

Transit Joint Powers Authority for Merced County

FINAL Short Range Transit Plan 2012-2017



Volume 3: Market Research Report



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Methodology

Three surveys of Merced County Transit riders were conducted as part of this study. These included:

- On-board survey of The Bus fixed route passengers
- Survey of Carless Commute riders conducted with the aid of sponsoring agencies
- Mail-back Survey of Dial-a-Ride passengers

In addition, qualitative information was collected via a series of stakeholder interviews, public meetings and on-bus observations. This report summarizes the findings of all data collection efforts.

On-board Survey of Fixed Route Passengers

In May 2011 an on-board survey of passengers was conducted on a sample of The Bus runs which included all routes and days of the week. Trained surveyors rode assigned buses to distribute and collect a bi-lingual, self-administered questionnaire. A total of 847 passengers completed the questionnaire. The table at the right shows the number of questionnaires collected on each route.

Prior to data analysis, the sample was weighted to reflect actual ridership by route. This eliminates the disproportionality in the sample and insures that the information included in this report is representative of The Bus's overall ridership.

A sample of this size has an overall margin of error of approximately +/-3%. Throughout this report, we will often break this sample into three subsets with somewhat larger margins of error:

- Merced Routes – 574 respondents (+/-3.5%)
- Los Banos Routes (10, 10X, 14) – 81 respondents (+/-10.5%)
- Other Rural/Intercity Routes (7, 8, 9) – 192 respondents (+/-6.5%)

While we understand that these groupings are somewhat different than those used by TJPAMC for funding definitions, we believe they are more useful for understanding the various market segments among the ridership.

Survey of Carless Commute Riders

Carless Commute provides home to work transportation for a large number of disabled individuals traveling to work programs. The consulting team worked with staff at several developmentally disabled program sites and the Central Valley Regional Center to have them assist their clients in completing the survey. Seventy-

Route	Sample
Route 1	92
Route 2	60
Route 3	124
Route 4	59
Route 5	24
Route 7	92
Route 8	52
Route 9	48
Route 10	36
Route 10X	13
Route 11	38
Route 12	89
Route 14	32
Route 15	19
Route 16	29
Route 22	40
Total	847

nine completed questionnaires were returned. This data will be reported separately, as this subscription commuter service is quite different than The Bus's general public fixed routes.

Mail-back Survey of Dial-a-Ride Passengers

Dial-a-Ride drivers distributed a customized questionnaire and business reply envelope to Dial-a-Ride passengers on all buses over six days in June 2011. Approximately 300 questionnaires were distributed and 122 were returned by mail.

Stakeholder Interviews & Public Workshops

In-depth personal interviews were conducted with individuals representing various constituencies. These included:

- UC Merced
- Merced College (Merced and Los Banos)
- Kingsview Work Program
- Merced County Department of Workforce Investment
- Los Banos Worknet
- Merced County Human Services
- Fixed route and Dial-a-Ride Drivers

Public workshops were held in Merced (day and evening workshops), Atwater and Los Banos. These were publicized via newspaper ads, posters on buses and distribution of posters through stakeholders.

In addition, the consultants rode a cross section of routes speaking with passengers informally and observing ridership characteristics.

Fixed Route Survey

Who is Riding The Bus?

Community of Residence

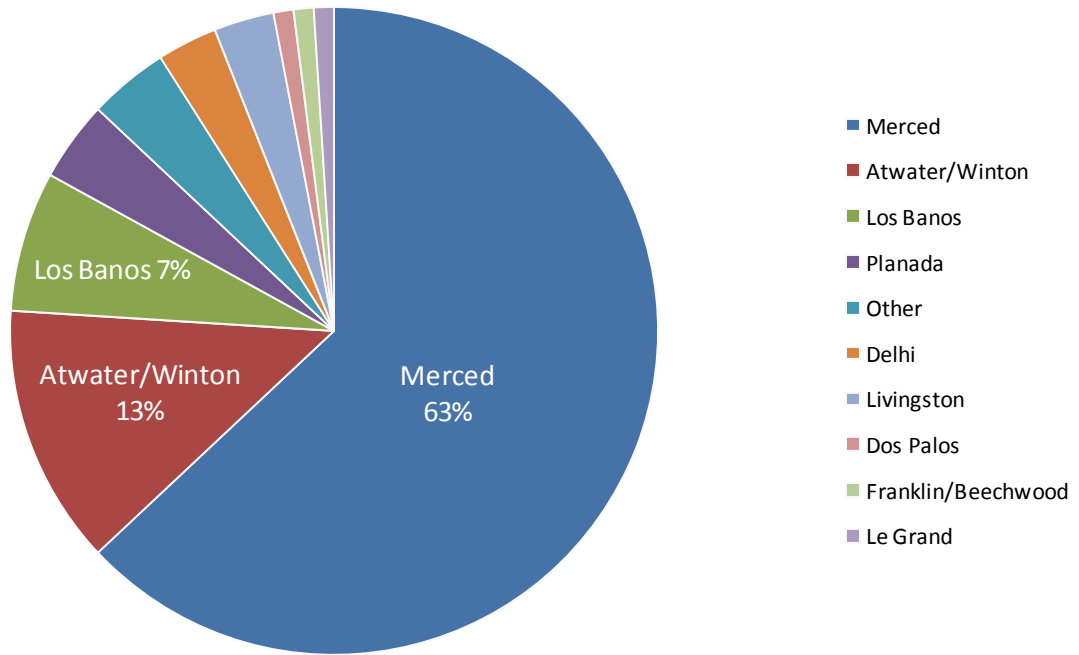


Figure 1 Community of Residence

Community of Residence

Based on the survey, it appears that about 63% of The Bus riders reside in Merced, with another 13% in nearby Atwater/Winton. Seven percent live in Los Banos and smaller groups (4% or less) live in the other outlying Merced County communities.

Age of Riders

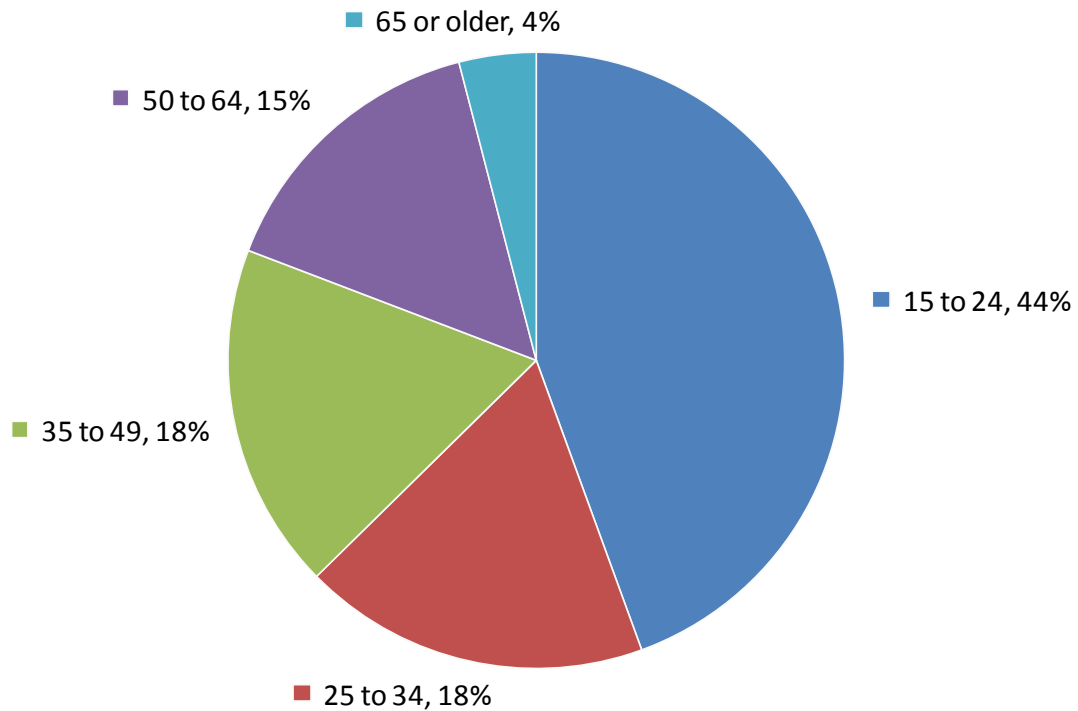


Figure 2 Age of Riders

Age

The demographic characteristic that most distinctly defines The Bus ridership is youth. Forty-four percent (44%) of riders are age 24 or younger. As we will see later in this report, this reflects the large number of students who ride The Bus.

Less than 20% of riders are age 50 or older and only 4% are senior citizens.

Age by Route Grouping

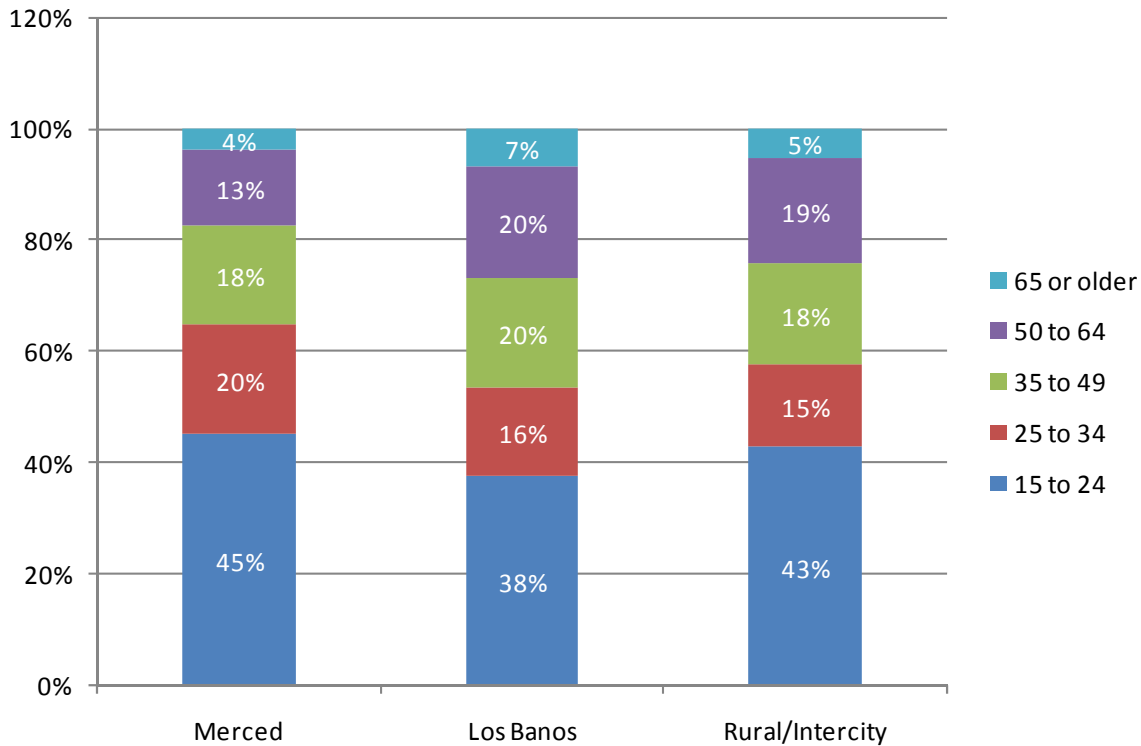


Figure 3 Age by Route Group

Variation in Age by Route

The chart above looks at the age distribution of riders on each group of routes:

- Merced Routes
- Los Banos Routes (10, 10X and 14)
- Other Intercity Routes (7, 8 and 9)

For each group, well over one third of the riders are 24 or younger. However, the proportion is highest for Merced with 45% of its riders under 25.

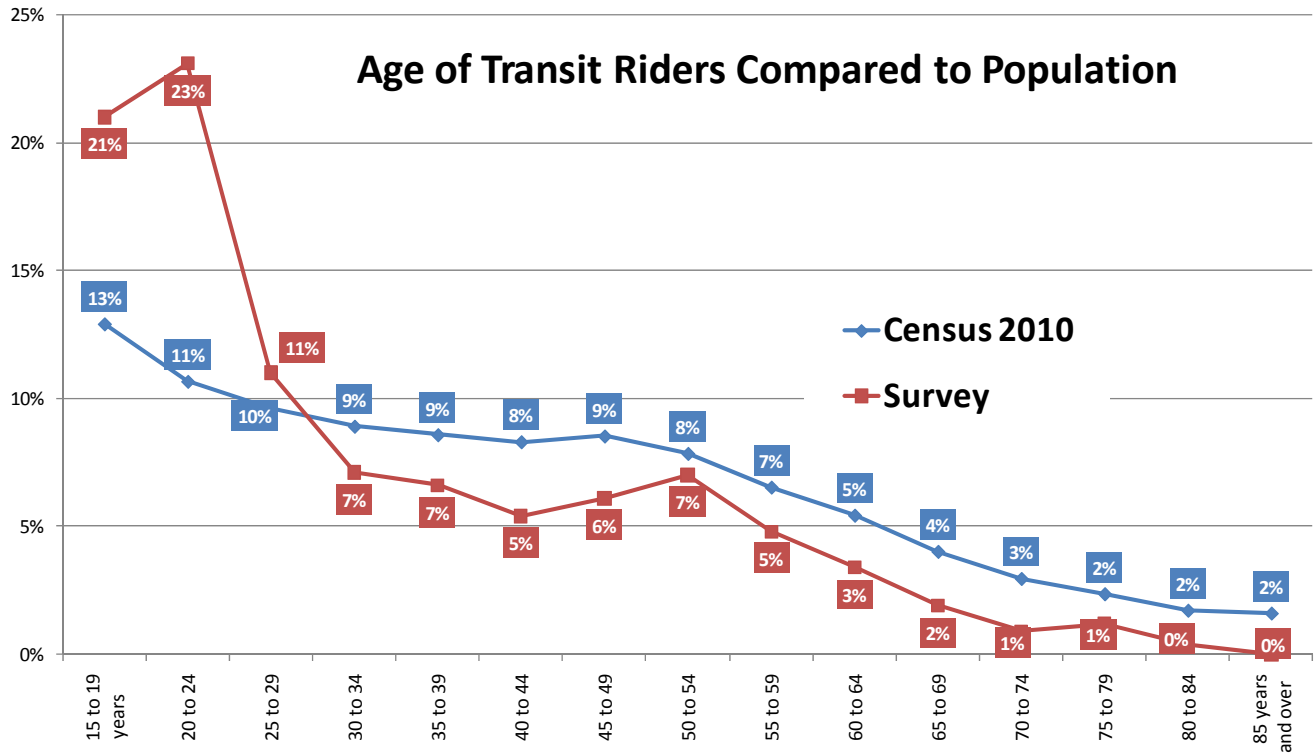


Figure 4 Age of Riders Compared to Census Data

Age of Riders Compared to County of Merced Census

The Bus’s ridership is much younger than the overall Merced County population as the chart above demonstrates. This is often the case for transit systems throughout the country, as young people rely heavily on transit to get to school and early jobs, while their earning power is low. However, The Bus’s ridership is even more skewed towards the youthful end of the spectrum, because of the large number of Merced College and UC Merced students among its ridership base.

Employment Status of Riders

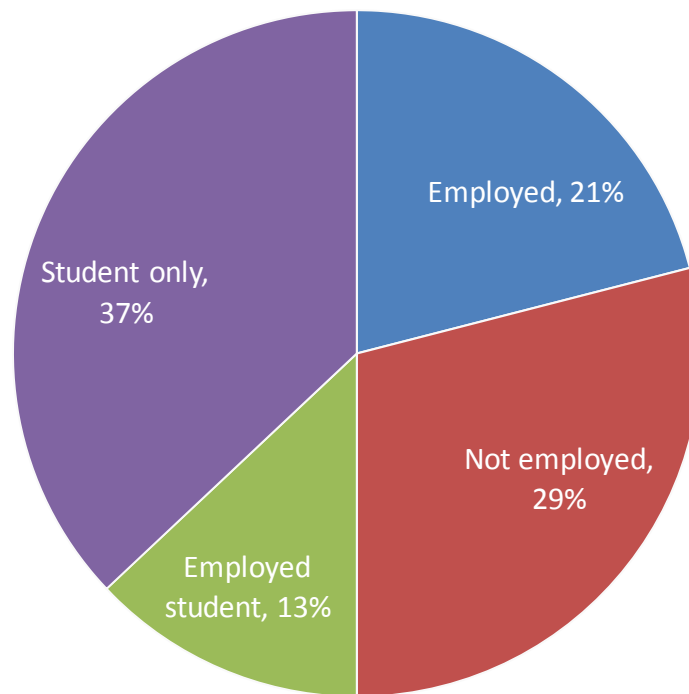


Figure 5 Employment/Student Status

Employment/Student Status

The Bus serves an economically active ridership. More than seven out of ten riders (71%) are either employed, students or both. One third of riders are employed, half are students, and 13% fall into both of these categories. This is true across all three route groups.

This profile is reinforced by the fact that 68% of riders say they use the bus to commute to work or school at least one day each week.

