‘Less-than’ and ‘barely’ citizens: Young people’s public mobilities as precarious experiments of democracy

- December 22, 2022
- Issue: Just mobility, transport and urban infrastructures

- Tanja Joelsson, Dag Balkmar, Malin Henriksson

Why young people’s bus mobility is linked to citizenship and concerns spatial justice.

> Right, the free summer pass was a thing. Yes, I had the summer pass, when was it, 2020. It was really good, the best thing. In the summer, me and my friends, we explored new beaches in the area, every day we went to a new place, a new beach. We went out of the city, with the yellow buses, we went everywhere. And we went all over Uppsala too. It was so nice. But now, this summer, every bus trip cost, you have to pay for every bus trip. It's not worth it. (…) It was easier [with the summer pass]. My free time, to be able to enjoy the whole city, not just where I live. My everyday life just got this much bigger [shows with big hand gestures]. So right now, it's pretty small. I stay at the same place. But last summer, it was so nice.
>
> Asif, 15 years old

In a research project on families' everyday mobilities in so-called disadvantaged neighbourhoods in three cities in Sweden, the young research participants not only elaborate on the joys, desires and positive experiences of their everyday mobilities, but also address the precarity of them. The bus stands out as particularly important in their everyday lives, but not always as a consequence of "choice" (Joelsson et al, forthcoming). As Asif highlights in the opening quote, having the opportunity to ride the bus for free during a summer not only expanded his range of mobility, but also the mental imaginaries of feeling entitled to access the whole city.

In this text, we will discuss this current urban matter of the publicness of public transport as a question of spatial justice, through the perspective of young people in so-called disadvantaged neighbourhoods. We argue that public mobilities such as the bus, are essential for young people's everyday lives, yet seldom highlighted in discussions of, for example, child-friendly cities. Bus mobilities can be understood as a vital part of citizenship, as the bus allows young people to explore dispersed localities, to take up and inhabit public space, with opportunities that go beyond mere transport. In this sense, be(com)ing a bus rider is about be(com)ing a citizen, but the citizenship skills cultivated through everyday bus use are seldom recognized as such. The young people can be seen as less-than-citizens, as their perspectives and bodies are not recognized as both citizenship and urban mobilities seem to be permeated by an adult norm.

One of the challenges the young people bring up relate to the cost — the bus is considered expensive. The expensiveness of the bus contributes to the precarity of bus mobilities. Perceiving the bus as a public space also places the question of ticket prices into a particular light. High fares complicate and hinder the young people's everyday mobility citizenship, positioning them as 'barely citizens' (Cresswell, 2013) with shrinking opportunities to partake in the experiment of democracy of public space (de Visscher, 2014).

The research context

Children and young people between 0-19 years old comprise 23 per cent of the Swedish population (Statistics Sweden, 2021). In so-called disadvantaged neighbourhoods, the number of children and young people are often higher than the national average (ranging between 30-60 percent, Statistics Sweden). Many young people commute to school, which is connected to whether their neighbourhood hosts a school (on the appropriate level) and related to the free school choice principle launched in the1990s, which stipulates that pupils are free to choose schools anywhere in the municipality where they live. The municipalities decide on school bus passes on the basis of geographical distance, which usually is between 2-3 km between home and school in preschool class to year 3, and 4 km for years 4-9. Moreover, upper secondary school pupils receive study allowance during school terms. For the young people that do

not get school bus passes and that lack other financial resources, most of the study allowance goes to paying for public transport.

Public transport provision in Sweden is part of the welfare system and is therefore partly subsidized, as it is financed by both taxes and ticket revenue (Vitrano and Lindkvist, 2021). Public transport operation was deregulated in 2010, which opened it up for private stakeholders to provide transport services. In case studies, the regions in which the municipalities are located are responsible for public transport, and the services are procured in competition and operated by private companies (see also Khan et. al., 2021). As for the fares, it is up to each region to decide on reasonable prices. However, as bus services are privatized, that is, run by commercial companies, and surcharged, the 'publicness' of public transport can be questioned. The question of surcharged public transport is particularly vital in relation to young people and young people's citizenship and access to public space, since they often lack financial resources, and don't have access to cars.

