

# Bus drivers more likely to let white customers ride for free: study

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A new paper in *The Economic Journal* finds that bus drivers are more likely to let white riders ride for free and less likely to let Black riders ride without paying the fee.

Police officers must issue tickets to [drivers](#) exceeding the speed limit. A grocery store worker is not allowed to hand out goods free of charge. Similarly, bus drivers require all passengers to have valid tickets before being allowed onto the bus.

This study set out to test what happens when decisionmakers have to make unmonitored judgments. Do they voluntarily provide favours? And, if so, do they reward and accommodate some people more than others?

This study tested for discretionary favours, i.e., private accommodations, in everyday consumer transactions. In the study, the researchers hired test customers randomly assigned to board [public buses](#) where they presented a travel card with a zero monetary balance and asked the bus driver if they can have a free ride to a bus stop. While the public bus company's official rules and policies mostly discourage employees from providing a service free of monetary charge, close to two-thirds of observed bus drivers granted such favours, and predominantly to lighter-skinned people.

Based on 1,552 transactions in Queensland, Australia, the authors uncovered strong evidence of racial bias: bus drivers were twice as willing to let white testers ride free as Black testers (72% versus 36% of the time). Indian testers were accepted at 51%, while Asian testers were treated similarly to whites; being offered a free ride 73% of the time. Such racial bias against Black citizens still existed after controlling for several other variables including the [bus driver](#)'s age, gender, and race. Based on the data, researchers found no evidence of own-group bias: bus drivers were just as likely to grant free rides to customers from other races as they were to customers of their own race.

The study revealed strong evidence of racial discrimination. A key feature in the field experiment is that the bus drivers had only a few

seconds to decide regarding a person standing in front of them. Here the bus drivers appeared to use a customer's [skin colour](#) as a proxy for other unobservable group characteristics. The uncovered white privilege was reduced but still present when test customers wore business attire or dressed in army uniforms.

"Our findings show that white privilege extends into marketplace favours, or private accommodations, that are often hidden and unregulated," said Redzo Mujcic, one of the paper's authors. "The level of white privilege found is markedly greater than previously documented in other markets and public services, such as employment and housing, where discrimination is already illegal. As a society, we need to think about ways to eliminate such bias in daily interactions, especially given the large economic and social costs that accrue to discriminated minorities. For example, white citizens can simply refuse any such gifts in future transactions."

**More information:** Redzo Mujcic et al, The Colour of a Free Ride, *The Economic Journal* (2020). [DOI: 10.1093/ej/ueaa090](https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/ueaa090)

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