Student Status

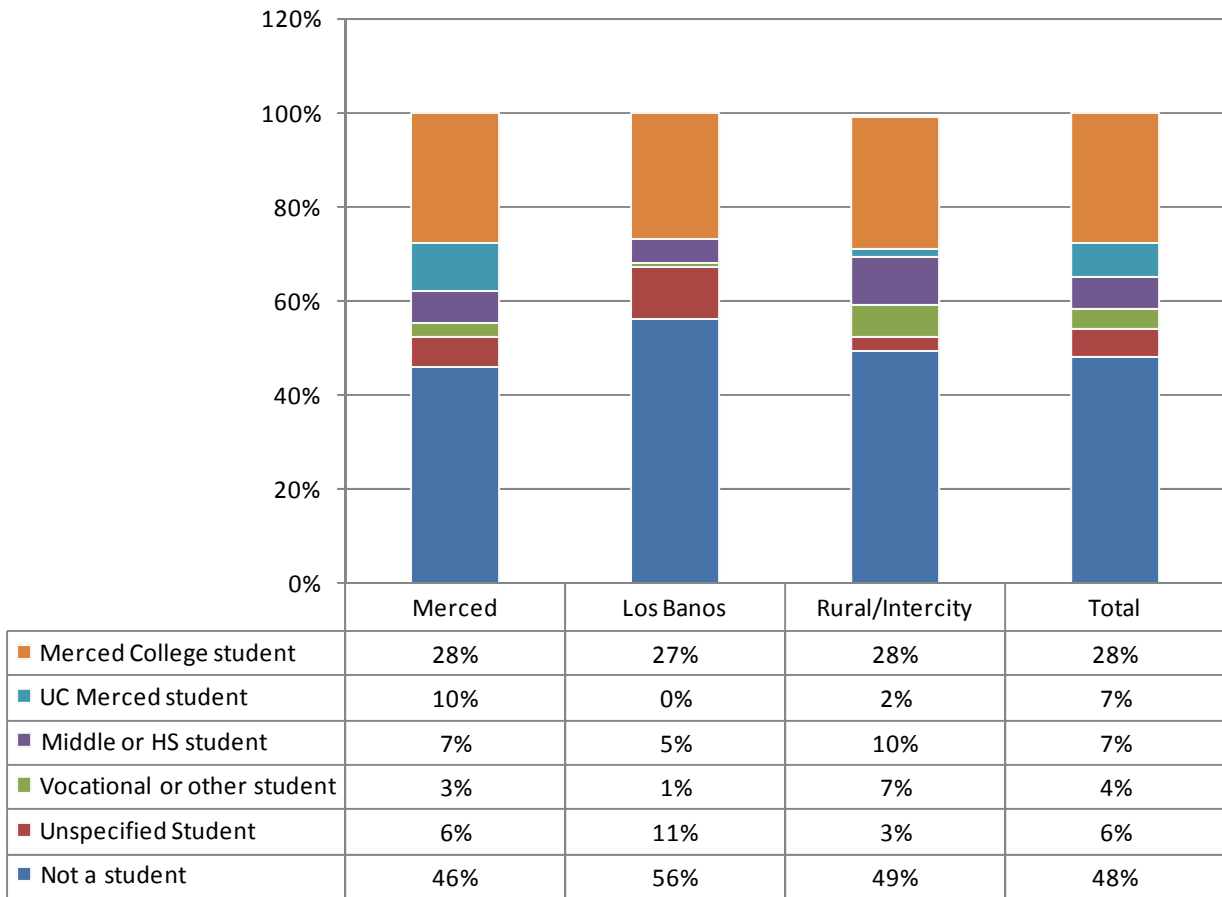


Figure 6 Student Status by Route Group

Student Status Details

As previously noted, half of all riders are students. The largest share of these is comprised of Merced College students who represented 28% of all passengers who completed the survey. As the chart above shows, Merced College students are equally represented in all route groups – Merced, Los Banos and other intercity routes.

UC Merced students make up about 10% of the ridership on the Merced routes, but very little on routes outside the city. Middle school, high school, vocational school students and students who did not specify their school make up another 17% of riders.

Ethnicity

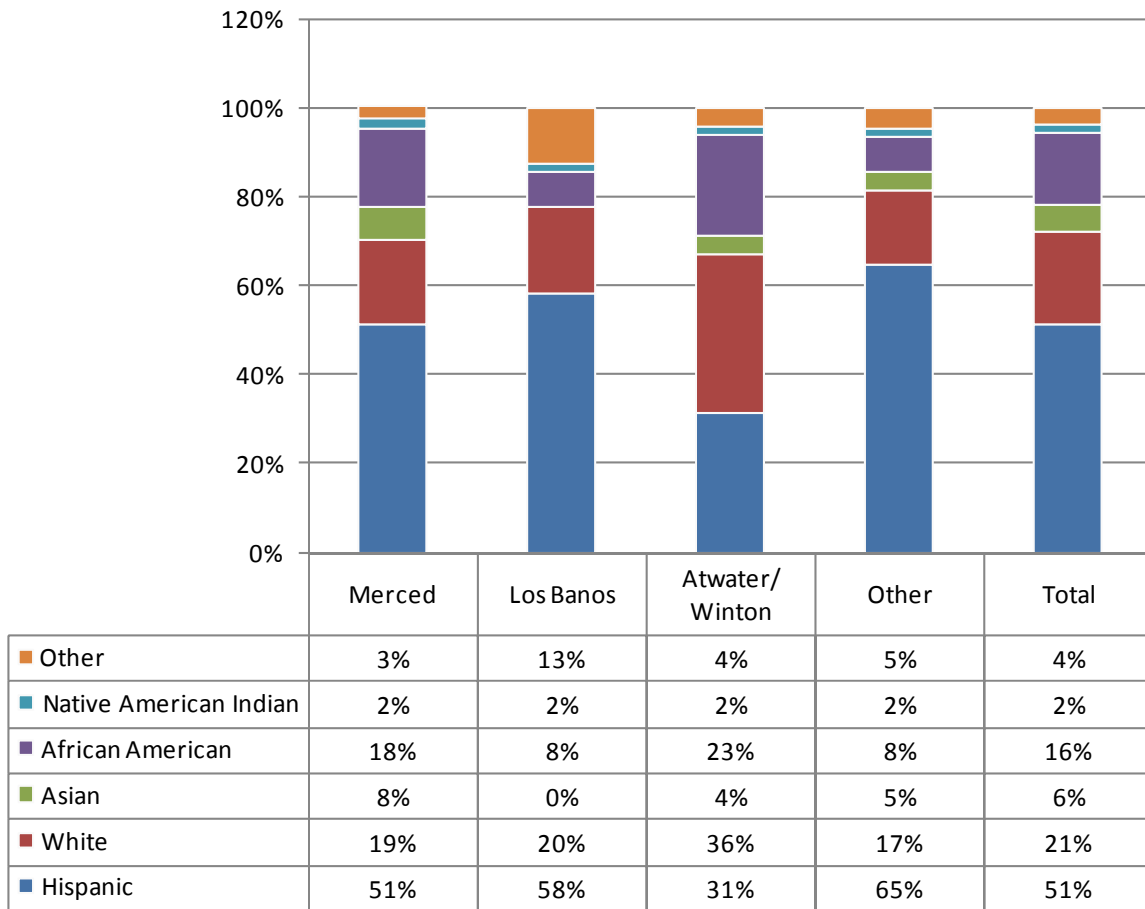


Figure 7 Ethnicity by Community of Residence

Ethnicity and Language

The chart above shows the ethnic breakdown of the sample by community of residence. Just over half of all respondents said they were Hispanic, but only 12% completed the questionnaire in Spanish. The number of Hispanic respondents was higher in Los Banos and outlying communities.

Transit Dependence

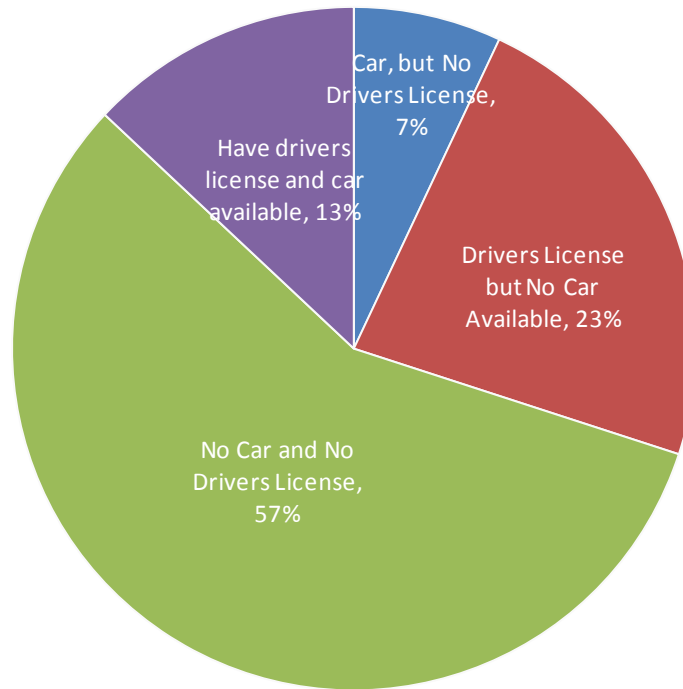


Figure 8 Transit Dependence

Availability of Vehicle and Drivers License

Most Merced The Bus riders do not have the option of driving themselves. Only 13% of those surveyed said they had a drivers license AND a vehicle available for the trip they were making.

Overall, 36% have a driver's license and hence may sometimes have the option of driving. Seven percent have a car but no driver's license. However, 57% have neither a car nor driver's license making them quite transit dependent.

Year Passenger Began Riding The Bus

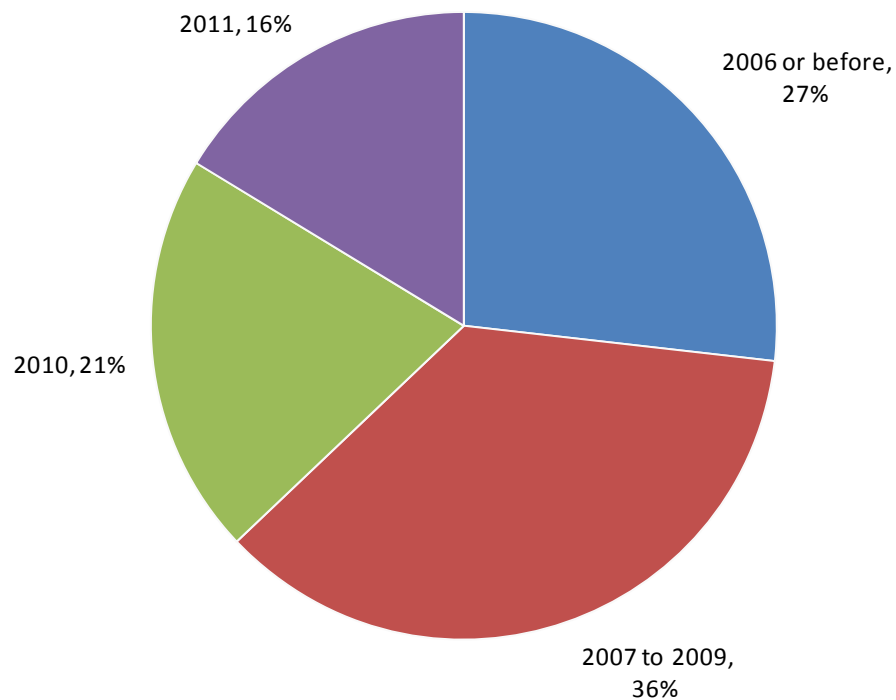


Figure 9 Duration of Ridership

Duration of Ridership

Well over one third (37%) of The Bus riders have just started using the system during 2010 or 2011 – a period of less than 18 months. A high level of “turnover” in ridership is common among transit systems, especially systems that serve a large number of young people and students. Only about a quarter (27%) of riders have been riding for five years or more.

This rapid turnover in ridership points to a need for effective passenger information and marketing. The Bus is constantly educating new riders about how to use the system.

Disability That Impacts Mobility

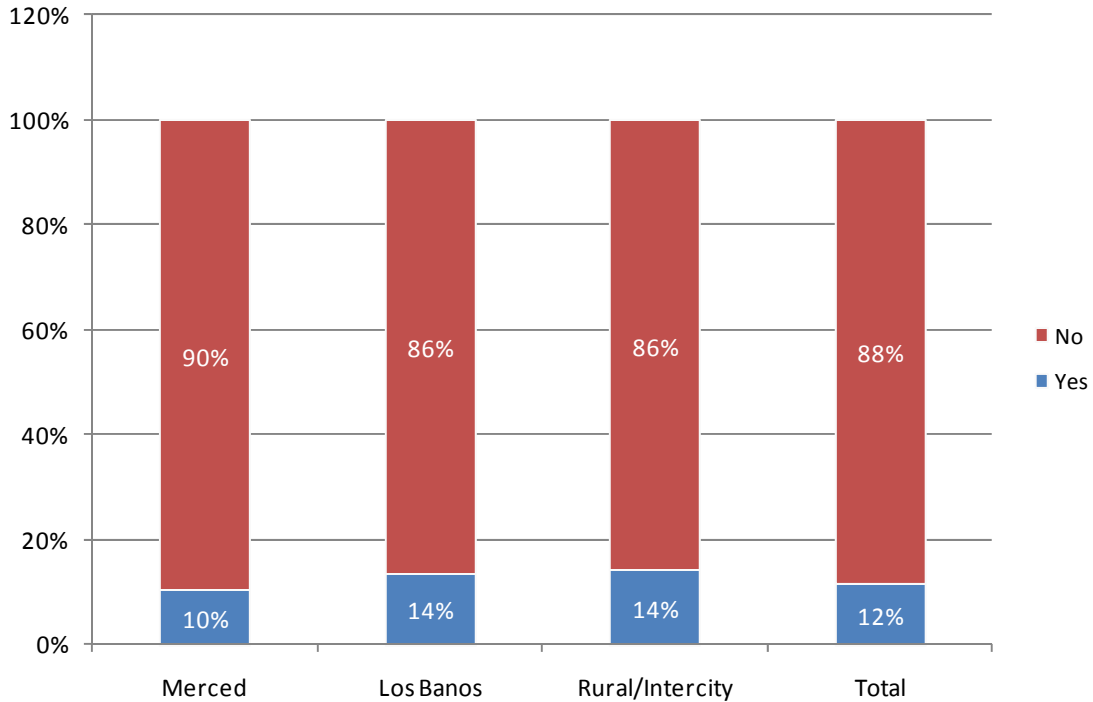


Figure 10 Disability that Impacts Mobility

Disability

Riders were asked if they have a disability that impacts their mobility. Twelve percent said they do – somewhat more on Los Banos and Intercity routes than on the Merced routes.

Income

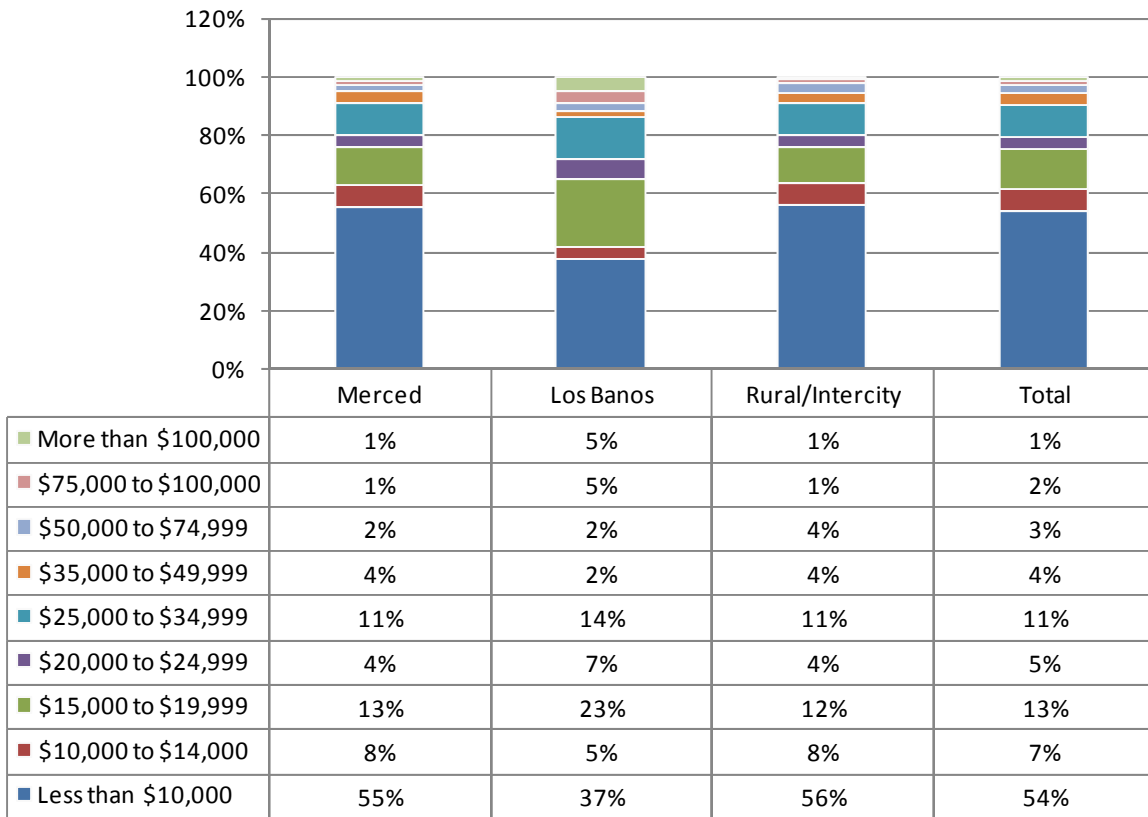


Figure 11 Income

Income

About three quarters (74%) of riders reported household incomes of under \$20,000. This is not surprising considering the high level of transit dependence and the large number of young people among the ridership.

However, about a fifth of riders (21%) have incomes above \$25,000. Incomes were somewhat higher on the Los Banos routes (28% above \$25,000), probably reflecting the incomes of commuters who use the 10X.

How do Riders Use The Bus?

Destination	Origin												
	ATWATER	DELHI	DOS PALOS	GUSTINE	LE GRAND	LIVINGSTON	LOS BANOS	MERCED	MODESTO	PLANADA	TURLOCK	WINTON	
ATWATER	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%	
DELHI	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	
DOS PALOS	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
LE GRAND	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
LIVINGSTON	0.0%	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.1%	
LOS BANOS	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	3.6%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
MERCED	3.8%	0.8%	0.4%	0.0%	2.1%	1.7%	2.0%	70.2%	0.0%	1.4%	0.1%	3.1%	
PLANADA	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	
TURLOCK	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%	
WINTON	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	

Origin and Destination

Passengers were asked to provide detailed origin/destination information which was geocoded and will be presented separately. At a summary level, however, the chart above looks at the community where passengers said they began and would end their one-way trip.