Within our research project on families' everyday mobility in so-called disadvantaged neighbourhoods in three cities in Sweden, we have carried out walking and online interviews with 21 young people 13-25 years old: 8 girls and 13 boys. In our interviews, we have asked questions about their daily mobility, of places they use and visit, and their experiences of their neighbourhoods. The interviews have been conducted 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Sweden, where schools remained more or less open during the pandemic (with some exceptions), many children and young people continued to use public transport to get to their school. In public discussions in Sweden, however, the perspectives or voices of children and young people were altogether absent. The discussions were labour-market centered, making children and young people invisible as school commuters and users of public space/transport. They are not 'productive' citizens for society, and become marginalized.

Precarious bus mobilities: limiting conditions for young people's bus use

The COVID-19 pandemic revitalized a focus on an unfortunate distinction between mobility and immobility, as discussions in many countries revolved around 'essential' and 'non-essential' work (Salazar, 2021). Public transport is exposed as a vulnerable infrastructure, and public transport came to be marked as the commuting option for society's essential workers. In Sweden, and in many other countries, the public debate on 'essential workers' is however, very adult and labour-market centered, making children and young people invisible as school commuters and users of public space/transport. They are not 'productive' citizens for society, and become marginalized.

It could also be argued that public transport is a public good, and during the pandemic, a *scarce* public urban good, thus exposing the conflict of interests between, for example, adults and young people (cf. Martens, 2012). Public transport was entangled in "a social and health-oriented proverbial battlefield where transgression [led] to condemnation and controversies over social responsibility" (Jensen, 2021, p. 10). In Swedish local media, young people are cast as irresponsible for riding the bus in too large groups, and for enjoyment and fun rather than necessity, and hence of not taking the pandemic seriously (enough) (Joelsson & Ekman Ladru, 2022).

Research into public transport pricing and fares show that low-income households tend to buy single tickets, because the prices of monthly cards are high (Bondemark et al., 2021) and that low-income households in Sweden place a larger part of their income on housing and transport (Transport Analysis, 2018, p.14). International research on transport poverty finds that households with poorer economic conditions have a diminished range or even lack of choices related to their mobility (Social Exclusion

Unit, 2003; Currie 2011). We still know little about what characterizes transport poverty in Sweden, but international experiences point to some key aspects. Lack of resources, that is, access to key opportunities related to employment, education, health or social networks, referred to as transport poverty, is hence often associated to low-income groups (e.g., Martens, 2013). For example, research has shown how driving licenses are important for getting employment, how young people have difficulties paying for transport to reach education, how households without a car lack access to local health institutions and how many people without a car have difficulties visiting friends and relatives. The housing segregation in Sweden has moreover resulted in a geographic concentration of low-income households, accentuating the entwinement of an unequal transport system with spatial inequalities (Joelsson & Ekman Ladru, 2022). It is an important track for future research to investigate if these patterns result in transport poverty, and in that case, in what ways. In our qualitative study in Swedish cities, transport poverty, as described in the previous literature, is not confirmed. This does not mean, however, that there is no relation between the socio-economic situation and people's everyday mobilities. It has become clear that this relation is ridden with complexities, ambivalences, and contradictions.

Non-available public mobilities for young people feed into spatial injustices

The young people emphasized the importance of being able to leave the neighbourhood and explore the whole city and beyond, as Asif, 15, pointed out in the quote in the beginning of the text. The cost for public transport becomes a barrier for the young people's spatial exploration, discouraging access and entitlement to public space (Goodman et al., 2014). In some of the cities, the experience of having free access to buses during the summer holidays impacts the well-being of the young people. These municipal initiatives have not been made permanent, but remain in the interviews as one-time experiments. Adan, 15, and his friend Yusuf talk of how the summer pass made it possible for them to go swimming outdoors. Buying monthly cards also during the summer — when they don't need to go to school — is regarded as too expensive, leaving the boys with few choices but to remain in the neighbourhood: "Last summer, we were only here", as Yusuf, 16, adds.

