

## Who Uses and Benefits from Toronto's Parks and Multiuse Trails? Webinar Summary

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Access to green space is widely recognized as a key indicator for mental, physical, and emotional health. Much of Toronto's green space is found through its extensive ravine system, much of which is linked by a multi-use trail system. On top of providing benefits as a space for recreation and nature, much of Toronto's multi-use trail system provides cyclists routes removed from vehicular traffic that connect many parts of the city. Despite these benefits, there is very little publicly available information on who currently uses and benefits from Toronto's parks and multiuse trail systems, and whether their amenities are equitably accessible to all Torontonians. To address this gap, between June and August 2024, The Centre for Active Transportation (TCAT) at Clean Air Partnership conducted intercept surveys and travel counts in three major multi-use trails across the city. In this webinar, TCAT Project Manager and study lead Sophie Callahan shared key transferrable insights for Ontario municipalities. Sophie shared highlights from an analysis of cross-cutting trends in the data as well as a demographic analysis that identified associations between demographic variables and trail behaviour, perceptions, and barriers and opportunities to increase trail use.

### Presenters

- Sophie Callahan, Project Manager, The Centre for Active Transportation (TCAT), [tcat@cleanairpartnership.org](mailto:tcat@cleanairpartnership.org)

### Key Findings

- The study strongly supports the view that Toronto's multi-use trail and ravine systems are integral to the community's health and well-being, serving a broad demographic spectrum.
- Racialized groups, especially those identifying as Black, East Asian, South Asian, or Indo-Caribbean, reported more negative perceptions of trail accessibility, navigability, and amenity quality compared to white respondents.
- The most common barriers to greater trail use included: Off-leash; lack of time; and insufficient amenities, such as inadequate washrooms or seating.

### Presentation Overview

#### Context

- Green spaces have mental, physical, and emotional health benefits. These spaces facilitate social and physical activities and have environmental benefits including positive affects on air quality, heat island effects, biodiversity, and ecosystem services.

- Green spaces enable active transportation in urban areas. In Toronto, the City's trails and parks are critical for commuting.
- In major cities, low-income groups, visible minorities, and renters are among those with less access to green space in their neighbourhoods than wealthier and predominantly white neighbourhoods.

### Methods

- Study areas were selected to prioritize areas with a higher need for green space, and the study considered trails as part of transportation infrastructure, not just recreation.
- Travel counts were conducted on Saturdays and during rush-hour on Wednesdays to capture data on pedestrian and cyclist demographics, including age, gender, and device type (e.g., conventional bike or electric mobility device). Approximately one-third of trail users were surveyed.
- Data was compared to local census data to assess if certain demographic groups were over or underrepresented among trail users.

### Findings

- A large majority of respondents (87%) visit the trails at least once a week, with 48% using them daily.
- Even in bad weather, 46% of users still visit at least once a week.
- Trails are particularly used for fitness/health (65%), spending time in nature (40%), and socializing (30%).
- A significant portion of respondents (73%) plan to spend at least half an hour on the trails during each visit, indicating a dedicated commitment to using the trails.
- Respondents, regardless of demographic group, generally reported positive perceptions regarding the quality and safety of the trails.
- Men were significantly overrepresented in both travel counts and survey responses, making up 56% of the total sample. This disparity was particularly pronounced among cyclists, with men outnumbering women on bikes by a ratio of about 3 to 1.
- Men were more likely than women to report no barriers to using the trails. While both genders perceived the trails as safe, women generally felt less safe compared to men.
- Racialized trail users, particularly non-white respondents, reported policing concerns and a fear of discrimination or harassment as barriers to trail use. Additionally, South Asian and Indo-Caribbean users cited a lack of formalized activities or programming as barriers.
- Findings suggest that newcomers (those who first moved to Canada within the last five years) represent a greater portion of trail users overall compared to the general Toronto population.

### Recommendations

- Recognize Toronto's multi-use trails as invaluable assets for residents' health and well-being, especially for lower-income residents, newcomers, and older individuals. Focus on expanding and protecting trails, particularly in areas with high concentrations of these groups.

- Respondents indicated several ways to improve trail use, including, but not limited to: Increased drinking fountains; year-round public washrooms; enhanced nighttime lighting; group seating, and covered spaces.
- Make trails more accessible in the winter, and improve snow clearance on trails to encourage winter trail use.
- Assess the current approach to reducing the prevalence of off-leash dogs.
- Create programs targeting women, racialized communities, and families with children to foster inclusivity and engagement. Programs that support caregiving responsibilities or target younger children could be especially beneficial for increasing trail use among these group.
- Reframe multi-use trails as part of the city's broader transportation infrastructure. This may include: Separated lanes for pedestrians cyclists; Improving the trails' commuting capacity; and enhancing cycling infrastructure to better serve older adults.
- Increase trail signage to help residents discover trails more easily. Many respondents reported stumbling upon trails by accident. Enhancing both online and offline awareness will ensure that trails are more accessible and well-known in local communities.

#### Next Steps

- The study identified gaps in understanding the unique barriers and opportunities for women and newcomers using the trails. To address these, targeted focus groups and in-person walk audits are being conducted to gain deeper insights into the needs of these groups and develop more specific recommendations.

#### Additional Resources

- [Who Uses and Benefits from Toronto's Parks and Multiuse Trails?](#)

#### Contact Information

Please reach out to us at any time with questions, input, or for additional information.

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