The majority of all trips (70.2%) begin and end in Merced, while another 19.5% of trips are between Merced and one of the other Merced County communities.

Intra-community trips outside of Merced include 4.1% in Atwater/Winton and 3.6% in Los Banos.

Frequency of Use - Days/Week

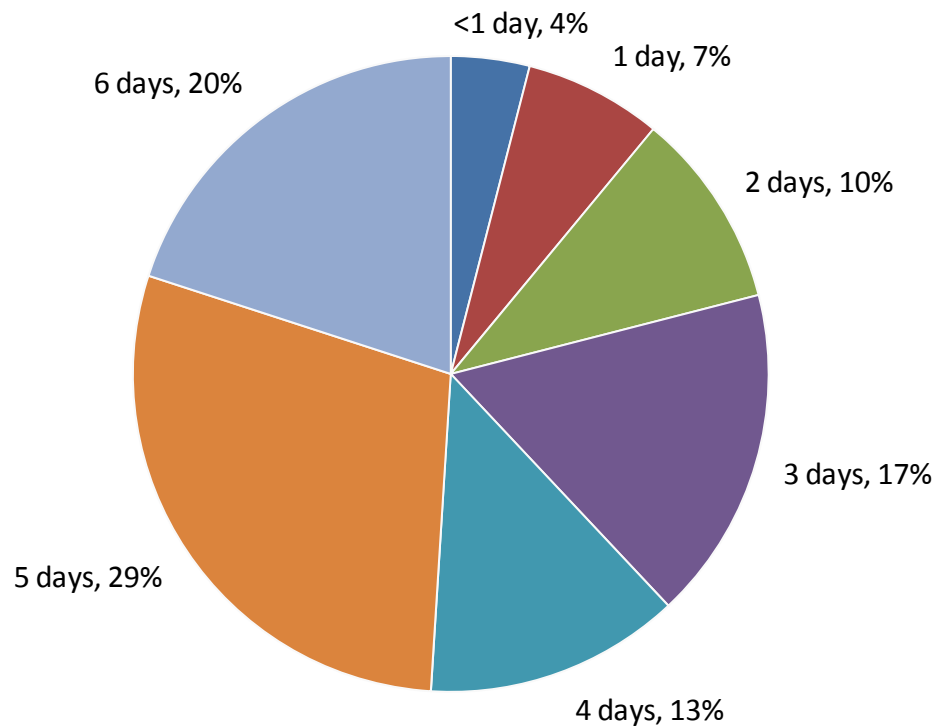


Figure 12 Days per Week Riders Use The Bus

Frequency of Use

Most riders are regular users of the bus. Nearly half (49%) say they ride five or six days per week, while another 30% ride three or four days each week. Only about one fifth (21%) of riders can be considered occasional users. This would be expected, given the high level of transit dependence among the ridership base.

Trip Purpose

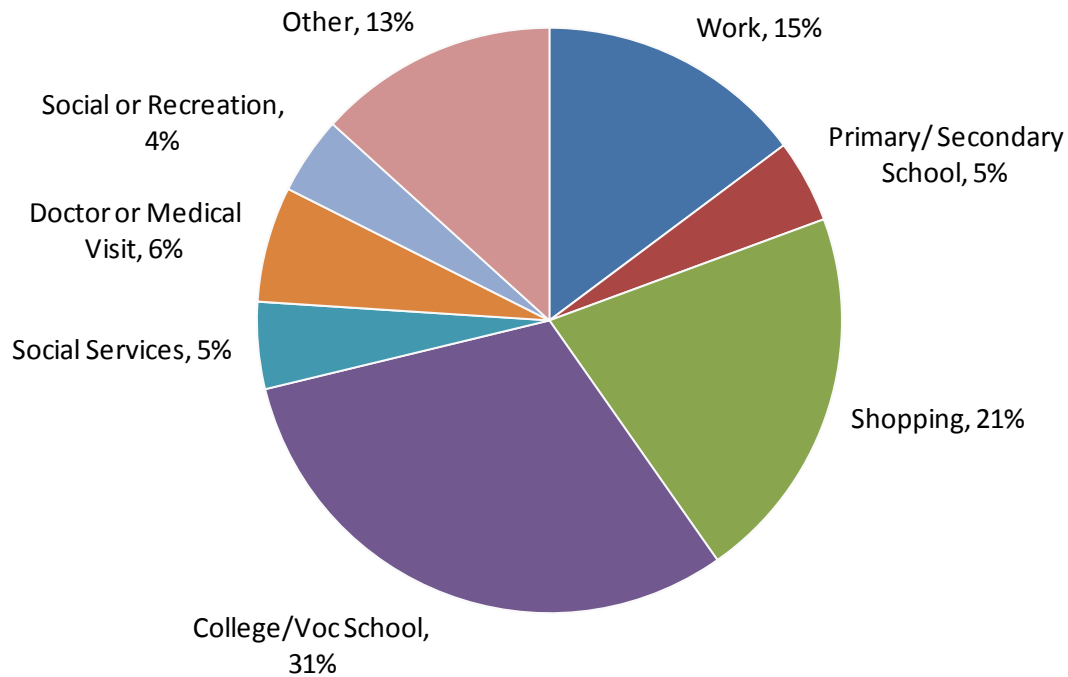


Figure 13 Trip Purpose

Trip Purpose

Riders were asked the main purpose of the trip they were making when surveyed. The largest group, 31%, were on their way to or from College or Vocational School. Another 5% were on their way to or from primary/secondary school for a total of 36% who were traveling for education. Fifteen percent of riders were on their way to or from work, indicating that more than half of all trips surveyed on The Bus were commute trips.

After commuting, the next largest trip purpose is shopping. Twenty-one percent (21%) of riders were going shopping, while 11% were going to appointments – either medical (6%) or social service (5%).

Trip Purpose by Route Group

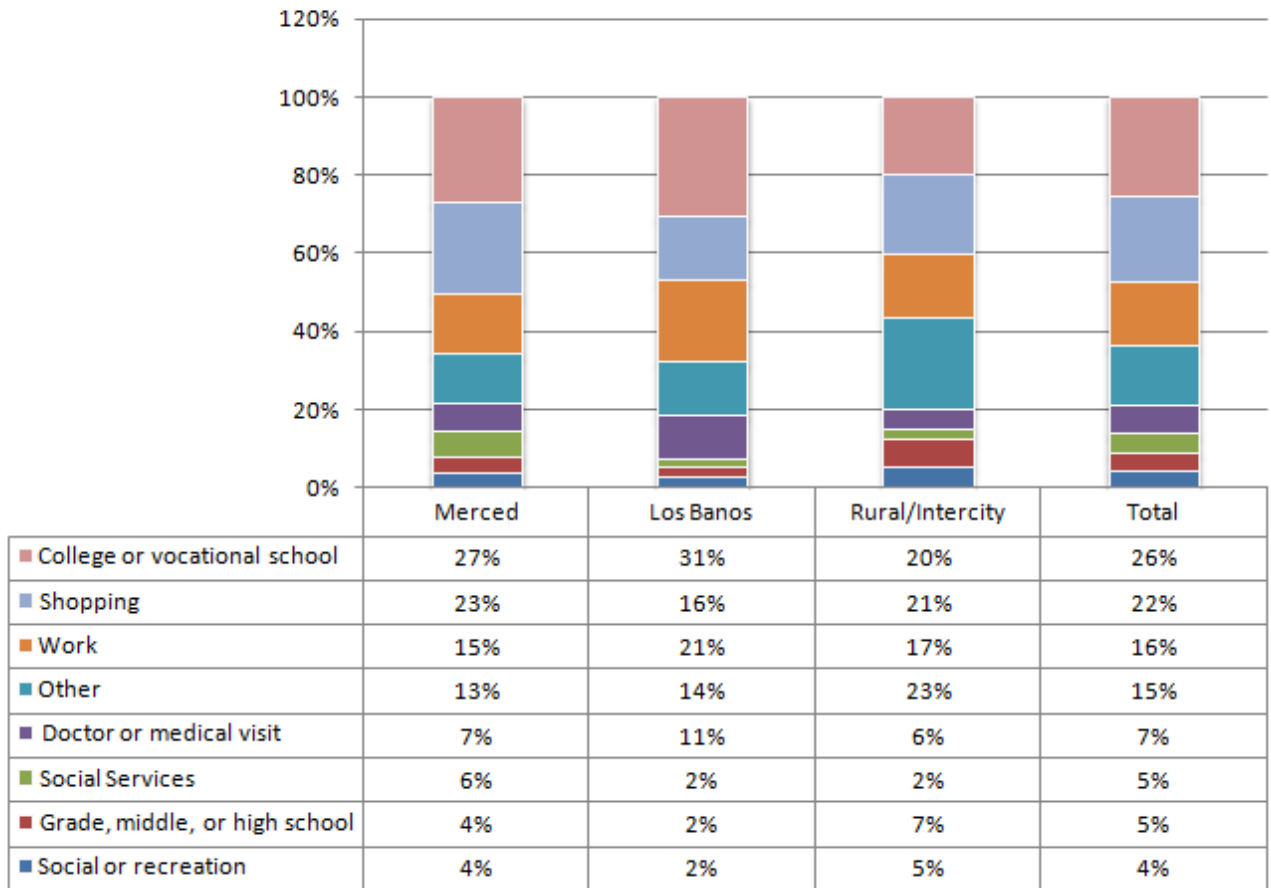


Figure 14 Trip Purpose by Route Group

Trip Purpose by Route Group

The distribution of trip purposes varies somewhat by route group. College trips are most dominant on the Los Banos and Merced routes, where the two Merced College campuses are located.

There are higher percentages of work trips on the Los Banos and Intercity routes than within Merced. Los Banos has more medical trips and less shopping trips than the other two groups.

Trip Purpose by Transit Dependence

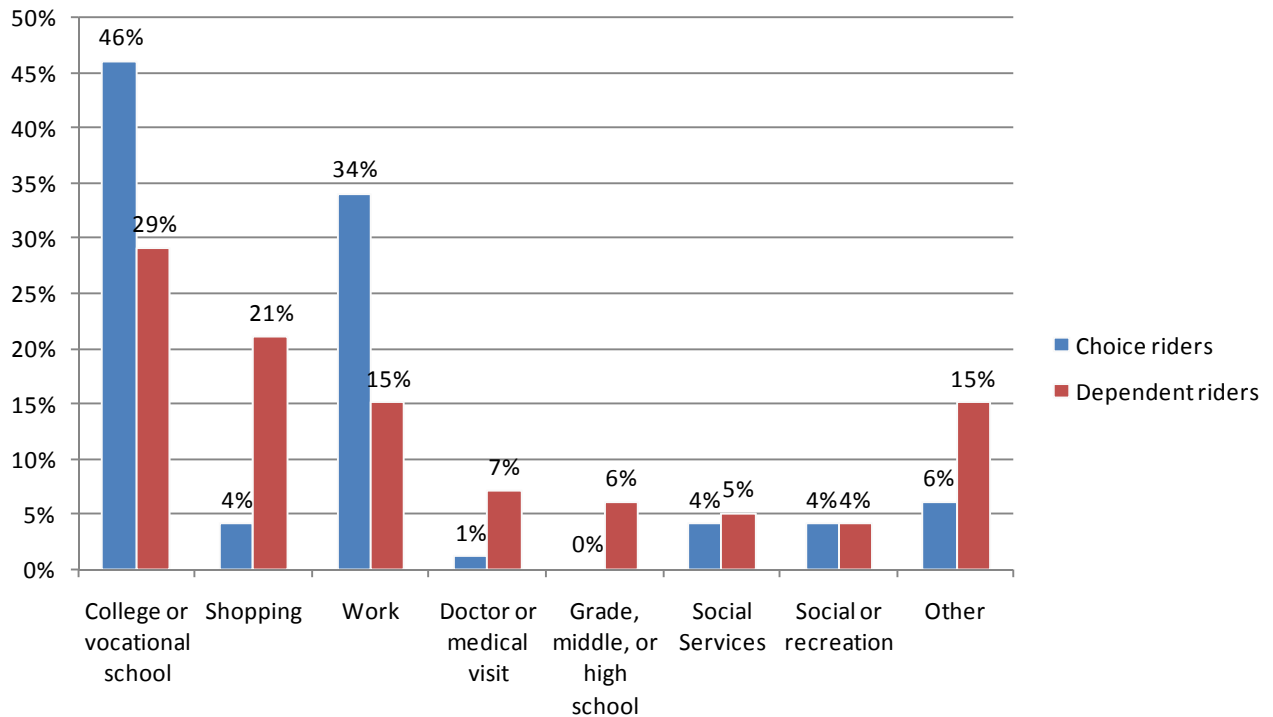


Figure 15 Trip Purpose by Transit Dependence

Variations in Trip Purpose by Transit Dependence

As previously discussed, 13% of The Bus riders can be considered “choice riders” in that they have a driver’s license and car available. This is a highly commute oriented ridership segment. When surveyed, 46% were traveling to or from college and 34% were traveling to or from work. Hence 80% of choice riders use The Bus for commute trips.

By comparison, among transit dependent riders, 29% were traveling to/from college and 15% to/from work. Shopping was a much more frequent trip purpose among transit dependent riders (21%) than among choice riders (4%).

Use of The Bus to Commute (at least one day per week)

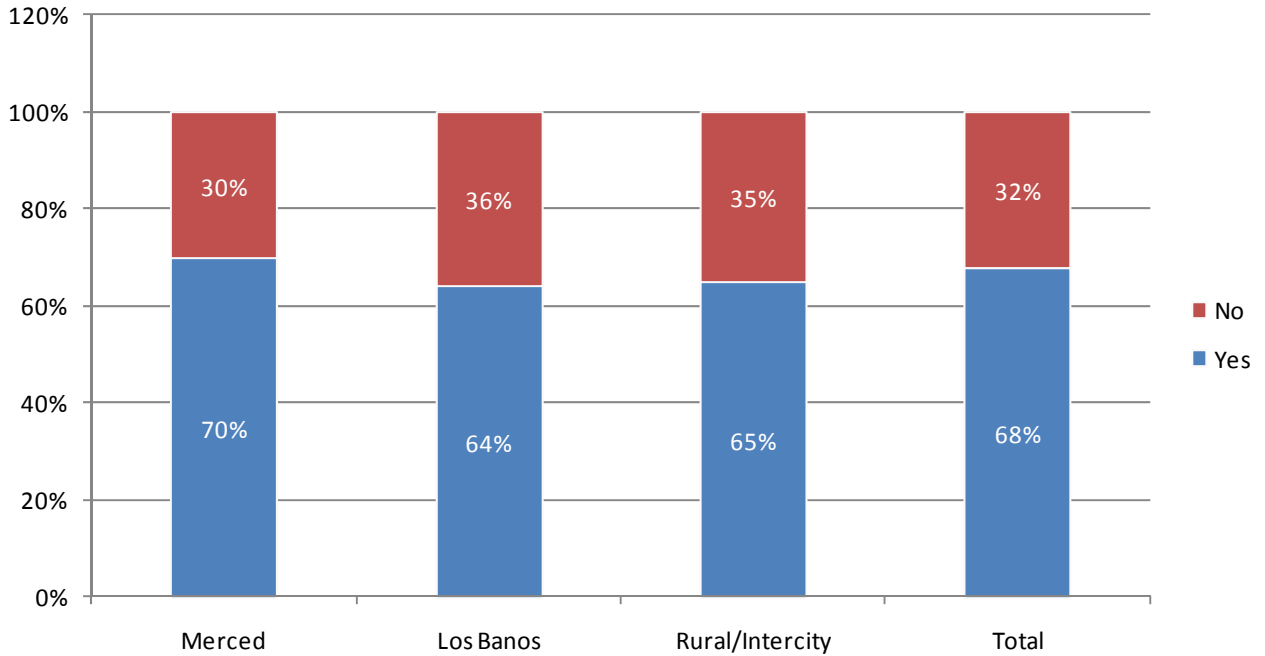


Figure 16 Use of The Bus to Commute by Route Group

Trip Purpose – Commuting

While 36% of riders said they were commuting to school or work when surveyed, a much higher percentage (68%) say they use the bus to commute at least one day per week. This is true across all route groups – but is highest on the Merced routes.

Transfer Activity

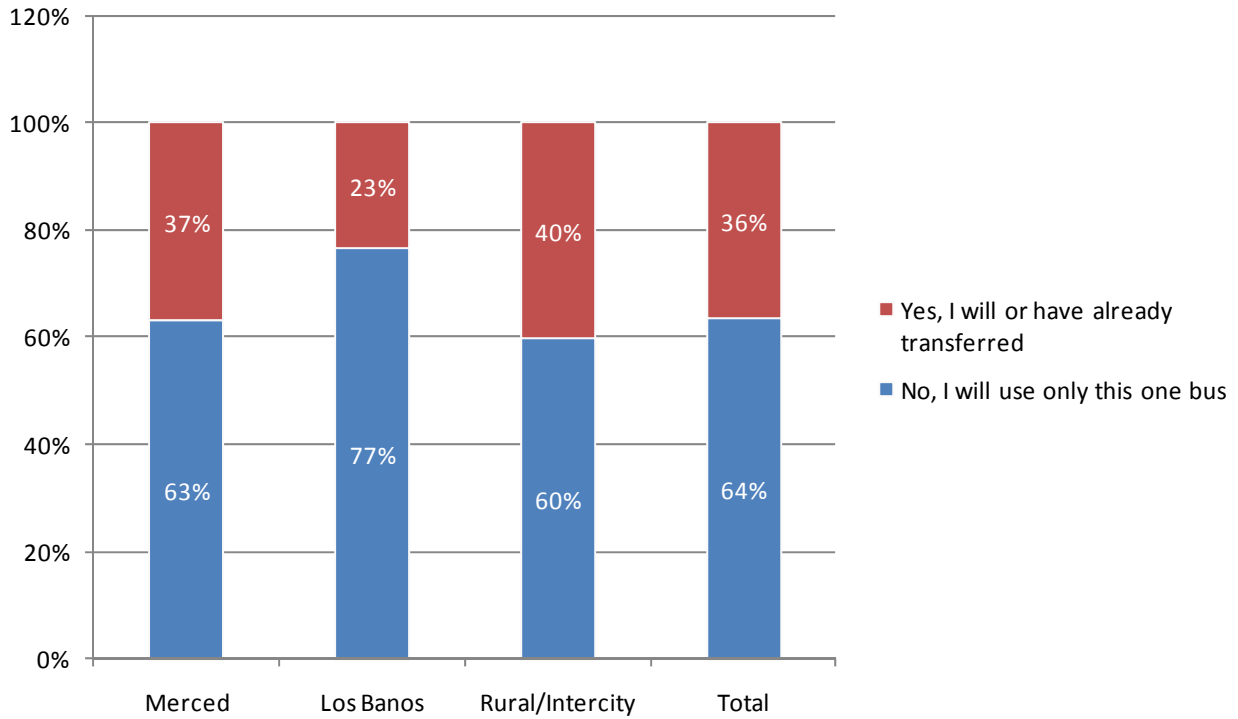


Figure 17 Transfer Activity by Route Group

Transferring

Just over one third of riders said they transfer to complete their one-way trip. More riders on the rural/intercity routes transfer than on the Merced or Los Banos routes. Los Banos has the lowest level of transferring.

