

Expectations for and Experiences with Public Transportation in New York City's Fair Fares Program: Preliminary Findings

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Background

- New York City's Fair Fares program provides half-priced discounts to low-income residents.
 - The program began in 2019 with an initial focus on targeted groups (e.g., working cash assistance & SNAP clients, CUNY students, NYCHA residents, low-income vets).
 - In January 2020, Fair Fares expanded to include all non-elderly adult residents in households under 100% FPL (elderly residents covered by MTA).
 - Renewals for Fair Fares cards issued in 2019 began in March 2020.
- All Fair Fares applications and renewals are submitted on-line.
 - Current HRA clients who meet eligibility requirements can enroll through an expedited "Fast Track" process, while others complete a short application and upload documents through a mobile app. Assistance is available at Fair Fares offices (currently closed) or 311.
 - Both Fast Track and new applicants can track their information via a Fair Fares page in ACCESS HRA, the agency's on-line client portal.
- The DSS Office of Evaluation and Research partnered with program staff to field a brief on-line survey for all Fair Fares applicants and renewers.
 - Survey questions focused on applicants' expectations for—and renewers' experiences with—changes in their use of public transportation and quality of life as a result of the discounted fare.

Methods

- A link to the survey was posted at the top of each applicant's ACCESS HRA Fair Fares page for 30 days following application/renewal.
 - The on-line survey was available in English and Spanish. Applicants could also access electronic (.pdf) versions in the remaining 10 NYC local law languages, with instructions for returning completed surveys electronically and via mail.
- This preliminary analysis focuses on more than 7,500 on-line surveys submitted by applicants in the first two months of expanded eligibility (January 26 – March 31, 2020) and on 150 surveys submitted by renewers in the first month (March 1 – 31, 2020).*
- We used administrative data provided by the Office of Planning and Performance Management to contextualize the number of responses.

Survey Respondents

- During the study period, applicants submitted 11,966 surveys and renewers submitted 259 surveys. After dropping surveys that were blank (applicant n=4,291; renewer n=59) or missing more than 85% of data (n=26, applicant only), the final study sample includes 7,649 responses from applicants and 150 from renewers.
 - Surveys were anonymous. While it is possible that respondents submitted more than one survey, analysis of IP addresses and demographic information suggest that the number of potential duplicates is very small (~3%). As a result, we did not attempt to deduplicate.
- 86% (n=6,600) of applicant surveys and 76% (n=114) of renewer surveys were submitted in English; the rest were in Spanish.
- For context, 58,467 Fair Fares applications were submitted during the first 4 weeks of the expanded program (1/26/20 – 2/22/20), during which time we received 6,422 survey responses (excluding blanks). This suggests a response rate of >10%. During the first month of renewals (3/1/20 – 3/31/20), we received 10,110 renewals and 150 survey responses, for a response rate of 1.5%.

Key Findings

- Both applicant and renewer respondents used public transportation frequently (on average, 5.7 and 6.0 days per week respectively) but reported financial challenges in doing so.
- Decreases in spending on public transportation as a result of having a Fair Fares discount were expected / reported by ~80% of both applicants and renewers, with most savings used for necessities.
- Among both applicants and renewers, two-thirds expected / reported increased use of public transportation. Both groups expected or reported increased use for work and healthcare, while applicants were more likely to expect increased use for school.
- Expectations among applicants that having a Fair Fares discount would improve their quality of life across multiple dimensions, including less financial stress, more ability to travel for work or school, and more access to social and cultural opportunities, were confirmed by the experience of respondents renewing their cards.
- In open-ended comments, both applicant and renewer respondents generally expressed very positive views about the Fair Fares program and provided meaningful examples of how they expected it to help them and their families.

Detailed Findings



Human Resources
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Applicant Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	% (#)
Gender	
Female	67.8% (5,187)
Male	29.1% (2,223)
Non-binary or Other Gender	1.3% (96)
Race / Ethnicity	
Hispanic (any race)	46.6% (3,439)
Non-Hispanic Black	30.1% (2,300)
Asian	10.1% (770)
Non-Hispanic White	9.3% (713)
Age, average	37.6 years

Two-thirds of applicant respondents identified as female and were employed or in school in the past year. Three-quarters identified as Hispanic or Black.

Characteristic	% (#)
Borough	
Bronx	31.8% (2,380)
Brooklyn	29.2% (2,187)
Queens	19.0% (1,424)
Manhattan	16.9% (1,268)
Staten Island	3.0% (226)
Employed or in school in past year	65.6% (4,889)

Renewer Respondent Characteristics

Characteristic	% (#)
Gender	
Female	86.2% (125)
Male	13.8% (20)
Race / Ethnicity	
Hispanic (any race)	60.4% (87)
Non-Hispanic Black	29.9% (43)
Non-Hispanic White	4.9% (7)
Asian	2.8% (4)
Age, average	41.8 years

Compared to applicants, a higher proportion of renewal respondents identified as female and as Hispanic. Renewers were also somewhat older and more likely to be in school or employed.