None of the neighborhoods in our study had an upper secondary school, and in some of the neighbourhoods the lower secondary schools have been recently shut down. Many children and young people commute from an early age, most often by bus, and the municipality decides on school bus passes based on geographical distance to school. For those living "too close" to the school, bus riding very soon becomes a costly transport mode. Many of our young research participants have several siblings, which means that they develop everyday strategies for managing the cost of taking the bus.

> Sometimes I buy single tickets. Sometimes I can't afford it, and then I have to dodge the fare, so that I can manage. But I usually buy a ticket. But, sometimes I would like to have a school bus pass, when it's winter and cold in the morning it is difficult to take the bike. But, when spring is here and the summer comes, then I always take the bike.
>
> Tigran, 17 years old

Some share a monthly card with other family members, others bike occasionally or all the time during the spring and fall season, others dodge the fares, or choose very carefully when they pay the fare, and try to maximize travels during the time when the ticket is valid. The need for using public transport is also seasonal, as many of the young people accounted for a more prominent urge during the winter season.

Considering and having to take account of the economic circumstances of one's everyday mobility is

stressful. Laylo, 18 years old, exclaimed that she “hates” the bus fares because they are so high, since almost half of her allowance goes to her school commuting. Asif, 15 years old, mentioned how he probably will need to start biking soon, when his parents withdraw their support for his bus riding. He does not want to use his study allowance to pay for the bus to school. Tigran, 17 years old, finds it difficult to pay for his school commuting, and thinks that the pandemic in this case made it easier for him to get to school since passengers entered the bus in the rear end, making it possible to dodge transport fares altogether. Several of the participants mentioned cheaper tickets as their main suggestion for how to improve transport opportunities in their neighborhoods, which has also been proposed by some politicians from time to time.

‘Less-than’ and ‘barely’ citizens engaging in the experiment of democracy through bus riding

At the most basic level, as already noted by, for example, Lefebvre, Soja, Harvey and Mitchell, the right to the city, including public space in general, and spatial justice involves “the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them” (see e.g., Soja, 2009). Redistribution has been a central aspect in the theorization of spatial inequality and injustice, where “valued resources and opportunities” are understood to be equally distributed. In order for such redistribution to take place, recognition and representation (it is argued, see Fraser, 1995) must also take place. For the constitution of self and identity, for be(com)ing a person, be(com)ing culturally intelligible, recognized as a fellow human being, is a necessary part of even being able to speak (up). To have a voice, and to be considered as someone, simply put, to *matter*, is contingent on having a position in society where one is recognized as a subject. As adult norms permeate society and societal institutions, children and young people are not necessarily recognized as groups with distinct needs, or in need of representation. This makes it difficult for them to be recognized as (conventional) political subjects. Children and young people are also excluded from the conventional political systems, thus expressing their perspectives differently, or through other means, which are not always considered political (Kallio & Häkli, 2010).

Citizenship is indeed a contested subject (Staehili, 2010), but it involves recognition and representation. Instead of perceiving citizenship as static, we understand it as a “set of processual, performative and everyday relations” shaped by every day, sometimes conflicting, practices and negotiations (Spinney et al., 2015, p. 325). Cresswell (2013) has furthermore argued that the modern citizen-subject is rather constituted in relation to the city than the nation-state, and has suggested that ‘barely citizens’ are the subjects with legal rights but with cultural differences that deny them the full range of benefits of citizenship. We find the concepts of ‘less-than-citizens’ and ‘barely citizens’ as capturing how young people are, on the one hand enjoying formal rights but are nevertheless positioned differently to citizenship due to generational and economic order. Young people’s citizenship status is wrapped in an economic fabric: contingent on both *productiveness* (where the generational order positions them as inferior aged subjects); and profitability (where public transport as a pseudomarket positions them as non-profitable consumer subjects).