Measuring the transfer rate in this manner will somewhat overstate the percent of linked trips that involve transfers because individuals who transfer are on more buses and hence have a somewhat higher probability of being captured in the survey. The actual transfer rate is probably between 20 and 25%.

Fare Payment

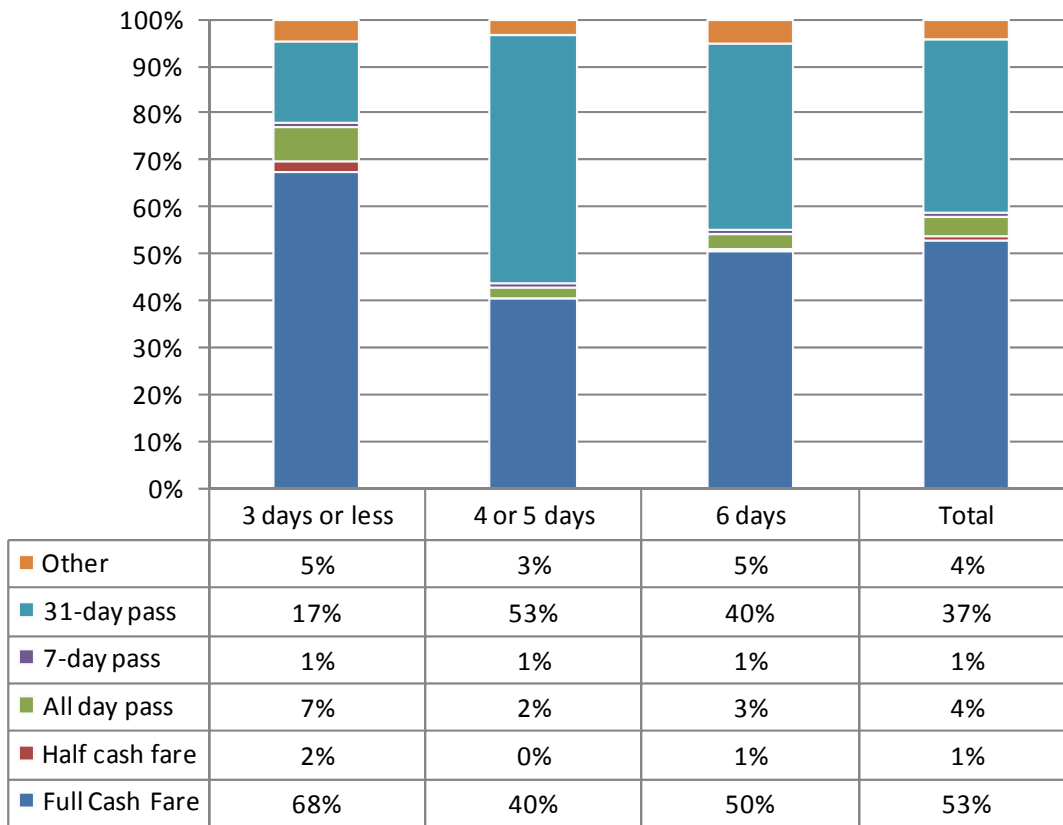


Figure 18 Fare Payment Method by Route Group

Fare Payment

Most The Bus riders pay their fare in cash (54%) and pay the full cash fare (53%). The 31-day pass is quite popular with regular riders (4-5 days, 53%) and frequent riders (6 days, 40%). However even among these groups that can definitely benefit from the economy of the pass, many riders still pay cash.

There is very low utilization of the All Day Pass and the 7-Day Pass despite the fact that these offer regular riders, especially those who transfer, a significant savings over the cash fare.

Website Use by Age Group

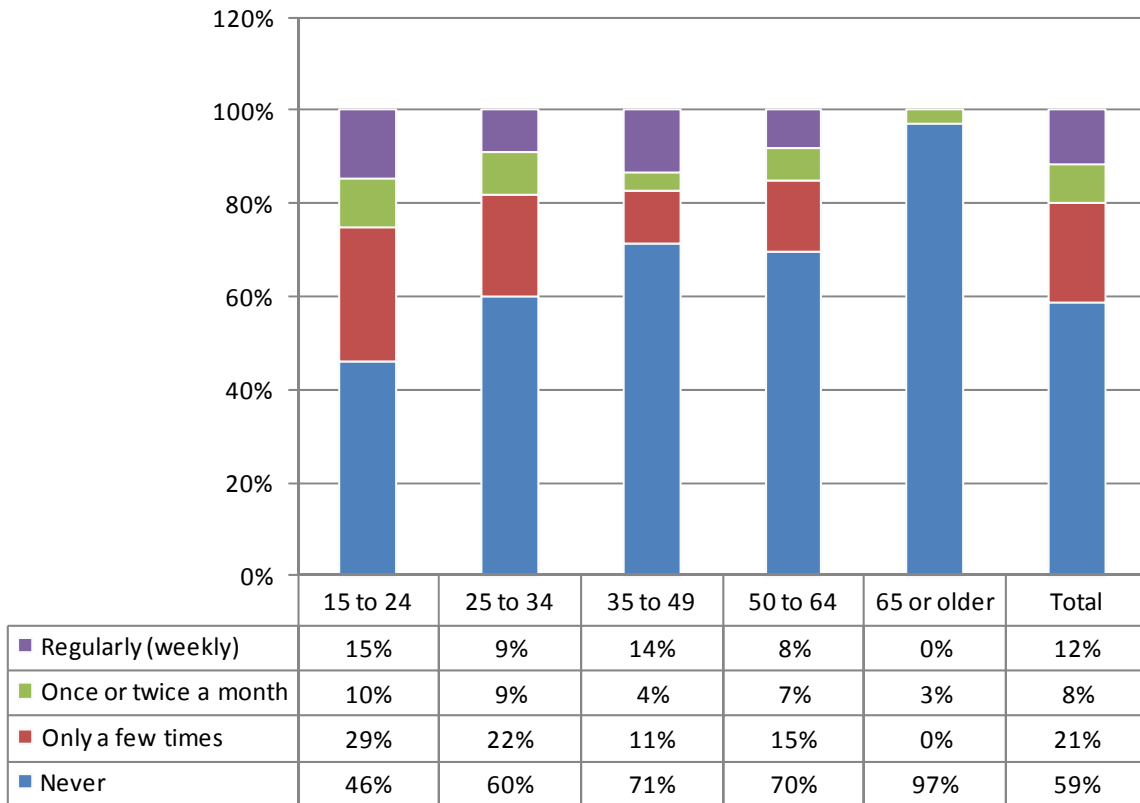


Figure 19 Website Use by Age Group

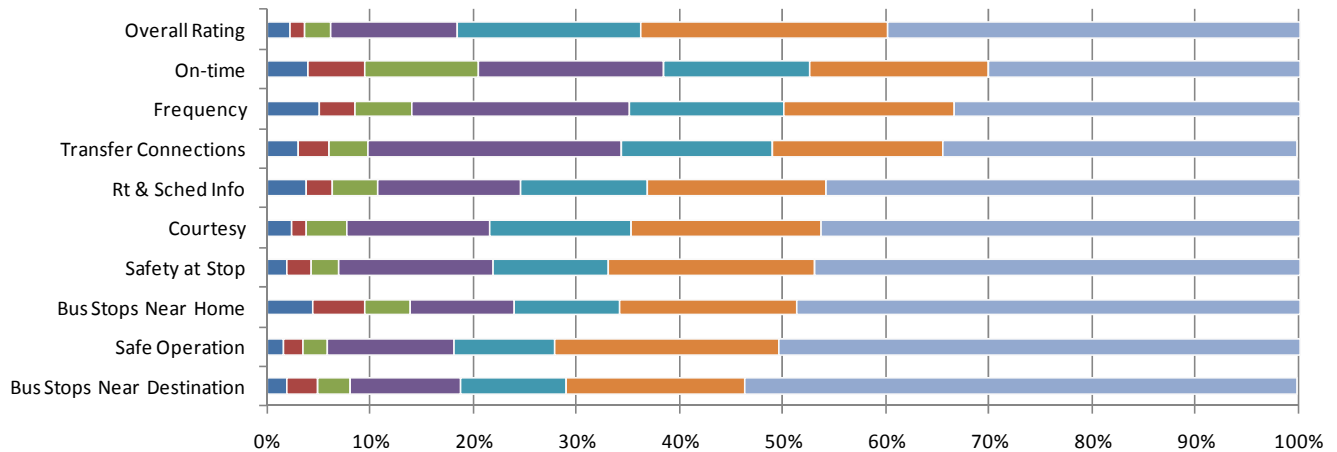
Website Use

Four out of ten riders have used The Bus website at least a few times. However, only about 12% say they use it regularly (at least once a week). As would be expected, the level of usage is highest among the 15-24 age group among whom a quarter (25%) visit the website at least monthly, and another 29% have used it a few times.

The large proportion of riders who are young and/or students points to an opportunity to use the website and social media more effectively as marketing tools.

How Satisfied are Riders?

Satisfaction Ratings



	Bus Stops Near Destination	Safe Operation	Bus Stops Near Home	Safety at Stop	Courtesy	Rt & Sched Info	Transfer Connections	Frequency	On-time	Overall Rating
■ 1 Very dissatisfied	2%	2%	5%	2%	3%	4%	3%	5%	4%	2%
■ 2	3%	2%	5%	2%	1%	3%	3%	4%	6%	1%
■ 3	3%	2%	5%	3%	4%	5%	4%	6%	11%	3%
■ 4 Neutral	11%	12%	10%	15%	14%	14%	25%	21%	18%	12%
■ 5	10%	10%	10%	11%	14%	12%	15%	15%	14%	18%
■ 6	17%	22%	17%	20%	18%	17%	17%	16%	17%	24%
■ 7 Very satisfied	54%	50%	49%	47%	46%	46%	34%	33%	30%	40%

Figure 20 Satisfaction Ratings

Satisfaction

Riders were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with various aspects of bus service. They used a 7-point scale ranging from Very Satisfied (7) to Very Dissatisfied (1). The chart above shows the full distribution of answers arranged from the aspect with which they are most satisfied (bus stops near their destination) to that with which they are least satisfied (on-time performance).

Aspects of service which were rated the highest (6 or 7 by 70%+ of riders) included the core elements of Bus Stops Near Destination and Safe Operation of the Buses.

Three aspects of service have distinctly lower levels of satisfaction and higher levels of dissatisfaction than the service overall. These are:

- On-time Arrival of Bus: 21% give this a less than neutral rating and only 30% give it the top score.
- Frequency of Service: 15% give this a less than neutral rating and only 33% give it the top score.
- Reliability of Transfer Connections: 10% give this a less than neutral rating, but 25% rate it as neutral and only 34% rate it a 7. The high level of neutral ratings is likely because the majority of riders don't transfer.

Other aspects of service where there are small, but significant pockets of dissatisfaction include:

- Bus Stops Near Home: 15% rate as below neutral
- Route and Schedule Information: 12% rate as below neutral

Satisfaction Rating

Mean Rating on Scale of 1 to 7

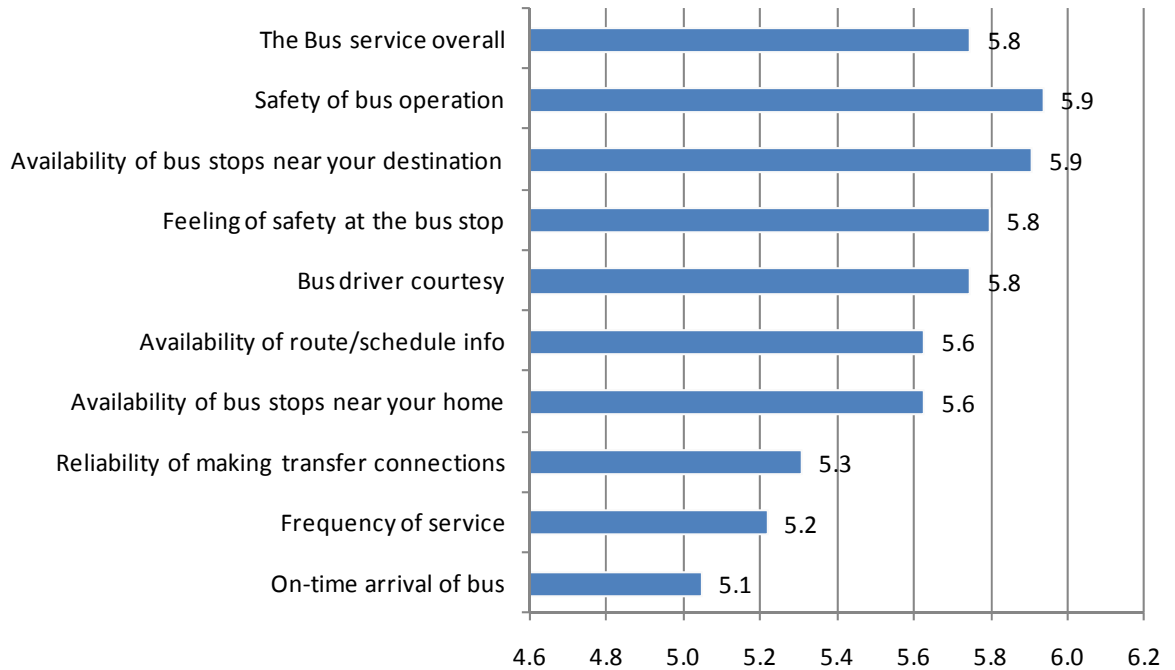


Figure 21 Satisfaction Rating Means

Mean Satisfaction Ratings

Another way to look at satisfaction ratings is to look at the mean scores given to each aspect. This somewhat changes the rank ordering of the factors. However, the same three aspects of service continue to be rated significantly lower than the others.

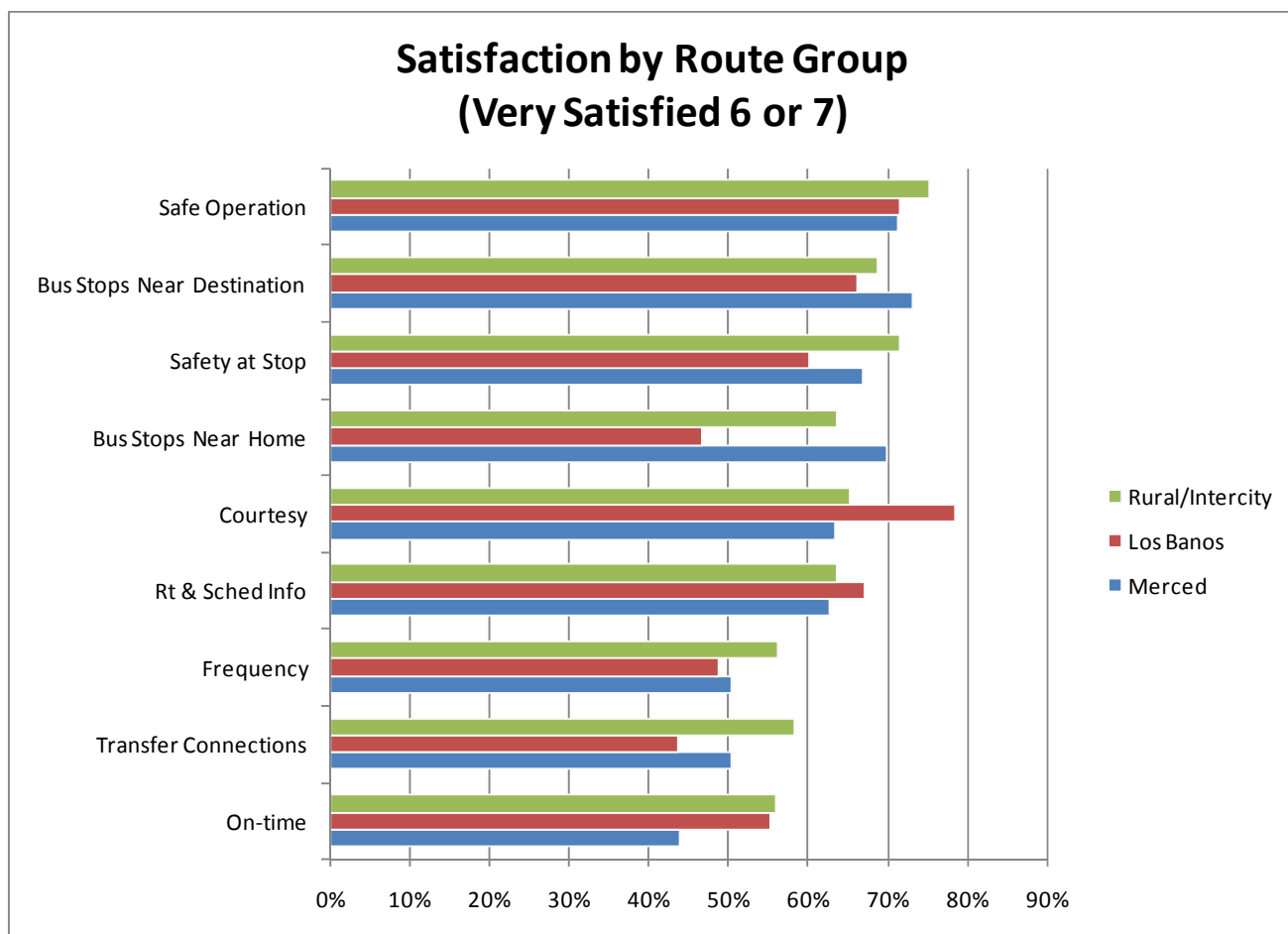


Figure 22 Satisfaction by Route Group

Variations in Satisfaction

This chart shows the very satisfied (6-7) ratings for each aspect by route group.

