depth interviews with 118 young Londoners, aged 12-18, from a range of inner and outer London boroughs.

The research on older people was based on qualitative, in-depth interviews with 47 Londoners aged 60 or over, from a range of inner and outer London boroughs. It was published as: Judith Green, Alasdair Jones and Helen Roberts "More than A to B: the role of free bus travel for the mobility and wellbeing of older citizens in London". *Ageing and Society*, DOI: 10.1017/S0144686X12001110

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