On the one hand, young people are not even recognized as citizens as they are not ‘productive’. Their actual school commuting is not recognized as essential mobility, so they are disqualified from citizenship framed around productiveness (a framing which is in itself highly problematic). This positions them as aged subjects, a ‘less-than-citizen’ in contrast to the adult citizen. On the other hand, young people’s access to the bus as a public space is restricted due to high fares, consequentially restricting access also to places beyond the closest neighbourhood. Public transport is exposed as a pseudo-market driven by

profitability. In this context, young people are non-profitable subjects, or simply ‘barely’ citizens in contrast to the paying transport system customer/citizen.

Young bus riders are, in this sense, both less-than citizens and ‘barely citizens’ as they are “produced through [bus] mobility” (Spinney et al., 2015, p. 327) and a public transport system based on productivity and profitability. A processual and relational approach to citizenship also reveals ambivalence, as the practices of citizenship arise from actual social interactions between and among people (cf. de Visscher 2014), and relate to economic processes that operate both near and far, which structure the everyday mobilities of young people (Ansell, 2009).

Young people’s citizenship is therefore fraught with ambivalences in its practice, but also in how young people is discursively framed as ‘less-than” and ‘barely’ citizens. Young people’s (collective) presence in the neighbourhood, and public space in general, is often framed as conflictual. Some researchers have suggested that young people are positioned as ‘out of place’, or that they ‘do not belong,’ to a public space marked by adult(ist) norms (e.g., Skelton & Valentine, 1998). This view is also often in conflict with a more overarching discourse of pedagogization of public space, where public space is perceived as static and children and young people are positioned merely as (passive) learning subjects, rather than fellow citizens with competence and agency (de Visscher, 2014). It is clear that bus riding involves many skills, and that be(com)ing a bus rider is dependent on certain codes of conduct and adherence to various norms of moving around. Knowing how to read time-tables, to pay the bus fare or use a travel pass, to get on and off the bus, or to be on the bus are skills, which are the result of the social and material interactions young people engage in in public spaces. They are part of how young people familiarize themselves with society, and are practices of citizenship and “the experiment of democracy” (Lawy and Biesta, 2006). Lawy and Biesta (2006, p. 47) contend that:

> Children’s] citizenry is not a status or possession, nor is it the outcome of a developmental and/or educational trajectory that can be socially engineered. It is a practice, interwoven and transformed over time in all the distinctive and different dimensions of their lives.

The bus mobilities of the young people in our study can thus be seen as “locations where the experiment of democracy can be enacted and where something can be learned from this enactment” (de Visscher 2014, p. 73). It is, therefore, vital that the possibilities where young people have the opportunity to engage in “the experiment of democracy” is not part of a commercialized public space. Putting a price on what should be part of the free movement of young people, public transport, is only further accentuating the inequality of mobilities and contributes to further social and spatial divisions, and consequently to a less democratic society.

Acknowledgements

The work was supported by FORMAS, the Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development, as part of the National Research Programme for Sustainable Built Environment [grant number 2019-01900].

Cover Image: “???????? ??????.. ???????? Public Transportation People Watching Silhouette” by perriscope is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

References

Ansell, N. (2009). ‘Childhood and the politics of scale: descaling children’s geographies?’, *Progress in human geography, 33*(2), pp. 190-209.

Bondemark, A., Andersson, H., Wretstrand, A. and Brundell?Freij, K. (2020) ‘Is it expensive to be poor? Public transport in Sweden’, *Transportation* 48, pp. 2709–2734. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11116-020-10145-5

Cresswell, T. (2013) ‘Citizenship in worlds of mobility’, *Critical mobilities, 2013*, pp. 105-124.

Currie, G. (ed.) (2011) *New perspectives and methods in transport and social exclusion research*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing.