There is a fair amount of variation in the satisfaction levels across the three route groups. Satisfaction with On-Time Performance is much lower on the Merced routes, while satisfaction with Bus Stops Near Home and Transfer Connections are lower on the Los Banos Routes.

Satisfaction with driver courtesy is much higher on the Los Banos routes.

The rural/intercity routes generally have higher ratings than the other route groups.

Impact of problems on satisfaction scores					
	Percent indicating problem in past 30 days	Rating with problem in past 30 days	Rating with no problem in last 30 days	Satisfaction decline when problem experienced [C - B]	Impact score [A * D]
	A	B	C	D	E
On-time arrival of bus	21%	3.07	5.70	2.63	0.55
Availability of bus stops near your home	46%	5.33	6.08	0.75	0.35
Availability of route/schedule info	12%	3.69	6.14	2.45	0.29
Bus driver courtesy	48%	5.51	6.10	0.59	0.28
Frequency of service	10%	3.16	5.79	2.63	0.26
Reliability of making transfer connections	9%	3.40	5.78	2.38	0.21
Availability of bus stops near your destination	8%	4.69	6.24	1.55	0.12
Safety of bus operation	6%	4.92	6.21	1.29	0.08
Feeling of safety at the bus stop	6%	5.21	6.00	0.79	0.05

Figure 23 Impact Scores

Impact Scores

Impact scores are a way of looking at the impact that specific problems have on satisfaction. Passengers were asked to rate each aspect of service and also asked if they had encountered a problem with this aspect of service in the past 30 days. Column A in the table above shows the percent of respondents who had encountered a problem.

The impact analysis compares the satisfaction levels of those who have and have not encountered a problem with a specific aspect of service and then combines this with the frequency of problems to create a factor (impact score-Column E) that reflects the “impact” of this type of problem on satisfaction. The higher the number, the more negative the score.

As you can see, on-time performance is the problem that is most adversely impacting satisfaction with The Bus.

Safety at the stop and on the bus, as well as availability of bus stops near your destination are the three factors will very little negative impact on satisfaction.

What Improvements Would Riders Most Like?

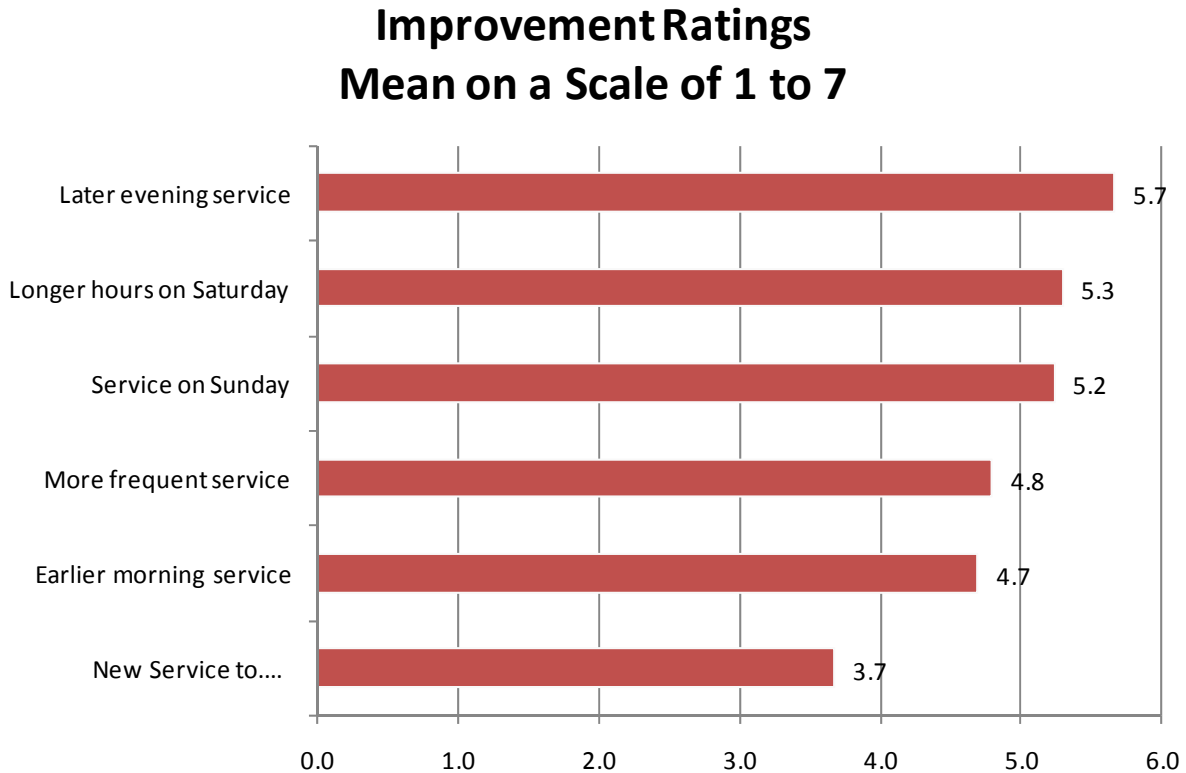


Figure 24 Mean Improvement Ratings

Improvement Ratings

The chart above shows how riders rated the importance of various potential service improvements.

- Later evening service was the improvement rated the highest – a mean of 5.7 on a 7 point scale. Of riders who said later evening service would be desirable, 86% specified times between 7 p.m. and midnight. The majority of riders (59%) indicated their needs would be satisfied if service operated until 8 p.m.
- Longer hours on Saturday and Sunday service were rated fairly evenly –with means of 5.3 and 5.2 respectively.
- More frequent service had a mean rating of 4.8. Riders who requested more frequent service tended to list several routes, and responses covered the entire spectrum of The Bus service.
- Earlier morning service received a mean rating of 4.7. Of riders who said earlier morning service would be desirable, most (83%) gave times in the 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. range. Only 16% percent ask for times earlier than 5:45 a.m.
- Service to new destinations received a mean rating of only 3.7 with a diverse array of desired locations ranging from specific locations within Merced to Modesto and Fresno.

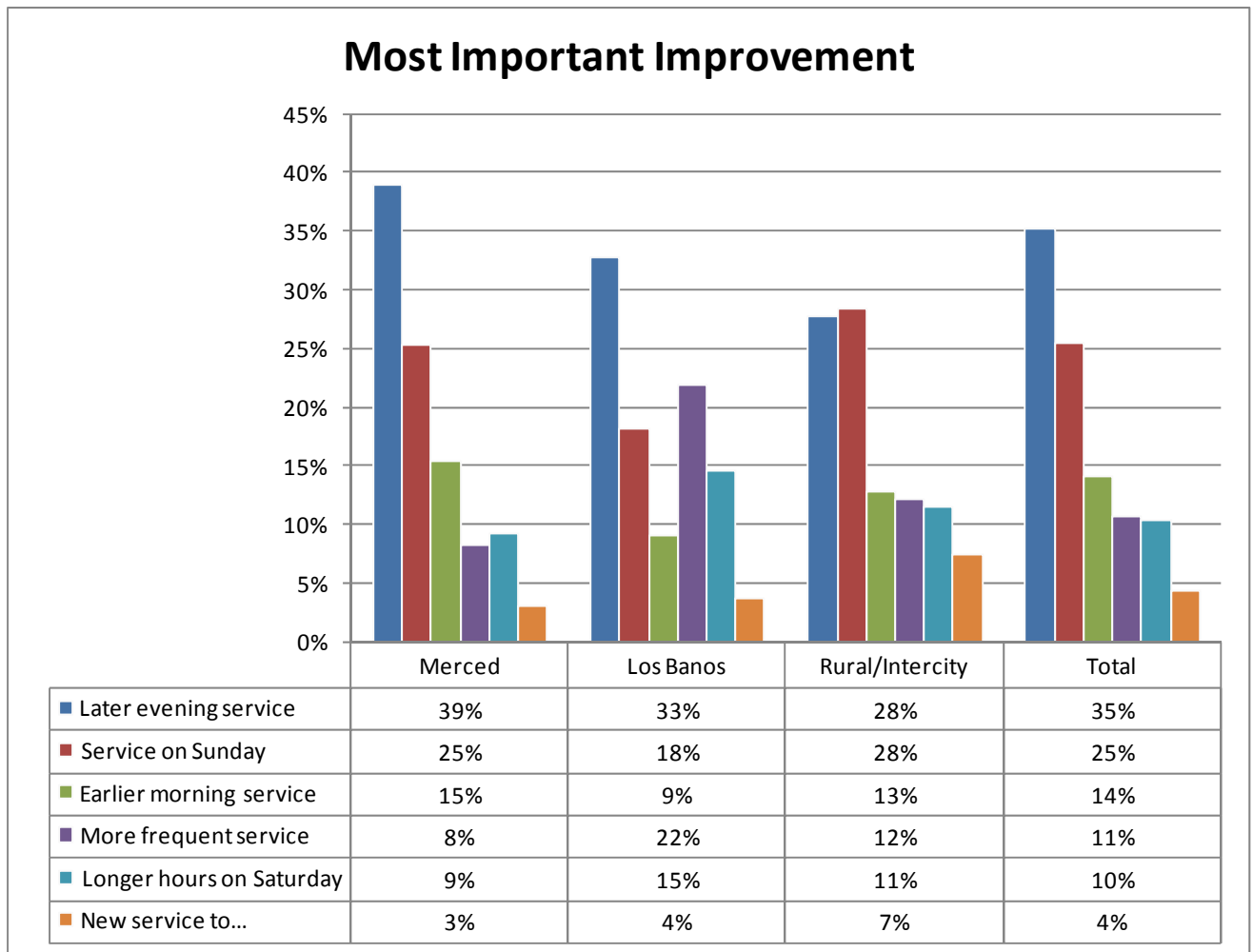


Figure 25 Most Important Improvement by Route Group

Most Important Improvement

In addition to rating the list of improvements, riders were asked to select the single improvement that would be most important to them. Later evening service continues to be the most desired improvement. However, the ranking of other improvements changes somewhat. Service on Sunday moves to the second position well ahead of expanded Saturday service.

There are also differences in priorities by route group. Later evening service is perceived as the most important on the Merced routes. On the Rural/Intercity routes, evening service and Sunday service are rated as equally important. While on the Los Banos routes, increased frequency of service is regarded as second only to later evening service.

How Will a Fare Increase Impact Ridership?

Response to Fare Increase

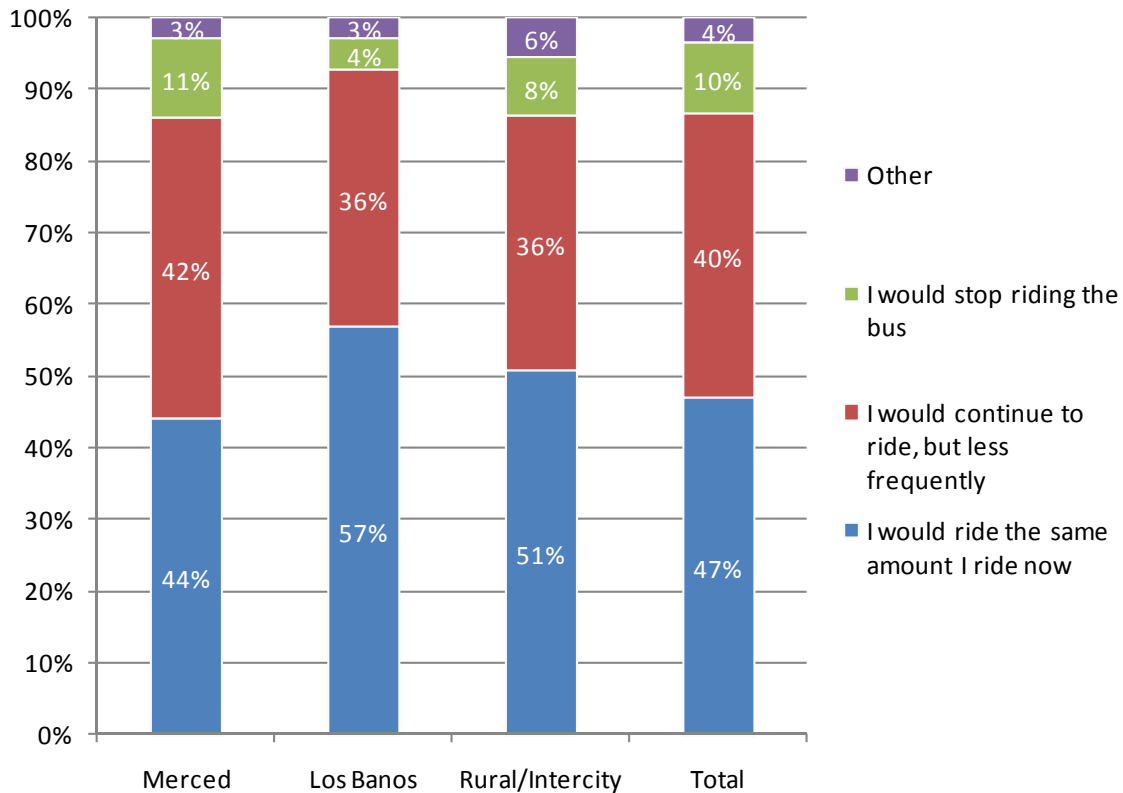


Figure 26 Response to Fare Increase

Fare Increase

The Bus is considering an increase in fares. Riders were asked how they would respond to an increase in the base fare from \$1.00 to \$1.50.

Nearly half of respondents (47%) said they would continue to ride the same amount as now. Another 40% said they would continue to ride, but less frequently. Only 10% said they would stop riding.

Riders on the Los Banos routes are least likely to change their behavior in response to a fare increase, while those on the Merced routes are most likely to.

Fare Increase vs Service Reduction

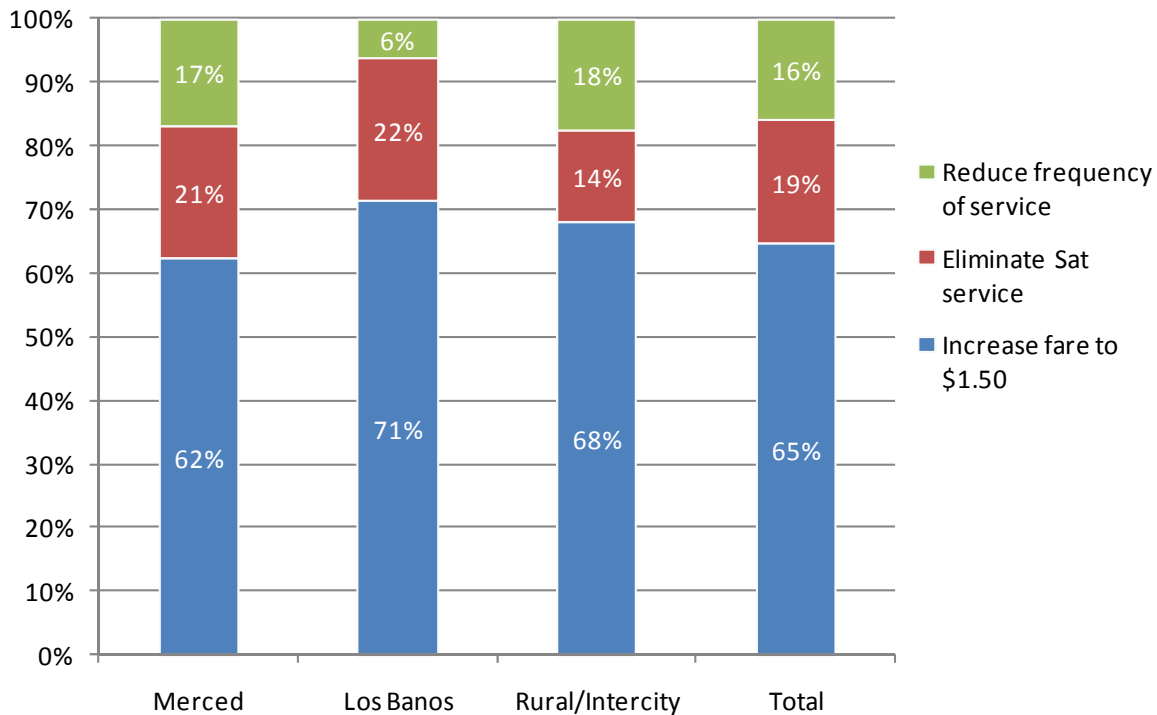


Figure 27 Fare Increase vs Service Reduction

Preference for Fare Increase or Service Reduction

As whether they would prefer a fare increase or a reduction in service, riders clearly chose a fare increase. The chart above shows the response to the question:

If, because of budget, The Bus must do one of the following, which would you prefer?

- (1) Increase fare to \$1.50
- (2) Eliminate Sat. service
- (3) Reduce frequency of service

Riders on the Merced routes were somewhat less likely than those on the other routes to choose a fare increase. However, a clear majority (62%) still selected this option over elimination of Saturday service or reduced frequency.