Characteristic	% (#)
Borough	
Bronx	42.2% (62)
Brooklyn	25.2% (37)
Queens	17.0% (25)
Manhattan	15.0% (22)
Staten Island	0.7% (1)
Employed or in school in past year	89.7% (131)

Current Use of Public Transportation

- 85% of applicant and 83% of renewers reported currently using public transportation at least one day / week.
- Applicants and renewers reported similar frequency of public transportation use (5.7 days / week for applicants and 6.0 for renewers).
- Both applicants and renewers reported financial challenges in accessing public transportation.

How often do you experience the following?	Often		Sometimes	
	Applicant % (n=7,659)	Renewer % (n=150)	Applicant % (n=7,659)	Renewer % (n=150)
Choose between spending money on transportation vs. other expenses.	77.0%	76.5%	19.1%	19.5%
Do not travel by public transportation because I can't afford it.	27.1%	30.9%	50.3%	50.4%

Changes in Transportation Expenses

- *Decreases* in spending on public transportation as a result of Fair Fares were expected by most applicants (79.4%) and reported by most renewers (85.3%).
- Relatively few anticipated or reported increased spending on public transportation (12.2% among applicants and 7.3% among renewers).
- About three-quarters of respondents reported expecting to use transportation savings for necessities, and almost all renewers (89.8%) reported doing so.

What is the main thing you plan to do with your transportation cost savings?	Applicant % (n=7,659)	Renewer % (n=150)
Have more money for food, rent, utilities, or other necessities	73.7%	89.8%
Save money for emergencies	8.3%	4.1%
Pay off debt	8.1%	4.8%
Save money for long-range goals like school, a car, or retirement	5.5%	1.4%

Changes in Transportation Patterns

As a result of having a Fair Fares discount, use of public transportation to get to ...	Expected to Increase / Increased		Expected to Stay the Same / Stayed the Same	
	Applicant % (n=7,659)	Renewer % (n=150)	Applicant % (n=7,659)	Renewer % (n=150)
Work or job interviews	72.0%	67.3%	22.2%	25.9%
Healthcare services	67.3%	59.7%	27.5%	34.7%
School or training programs	66.4%	48.1%	27.8%	43.0%
Recreation and leisure activities	63.1%	54.1%	30.3%	40.0%
Government offices and services	54.8%	46.0%	38.7%	46.8%
Shopping/retail locations	45.8%	39.7%	45.8%	50.0%

- *Increased* use of public transportation was expected by most applicants (66.6%) and reported by most renewers (68.5%).
- Both groups expected or reported increased use for work and healthcare. Applicants were more likely to expect increased use for school.
- Most also expected (68.2% of applicants) or reported (76.3% of renewers) *decreased* use of private transportation.

Changes in Quality of Life

As a result of using a Fair Fares discount, I expect I will be / I was...	Strongly Agree		Agree	
	Applicant % (n=7,659)	Renewer % (n=150)	Applicant % (n=7,659)	Renewer % (n=150)
Less stressed about my financial situation.	62.8%	61.1%	29.7%	31.9%
Able to travel further away from home to get to work, school, or look for a job.	59.9%	67.4%	27.7%	30.5%
Able to visit more with family and friends.	57.8%	51.4%	32.5%	43.6%
Able to take more advantage of NYC's cultural or recreational activities / events.	55.6%	50.4%	33.8%	45.1%
Able to save time on traveling.	51.0%	53.6%	30.6%	37.0%

Expectations among applicants that having a Fair Fares discount would improve their quality of life across multiple dimensions were confirmed by the experience of respondents renewing their cards.

Applicant Comments on Fair Fares

- Over 1,500 applicant respondents (~20%) submitted free-text comments, the majority of which were very positive about the Fair Fares program.

*“Quería tomar un curso de inglés hace mucho tiempo, pero pagar los pasajes me salía muy caro. Al tener esta tarjeta podré ir todos los días a clases.”**

[With Fair Fares] I would be able to get my children to school everyday and not have a ACS case again

I believe the Fair Fares metrocard is the best thing that has happened for low income families.

I'll be able to save money so I can get my life together

I am currently looking for work and the program will allow me to be able to search for work beyond walking distance. It will also allow me to be able to visit my mother who is across town in a long term care facility.

work wise I can pick up more hours and travel to different locations

Renewer Comments on Fair Fares

- One-quarter of renewing respondents submitted free-text comments, almost all enthusiastically endorsing the program.

*gracias a este servicio. no he tenido que caminar mucho para el trabajo. ya que algunas veces he tenido que caminar por falta de una metro card. por que no me alcanzaba el dinero para comprarme una de \$32 semanal.

It's a great program and helps my single mother home to save money weekly

It definitely comes in handy when paying less, as in NY today everything is too expensive. Its Hard to pay rent, bills etc on these types of income. So Thank you for giving me one less thing to worry about.

It has helped me commute further than expected.

it makes me feel valued as a lifelong new yorker

**Me ayudo bastante porque tengo hijos pequeños q dejar en la escuela y daycare y después para ir al trabajo me ayuda mucho esta metro car ya que yo soy una persona que ocupa los 6 días buses y trenes

* "thanks to this service. I have not had to walk much to get to work. Since sometimes I have had to walk for lack of a metro card. Because I could not afford the money to buy a \$32 weekly [card]."

** "It helps me a lot because I have small children that I leave at school and daycare and then go to work this metro car helps me a lot since I am a person who uses buses and trains 6 days a week."