De Visscher, S. (2014) ‘Mapping Children’s Presence in the Neighbourhood’in Biesta, G., De Bie, M., Wildemeersch, D. (eds.) *Civic Learning, Democratic Citizenship and the Public Sphere*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 73-89.

Fraser, N. (1995) ‘Recognition or Redistribution? A Critical Reading of Iris Young’s *Justice and the Politics of Difference’, Journal of Political Philosophy* 3, pp. 166–180. 10.1111/j.1467-9760.1995.tb00033.

Freudendal-Pedersen, M., & Kesselring, S. (2021) ‘What is the urban without physical mobilities? COVID-19-induced immobility in the mobile risk society’, *Mobilities* 16(1), pp. 81-95.

Goodman, A., Jones, A., Roberts, H., Steinbach, R., & Green, J. (2014) ‘”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* 9(2), pp. 275-293.

Jensen, O. B. (2021) ‘Pandemic disruption, extended bodies, and elastic situations – Reflections on COVID-19 and Mobilities’, *Mobilities* 16(1), pp. 66-80.

Joelsson, T., & Ekman Ladru, D. (2022) ‘Cracks in the well-plastered façade of the Nordic model: reflections on inequalities in housing and mobility in (post-) coronavirus pandemic Sweden’, *Children’s Geographies 20*(4), pp. 478-486.

Joelsson, T., Henriksson, M., and Balkmar, D. (forthcoming) ‘I’m always on the bus’ – precarious bus encounters (during the Covid-19 pandemic) in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Sweden (submitted April 29th 2022 to *Cities*, special issue on “Understanding and overcoming mobility inequality in cities”)

Khan, J., Hrelja, R. and Pettersson-Lofstedt, F. (2021) ‘Increasing public transport patronage – An analysis of planning principles and public transport governance in Swedish regions with the highest growth in ridership´ *Case Studies on Transport Policy* 9, pp. 260–270.

Kallio, K. P. and Häkli, J. (2011) ‘Young people’s voiceless politics in the struggle over urban space’, *GeoJournal 76*(1), pp. 63-75.

K?b?owski, W. (2020) ‘Why (not) abolish fares? Exploring the global geography of fare-free public

transport', *Transportation* 47, pp. 2807–2835. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11116-019-09986-6

Lawy, R., and Biesta, G. (2006) Citizenship-As-Practice: The educational implications of an inclusive and relational understanding of citizenship. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 54(1), pp. 34-50. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2006.00335.x

Martens, K. (2012) 'Justice in transport as justice in accessibility: applying Walzer's 'Spheres of Justice'to the transport sector', *Transportation 39*(6), pp. 1035-1053.

Martens, K. (2013) 'Role of the Bicycle in the Limitation of Transport Poverty in the Netherlands', *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board* 2387(1), pp. 20-25. https://doi.org/10.3141/2387-03

Purcell M. (2003) 'Citizenship and the right to the global city: reimagining the capitalist world order', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 27 (3), pp. 564–90.

Salazar, N. B. (2021) 'Existential vs. essential mobilities: insights from before, during and after a crisis', *Mobilities* 16(1), pp. 20-34.

Soja, E. (2009) 'The city and spatial justice', *Spatial justice* n° 01 September 2009. http://www.jssj.org.

Spinney, J., Aldred, R., and Brown, K. (2015) 'Geographies of citizenship and everyday (im)mobility', *Geoforum* 64, pp. 325-332.

Skelton, T. and, Valentine, G. (1998) *Cool places: geographies of youth cultures.* London & New York: Routledge.

Social Exclusion Unit. (2003) *Making the connections: final report on transport and social exclusion.* http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social_exclusion_task_force/assets/publications_1997_to_2006/making_transport_2003.pdf

Transport Analysis. (2018) *Fördjupad uppföljning av de transportpolitiska målen*. Report 2018:14

Vitrano, C. and Lindkvist, C. (2021) 'Justice in Regional Transport Planning through the Lens of Iris Marion Young', *Planning Practice & Research*, DOI: 10.1080/02697459.2021.1874637