Car-Less Commute Survey

Background on Car-Less Commute Program

The Car-less Commute Program sets routes based on employee residences, as well as business locations, and charges employees a monthly fare for rides on the county-wide fixed route system. It is a subscription bus service with a fixed route and schedule.

In addition to the bus routes for transit to and from work, the program also offers a "Guaranteed Ride Home" to allow for personal emergencies, such as a sick child. The "Guaranteed Ride Home" means that in an emergency situation, a vehicle will be sent to pick the rider up to take the rider directly home or elsewhere, as needed.

There are currently 15 Car-less Commute routes. These routes provide traditional commutes for 41 passengers from home-to-work. Most of these commuters work at government offices in downtown Merced such as HSA, Mental Health, and MCAG. The large majority of daily trips provide services for adult developmentally disabled individuals to nine program sites, including:

- Challenge (3 morning runs and 2 afternoon runs)
- Enrichment (4 morning runs and 4 afternoon runs)
- Daybreak (3 morning runs and 3 afternoon runs)
- Piper (3 morning runs and 2 afternoon runs)
- Kingsview, Atwater (6 morning runs and 6 afternoon runs)
- Kingsview, Los Banos (3 morning runs and 2 afternoon runs)
- Merced College (2 morning runs and 2 afternoon runs)
- Merced High School (4 morning runs and 4 afternoon runs)

According to sample records from The Bus, there are 208 developmentally disabled individuals making 409 daily one-way trips on the CLC routes.

Due to the difficulty of having developmentally disabled individuals fill out the questionnaires on-board the bus, efforts were made to have program representatives or caretakers fill out the questionnaires on behalf of the clients. Questionnaires were distributed to six program sites and 74 completed questionnaires were returned. The results below are limited to the developmentally disabled adult population surveyed.

The following profile is from these program clients only.

Disabled Riders Using Car-Less Commute Routes

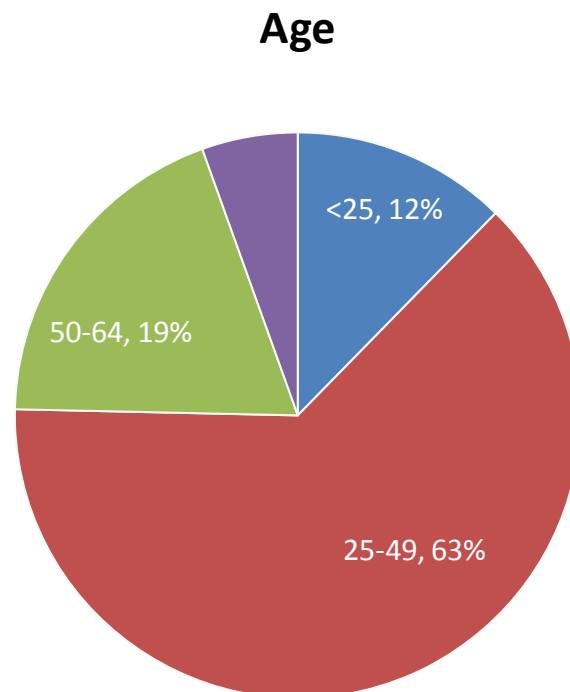


Figure 28 Age of Car-Less Commute Riders

Demographics of Car-less Commute Riders

Almost all (87%) of the adult developmentally disabled respondents reported they have a disability that impacts their mobility. This is a very transit dependent population with 99% not having a driver's license nor a car for the trip.

The average age of the developmentally disabled individuals on the CLC routes is 41. As shown in the pie chart above, 63% are between 25 and 49 years old.

A large majority (68%) of the developmentally disabled individuals surveyed are employed; 8% of the respondents were students and 24% are not employed.

This is a very low income group, with 91% of these adult developmentally disabled individuals earning less than \$14,000 per year.

Among the respondents 53% were white and 40% Hispanic. African Americans accounted for 5% of the sample.

Trip Purpose

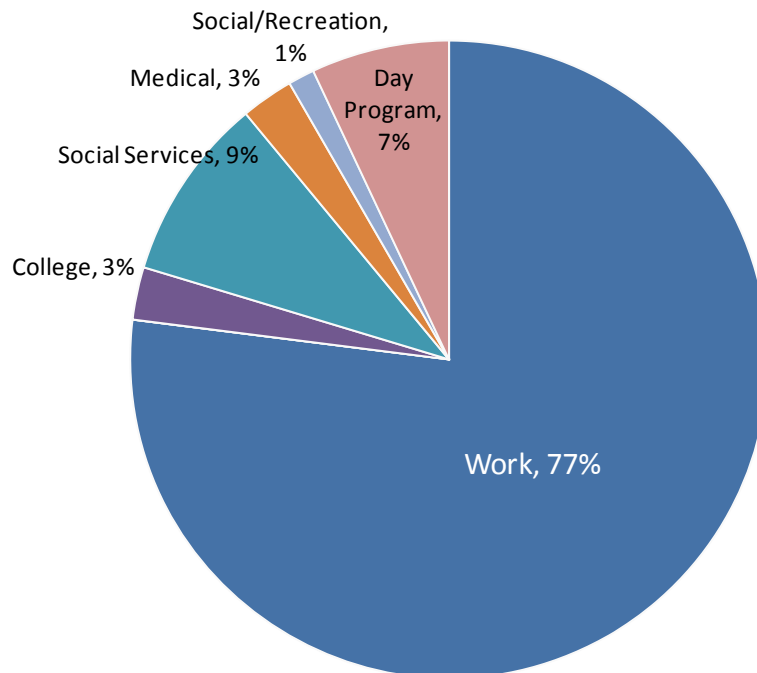


Figure 29 Trip Purpose of Car-Less Commute Riders

How do Riders Use The Bus?

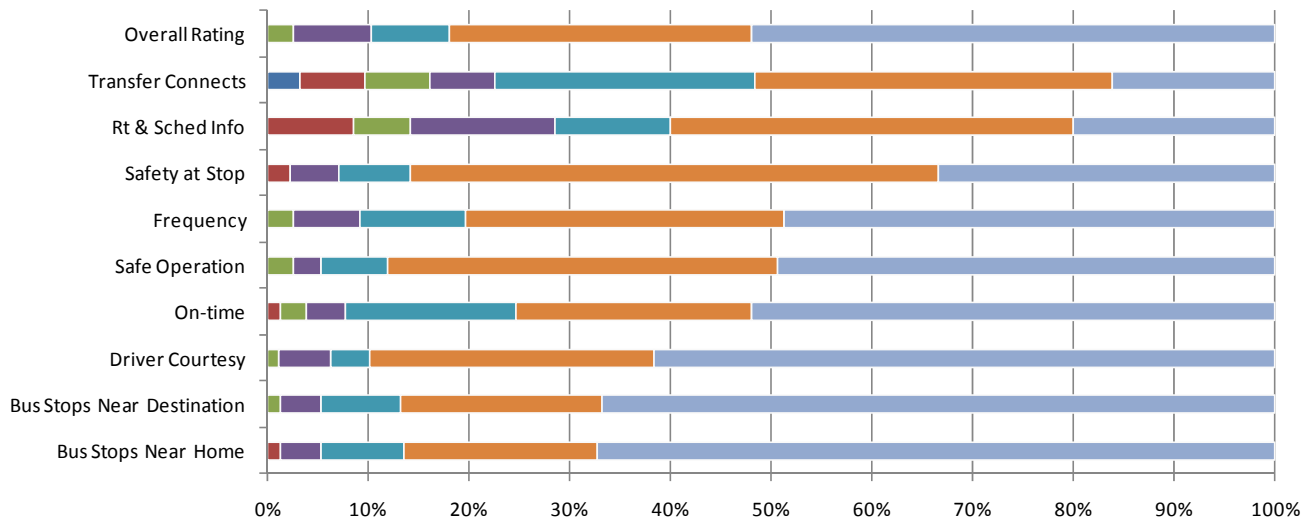
While three-quarters (77%) of the trips reported were for work, 9% were for social services, 7% for day program or day care and 3% for medical trips.

There is a dedicated ridership base at the developmentally disabled programs. Sixty-one percent of the CLC riders surveyed report they have been utilizing the service since 2008 or before.

Since this is a commute service, 94% utilize the CLC routes 4 or 5 days a week. Only 6% utilize the CLC routes 3 days or less.

The large majority of trips are one seat rides with the CLC bus picking up the passengers at the home end and taking them directly to their respective program. However, 4% of the passengers did indicate that they transferred.

Satisfaction Ratings



	Bus Stops Near Home	Bus Stops Near Destination	Driver Courtesy	On-time	Safe Operation	Frequency	Safety at Stop	Rt & Sched Info	Transfer Connects	Overall Rating
1 Very dissatisfied	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3%	0%
2	1%	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%	2%	9%	6%	0%
3	0%	1%	1%	3%	3%	3%	0%	6%	6%	3%
4 Neutral	4%	4%	5%	4%	3%	7%	5%	14%	6%	8%
5	8%	8%	4%	17%	7%	11%	7%	11%	26%	8%
6	19%	20%	28%	23%	39%	32%	52%	40%	35%	30%
7 Very satisfied	67%	67%	62%	52%	49%	49%	33%	20%	16%	52%

Figure 30 Satisfaction Among CLC Riders

Satisfaction with CLC Service

Respondents were asked to rate various aspects of service. Overall, they gave the system very high ratings with 82% rating it 6 or 7 on a seven point scale.

The chart above shows the full distribution of ratings ranging from the aspects of service rated highest (availability of bus stops near home and destination and driver courtesy) to the aspects rated lowest (making transfers and availability of route/schedule information).

If because of budget, The Bus must either increase fares or reduce service, the developmentally disabled riders surveyed overwhelming preferred an increase of fares (65%). One quarter (26%) would prefer a reduction in the frequency of service and another 10% would prefer eliminating Saturday service.

Dial-a-Ride Survey

Who is Riding Dial-a-Ride

Community of Residence	
Merced	61
Atwater	26
Delhi	1
Dos Palos	9
Franklin/Beechwood	1
Livingston	3
Le Grand	3
Los Banos	9
Planada	1
Winton	1
Other	5
No Response	2
Total	122

Community of Residence

The 122 respondents to the Dial-a-Ride survey were asked the community in which they live. The table at the right shows the distribution of responses. Half live in Merced, 20% in Atwater and the remaining 30% are spread among the various communities of the county. For the charts included in this section, the smaller communities have been grouped by proximity. However, even then the samples from the outlying areas are quite small.

Figure 31 Dial-a-Ride

Community of Residence

Age

As would be expected, Dial-a-Ride riders are much older than the fixed route ridership, with an average age of 62.

More than half (51%) of the riders are senior citizens – aged 65 or older. About half of this group (26% of the total sample) are 75 or older.

Another third (32%) are between 50 and 64, only while 17% are under 50.

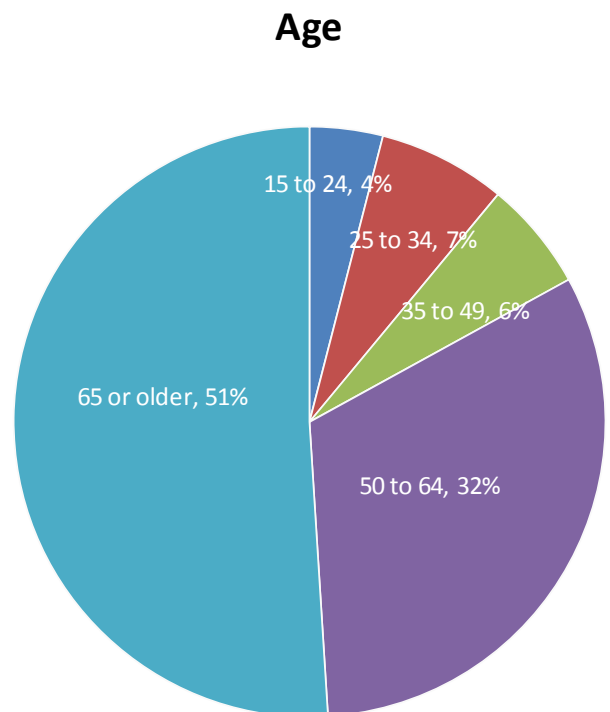


Figure 32 Age of Dial-a-Ride Riders

Disability

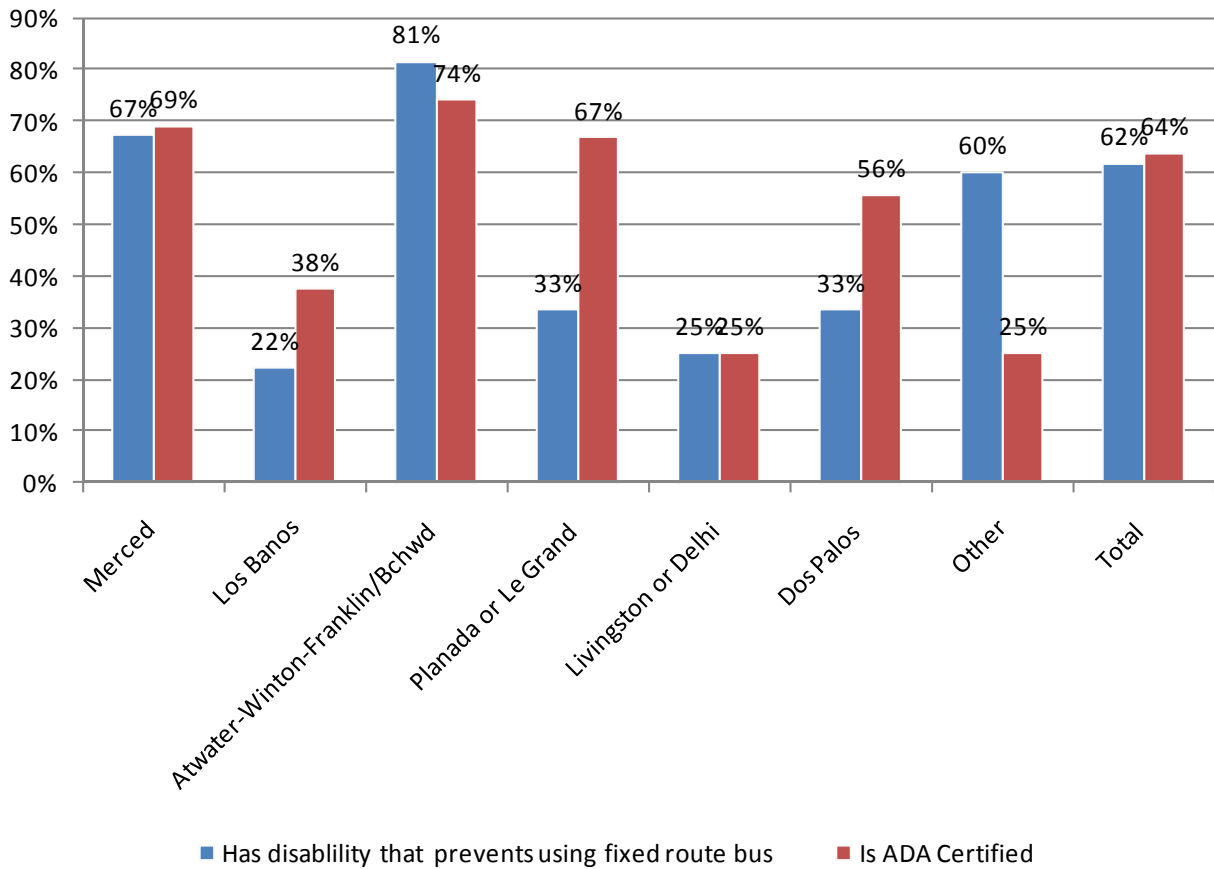


Figure 33 Disability among DAR Riders

Disability

Sixty-two percent of Dial-a-Ride respondents say they have a disability that prevents them from using the fixed route bus. A slightly higher percentage (64%) say they are ADA certified. The level of disability is highest in the Atwater area (likely due to the fact that the Atwater dial-a-ride is now restricted to ADA eligible individuals).

Transit Dependence

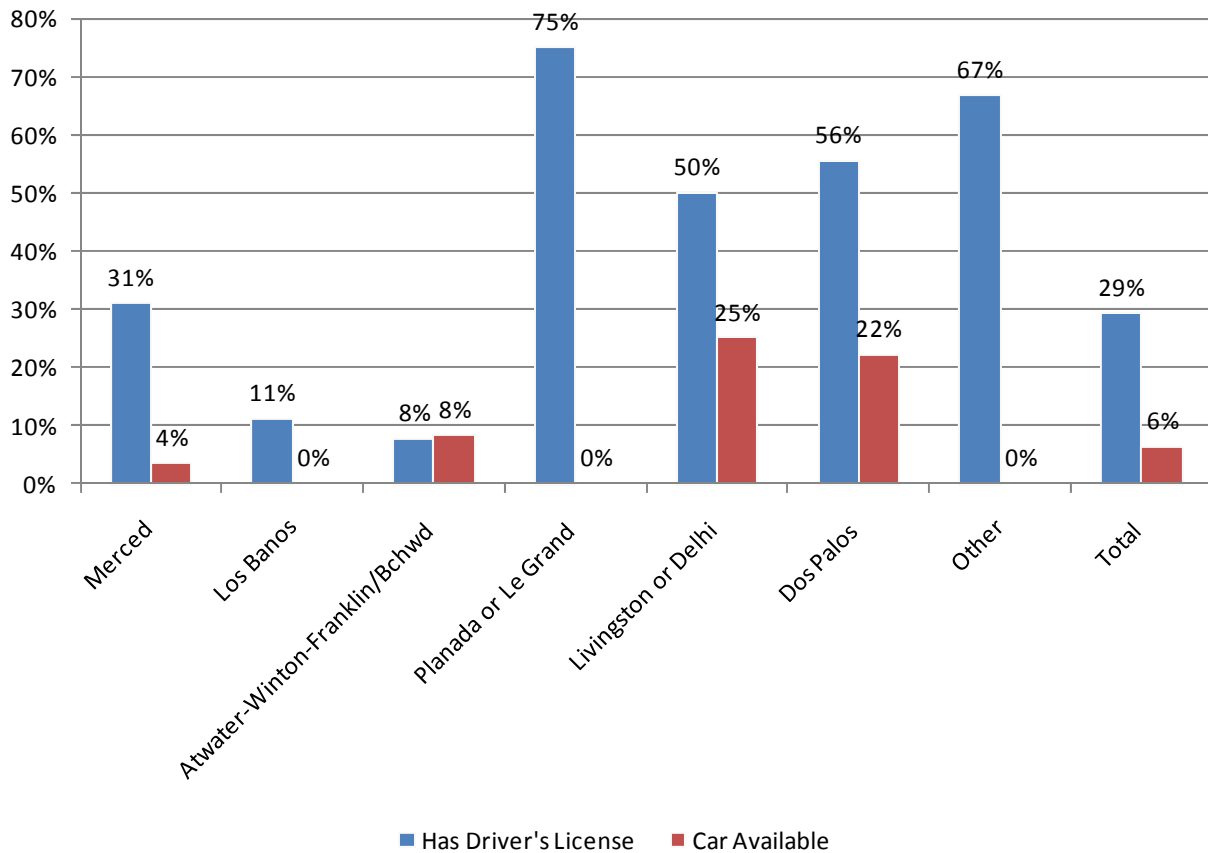


Figure 34 Transit Dependence among DAR Riders

Transit Dependence

While a significant minority of DAR users (29% overall) have a driver’s license, very few – only 6% - had a car available for the trip on which they were surveyed. This is a group that is very reliant on public transportation for their mobility.

Employment Status of DAR Riders

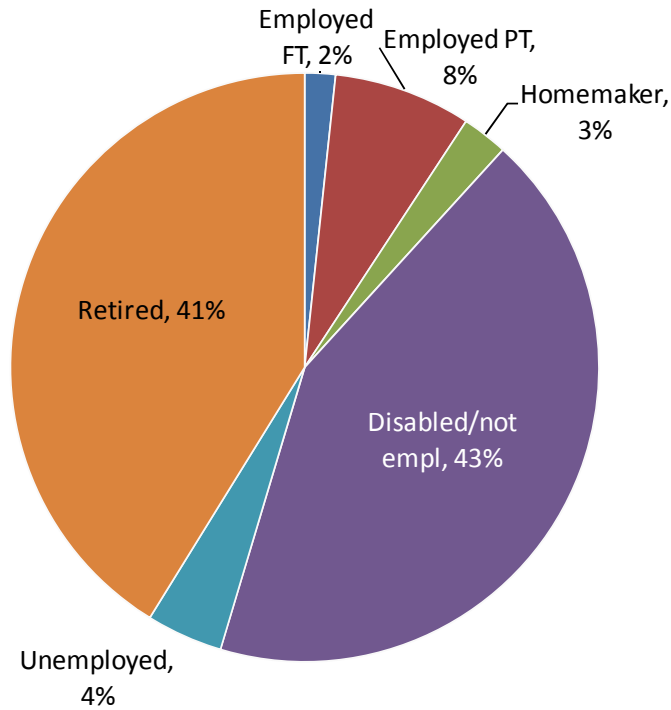


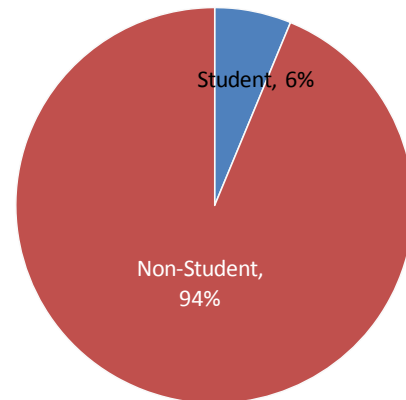
Figure 35 Employment & Student Status of DAR Riders

Occupation

The vast majority of DAR users classify themselves as disabled and not employed (43%) or retired (41%). Only 10% are employed either part time (8%) or full time (2%).

Six-percent of DAR users are students. All seven individuals who said they were students said they attend Merced College.

Student Status of DAR Riders



Ethnicity of DAR Riders

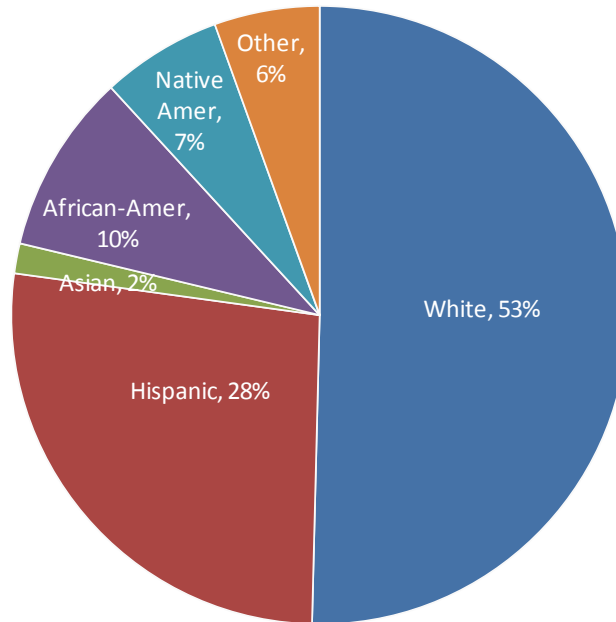


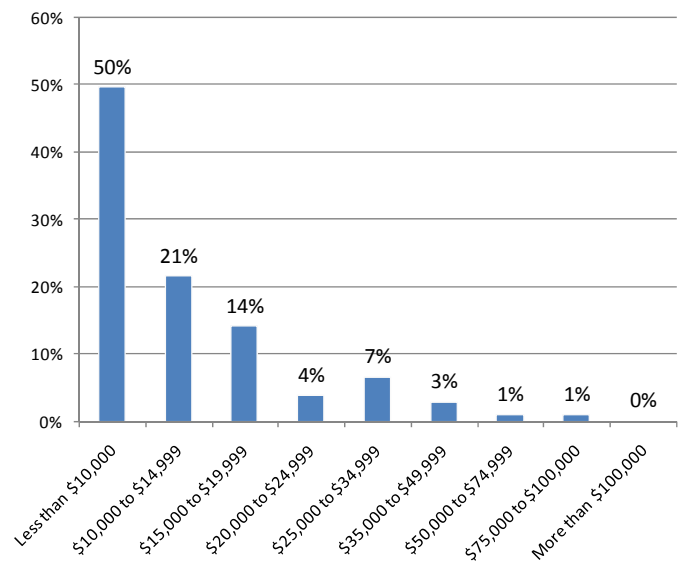
Figure 36 Ethnicity and Income of DAR Riders

Ethnicity and Income

While half of fixed route riders are Hispanic, only 28% of Dial-a-Ride respondents classified themselves as Hispanic. The majority (53%) are white.

Dial-a-Ride users are similar to fixed route riders in that they are quite low income. Eighty-five percent (85%) have household incomes of \$20,000 per year or less and half are under \$10,000.

Income Level of DAR Riders



How do DAR Riders Use the System?

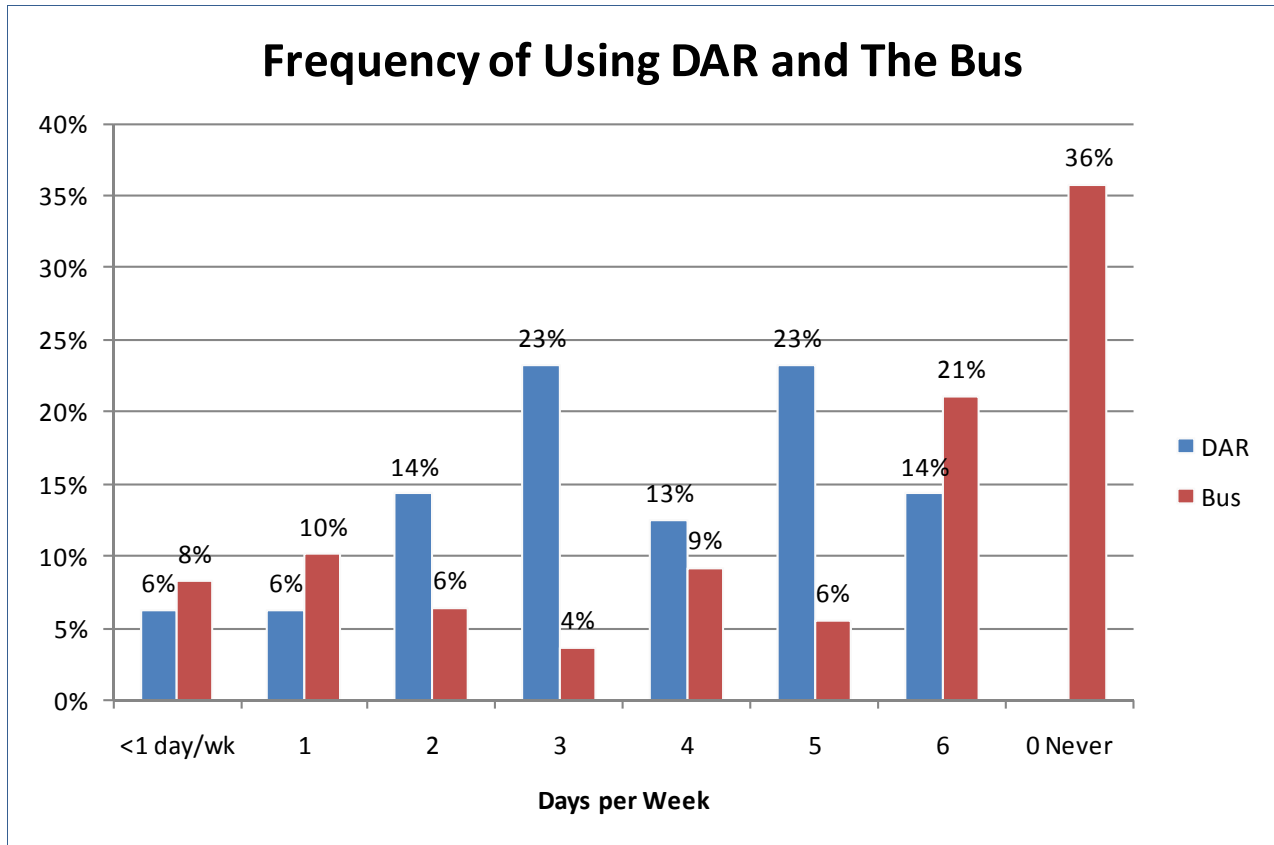


Figure 37 Frequency of Using DAR and The Bus

Frequency of Use

Dial-a-Ride users were asked how many days per week they used DAR and many days per week they use The Bus. The chart above shows the distribution for the overall sample. Many respondents appear to use both fixed route and dial-a-ride service extensively.

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of respondents use Dial-a-Ride three or more days per week, and 37% ride five or six days per week.

Only thirty-six percent never ride The Bus and 8% use it less than once a week. However, more than half of the surveyed DAR users ride The Bus at least once a week and 40% ride the fixed route bus at least 3 days per week.

Never Use The Bus by Community of Residence

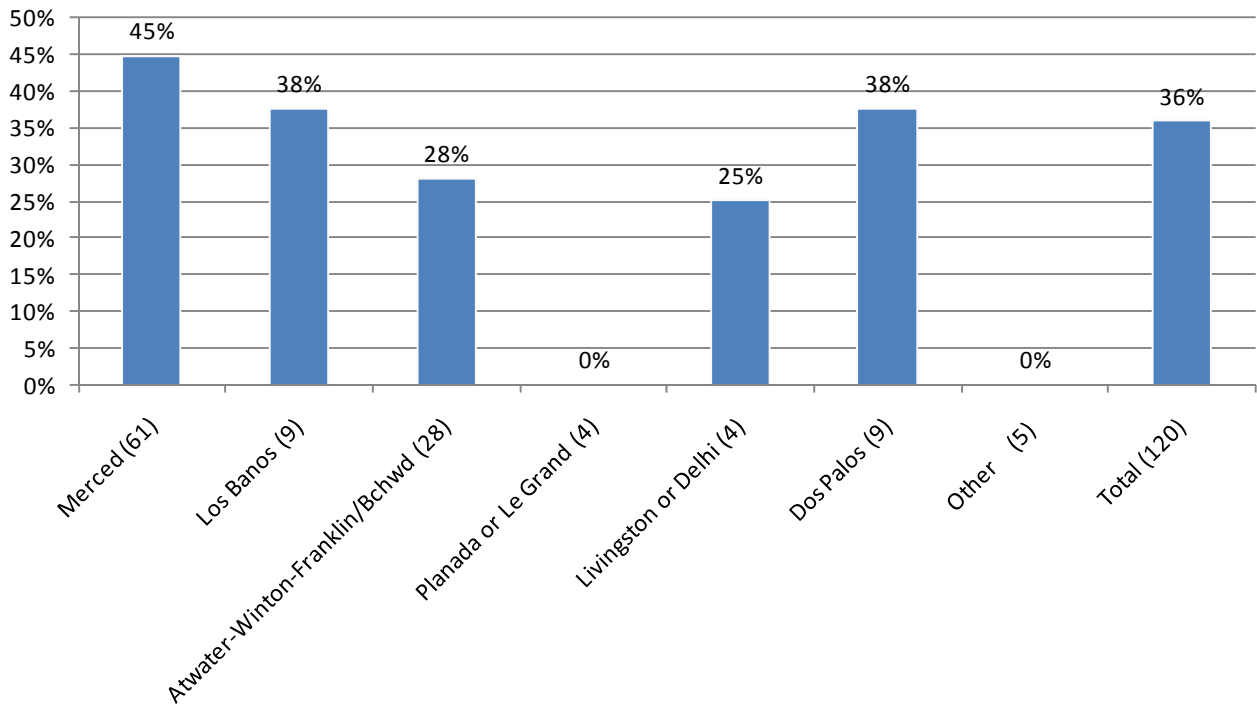


Figure 38 DAR Passengers Who Never Use The Bus

Exclusive DAR Riders

The percent of DAR users who say they never use The Bus varies by community and is highest in Merced. Keep in mind that the sample sizes in the outlying areas are very small.

Trip Purpose on DAR by Community of Residence

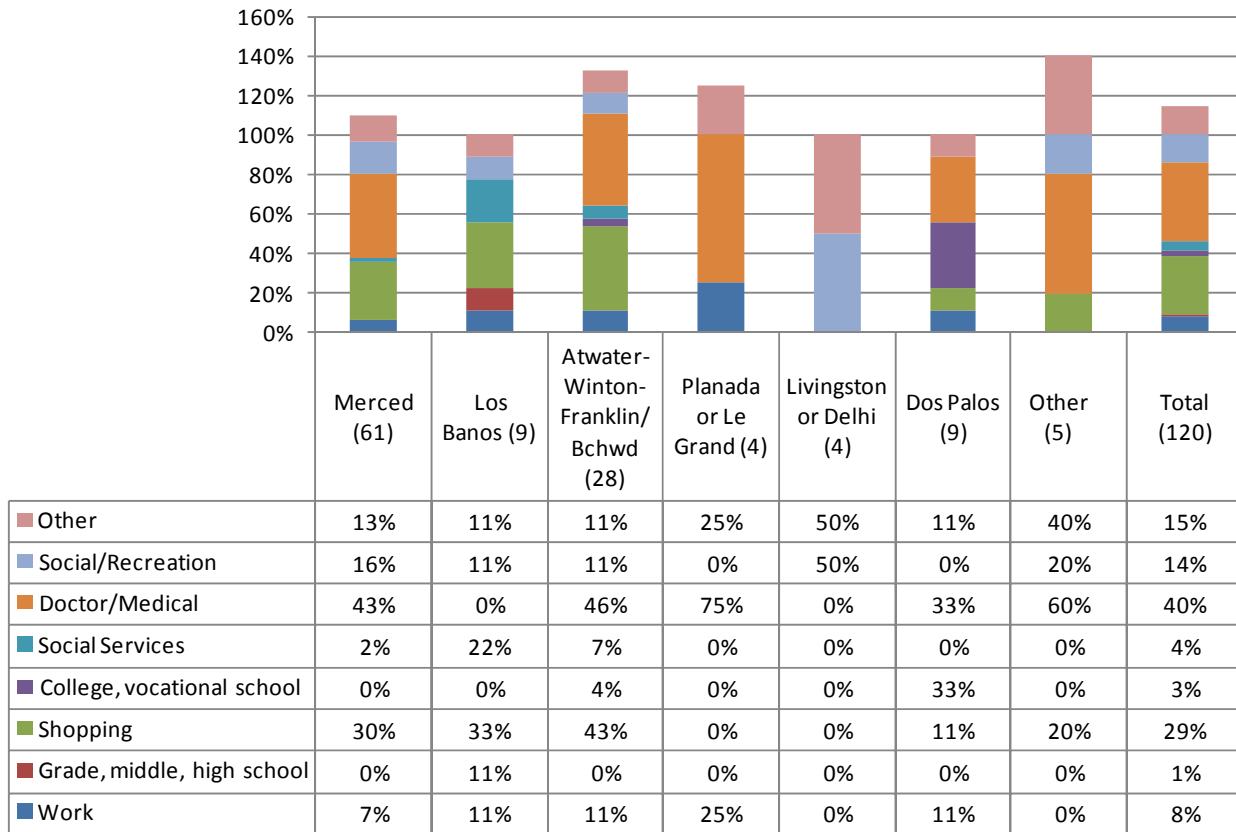


Figure 39 Trip Purposes of DAR Users

Trip Purpose

The distribution of trip purposes is quite different for DAR users than for fixed route riders. This would be expected, given that most DAR users are neither employed nor students and hence work and school trips only account for 12% of responses, compared to 51% on The Bus.

The most common trip purposes are medical appointments (40%) and shopping (29%). The distribution of trip purposes varies somewhat by community - most notably the lack of medical trips and the higher number of social service trips in Los Banos.

It should be noted that the DAR survey was conducted after the fixed route survey and after the end of the Merced College Spring semester. In interviews with Merced College staff we heard that they have a large number of students with disabilities and that many of these do use the Dial-a-Ride service to commute to school.

Fare Payment

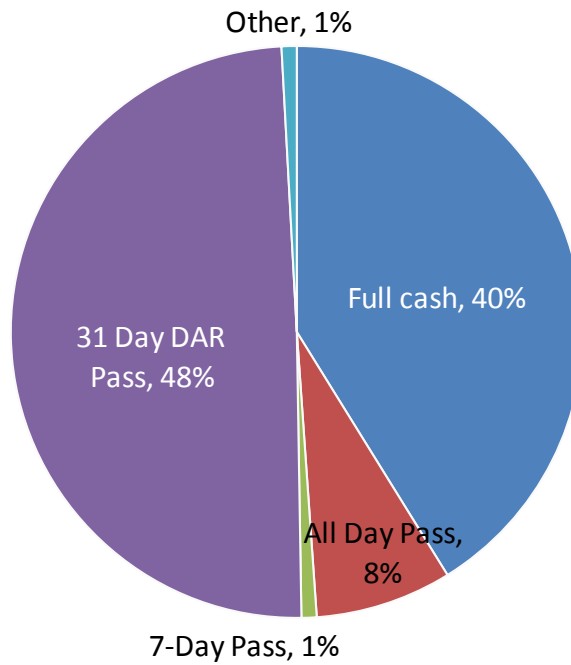


Figure 40 DAR Fare Payment Method

Fare Payment

Dial-a-Ride passengers are most likely to say they use a 31-Day DAR Pass (48%) or pay a cash fare (40%). A small number of riders use an All-Day Pass (8%).

Satisfaction with Dial-a-Ride Service

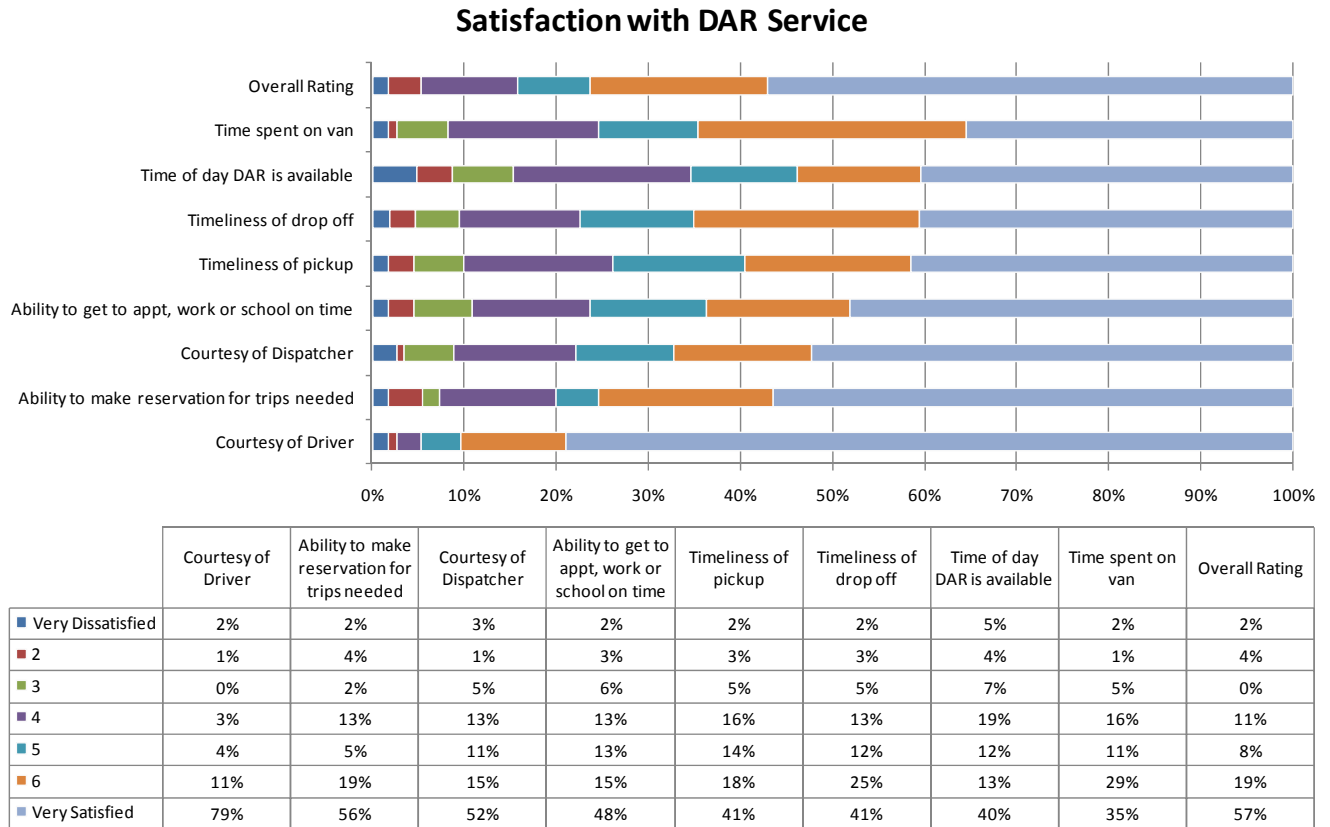


Figure 41 Satisfaction with DAR Service

Satisfaction Ratings

Respondents were asked to rate various aspects of Dial-a-Ride service. Overall, they gave the system very high ratings with three quarters (76%) rating it 6 or 7 on a seven point scale.

The chart above shows the full distribution of ratings ranging from the aspect of service rated highest (driver courtesy) to the aspects rated lowest – the time spent on the van.

Qualitative Interviews and Workshops

Findings by Theme

Information collected via stakeholder interviews, employee focus groups, public workshops and on-bus observations has been summarized by topic and will be presented here. While the input included a wide variety of very specific recommendations, this summary will address the major issues. In a number of instances quotes have been included to reflect the character of the input received. These are not intended to be statements of fact, but of perception.

Routes and Schedules

Routes in Merced have “grown” over time as new destinations have been added. This has resulted in a circuitous route structure with multiple routes serving each major destination. Passengers and drivers alike, said that riders must “learn” the system – generally by trial and error. The redundant service combined with the requirement to pay for each boarding, encourages riders to find a route that will get them to their destination without transferring. This often results in significant out-of-direction travel, making transit an inconvenient option.

From an operations point of view, the Merced schedules have not kept pace with routings, traffic and train delays. As a result, some routes are impossible to operate on time. Both drivers and passengers say that routes can run as much as 20-30 minutes behind schedule.

The service between Merced and Los Banos is extremely confusing. There are three versions of the route, each shown on a different passenger schedule. However, even within each version there are variations in the routing. It seems that every trip serves a different set of stops. As a result, some trips can only be made in one direction. For example, you can travel from Dos Palos to Los Banos (once a day) but you cannot return using the fixed route. You must return on Dial-a-Ride, a fact that is not apparent to riders and stakeholders.

There is also a lack of coordination between Route 10 and 14. The last route 10 bus arrives at K-mart in Los Banos 20 minutes after the last Rt. 14 has departed. Hence, as one rider put it, “you can’t get home.” Los Banos workshop participants expressed a desire for longer summer hours on Route 14.

Bus Stops

Both drivers and passengers recommended moving to a system of signed/designated stops, particularly within the urban areas. Frequent flag stops (often multiple stops in a single block) slow the route and make buses run later.

For passengers, flag stops increase uncertainty. For example sight- impaired riders have to flag the bus but can’t see it coming. One wheelchair-bound passenger at the Atwater meeting said she has tried to flag down the bus and several times the bus driver did not stop. It was generally agreed that having signed/designated stops will reduce problems both for drivers and passengers.

Sight impaired passengers noted that Transpo is very difficult place for the blind to transfer between buses.

Bus Operators

Overall, The Bus riders give their drivers very high marks for courtesy and helpfulness. While we heard isolated incidents of problems with drivers, we heard many positive comments. Because of the difficulty of understanding the system, passengers rely heavily on drivers as an information source.

Passenger concerns with drivers which were voiced included passing riders by (particularly disabled riders) at flag stops, failure to make stop announcements and need for additional training regarding ADA requirements.

Dial-a-Ride

Dial-a-Ride serves a number of needs in Merced County. It provides complimentary paratransit service throughout the service area, as well as general public service and service to seniors in some areas.

It is the perception of users that Dial-a-Ride is not fully complying with the ADA requirement that complimentary paratransit be offered during the same hours as fixed route service for a specific area.

- Dial-a-Ride hours in Merced are not perceived by riders to be the same as fixed route service. The last trip request is at 4:45 and workshop participants did not believe that they could make an advance reservation for a trip later than that, even if there is fixed route service between your origin and destination. According to bus operators, buses are back in the yard by 5:30 p.m. so that the dispatcher can go home. (This may be a misunderstanding generated by the practices of a specific dispatcher, and not a policy.)
- In Los Banos, it appears that the Dial-a-Ride service “is done” by 4 p.m., even though the fixed route operates until 6:15 p.m.
- There is no Dial-a-Ride service between Atwater, Winton and Merced on Saturday, even though Routes 7 and 8 are operating.

There are also issues with the reliability of scheduling advanced Dial-a-Ride trips. It does not appear that any priority is given to advance reservations and passengers do not feel confident that advance reservations will be honored (remembered). Passengers have been “trained” to call the same day for all trips. This is problematic if a passenger has a doctor’s appointment, as they are not sure if they will make the appointment on time.

In Atwater, the taxi scrip program is not well understood. Passengers can purchase \$40 of scrip per month for \$8. It requires a full month’s allocation to come to Merced (one-way) for a doctor’s appointment. Seniors don’t understand they need to transfer to The Bus and then use DAR in Merced. That makes for a long, confusing trip, possibly beyond the capabilities of many seniors.

For dial-a-ride services from outlying areas to Los Banos, the policy of dropping “Country” passengers at nearest bus stop in Los Banos often results in long waits for fixed route bus when DAR is going where rider

wanted to go anyway. The drivers felt that in these cases they should be able to take the passenger to their destination.

In addition to these broad issues, there were various specific complaints about the lack of helpfulness, timeliness or flexibility on the part of Dial-a-Ride staff (not drivers).

- The most frequent complaint we heard was about the rude Dial-a-Ride dispatchers. We heard this repeatedly from passengers, a staff person at Merced College and bus operators.
- Dial-a-Ride pickups are often very late – promised within 30 minutes but actual pick-ups can be up to 2 hours. Drivers noted that they often received the trip information very late – long after the ride was promised.
- The DAR application process can be intimidating and frustrating – expressed by a blind rider.
- Atwater workshop participants said that a trip was denied to a blind person because they wanted to bring along their 5-year old son on the trip.
- There is now just one DAR bus for the entire Atwater/Winton area. Passengers report they have to wait much longer for the trip.

Fares

The base fare for The Bus of \$1.00 is quite low. However, the policy of requiring a full fare for each boarding, increases the functional fare for many riders. Having to pay a second full fare to transfer locally is almost punitive. It requires passengers to find a route that connects their origin and destination even if that necessitates significant out of direction travel. This may be one reason that the routes have evolved to be so redundant. The current countywide day pass (\$6), which is very attractive for intercity travelers, doesn't serve the purpose of facilitating local transfers. While the \$20 7-Day Pass might serve that function it is minimally used.

At the time of the data collection, The Bus offered a senior/disabled fare between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. it was not broadly communicated – e.g. it is not included in the schedules and is only mentioned in the countywide fare brochure. There was also some confusion about the AAA discount for senior which we understand is only available at Transpo. In Los Banos, a workshop participant said the monthly pass for seniors went up from \$17 to \$40 and that this is hardship on fixed income seniors. This may have been a result of the AAA subsidy not being available.

As of July 1 The Bus expanded its 50 cent senior/disabled fare to all day. Since that time there has been a large increase in boarding within that fare category.

Passenger Information

The passenger information guides are not particularly user friendly. A rider must often use multiple schedules to understand the options for getting to key destinations. An updated system map has not been available for a while and the route maps on some schedules do not reflect actual routing in a few cases. As a result, passengers on the bus, workshop participants and drivers say that you must “learn” the system through trial and error and asking the drivers or other passengers for directions.

Several workshop participants liked the “old schedule booklet” which provided complete information about the system. Merced College staff would like to see a trip planner on The Bus website.

It is not clear to riders how to address service inadequacies. At the Atwater workshop participants had no idea of how to file complaints. They were unaware of who is on the policy board and how to contact them.

Several comments were received that passengers (Dial-a-Ride) are afraid to complain because if they complain, they fear they will not get the trips they need. The attitude of dispatchers can be: “I know where you live.” One Merced workshop participant noted that “If you go to Rod, things will happen now. If you go to Merced Transportation, nothing happens and there is no resolution.”

There appears to be a need for a more structured complaint process including a feedback button on the website.

Merced College

We spoke with the head of the Merced College Los Banos Campus and with a large number of department heads from the main campus in Merced. Both groups felt that The Bus service is very important to their students.

Merced Campus

The College administrators are generally satisfied with the fixed route service to the campus and feel that many students use it. They’ve had little contact with Merced County Transit and aren’t particularly well informed about the service or how it works. They noted that Cat Tracks buses also serve the Merced College stop but noted that they are generally empty.

They get a lot of questions about bus service at their information desk. They have one set of schedules in a binder which they allow people to look at. They would be happy to distribute schedules if they were provided. There is potential for an on-campus information display. Public Information officer said they got a display case from MCT once, but never got any information for in it.

Classes start at 8, 9 10...on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, with Tuesday and Thursday classes at 8, 9:30... Highest demand for day classes is morning to early afternoon. The administration expressed interest in the concept of a semester pass, though they didn’t think funding would be available to subsidize at this time.

Merced College has 900-1000 disabled students in the County, about 750 in Merced. The Disabled Students coordinator often assists in arranging Dial-a-Ride trips for students or calling for students having problems with Dial-a-Ride. She said the dispatcher knows who she is and is very rude as soon as she realizes that it’s her. With 750 disabled students in Merced, there is demand for DAR service to the college and the fact that no students were in the DAR survey is not indicative of this existing and potential demand, but simply a result of the timing of the survey.

Los Banos Campus

Merced College is a key destination in Los Banos. The administration is very interested in promoting usage among their 1,650 students.

The campus does not currently sell bus passes, but could sell a semester pass at the bookstore. There is no funding for a prepaid program at this time.

Evening classes are from 5:30-6:45 and 6:00 to 9:50 pm. Having a pick-up at 7 pm would be most useful. Currently, students cannot get home from any evening class.

There is no bike path and walking along the 152 corridor with no sidewalk is dangerous. She suggested service operating along 152.

Current information is difficult to decipher. Need to have the college as endpoint in any revised schedule and services on 10, 10a need to be better coordinated and communicated.

UC Merced

Note: Our interview with UC Merced was held in May 2011. Since that time, the move towards integration has progressed significantly. The TJPAMC board has approved a detailed study of the service integration as part of this SRTP effort.

By 2025, UC Merced expects to have 25,000 students. Expect growth to be 600 plus per year for the next 3 years. They currently spend about \$1.2 million per year to operate Cat Tracks. Students pay \$87.50 per semester. Cat Tracks operates on weekends (Sundays) and evenings when The Bus doesn't operate.

UC Merced expressed in integration of the two systems; however, they will do whatever is least expensive for the university. Very interested in better integration of UC campus with the Merced community. UC does not want to see separate services in the long-term. MCAG would also like to see consolidated system.

Route 22 has been funded with CMAQ funds for the past three years. These are about to expire. Contracting with VIA appears to be cheaper for the University than contracting with The Bus.

Specific questions that UC Merced asked during the interview:

- What does Merced College pay for having so many routes serve their campus? Merced College is a major connection point for UC Merced students to access the rest of the transit system.
- Would like for UC Merced students to continue to have free access to the overall transit system. How best to accomplish that?
- How to avoid redundancy of service that exists now. There are several common stops on different routes.

CLC Routes/Developmentally Disabled Population

Kingsview is a major user of CLC service. They have served developmentally disabled clients in Merced County for 35 years. They have 300 clients at the Atwater and Los Banos facilities (250 at Atwater). Their clients can be grouped into three categories.

- Low functioning group many in wheelchairs, many ride DAR. Staff ratio of 1:4 clients.
- Middle functioning group of about 60 with 1 staff: 8 clients.
- High functioning group all use CLC buses with 1 staff per 15 clients. They participate in work crews including The Bus shelter cleaning other janitorial duties. 20-40 clients are involved with landscape maintenance.

In rough numbers, about 50 Kingsview clients use the CLC routes in Los Banos and 180 use them in Atwater. The Regional Center purchases monthly passes, (about 80-90 per month). Travel training is provided. Overall this works quite well for their clients with only minor issues such as when a client loses a bus pass.

It appears that many of the CLC routes are focused exclusively on Kingsview and other programs for developmentally disabled clients. A Merced workshop participant noted that the policy now seems to be that passengers cannot be mixed on CLC buses, even if DAR passenger has the same origin and destination as the CLC bus. Example given where CLC bus was going just 2 blocks from desired destination, but the driver did the CLC run and then returned 40 minutes later and made the same trip back with the non-Kingsview rider. (According to MCAG staff, this is not a policy, but rather a decision made by the contract operator to generate two, rather than one billable trip.)

Unmet Needs

Two specific examples of potential unmet needs were raised by social service agencies in Los Banos.

The welfare to work program has clients from Dos Palos and Gustine who cannot get to program activities in Los Banos. (If trip is longer than 1 hour by bus they are excused for “good cause”). There are 57 clients on “good cause” from that area. Schedule adjustments on Rt. 10 would allow Dos Palos residents to get to and from Los Banos in a timely manner. They need to get to Los Banos by 8:30 and return around 4:30-5:00 pm.

Worknet clients in Los Banos can conduct job search, but cannot take jobs available for night shift because bus service is not available. Examples given in Santa Nella for Petco that has 3-11 or 11-7 shift.