Usage and Public Support for Pandemic-Time Street Reallocation Projects in Three Canadian Urban Centres

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Study Partners

Post Secondary Institutions

Ryerson University

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SFU Simon Fraser University

University of Toronto

Community Collaborators

the centre for active transportation

Vivre en Ville
la voie des collectivités viables

Your Cycling Connection

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* Renaming in progress: In August 2021, the university announced that it would begin a renaming process to address the legacy of Egerton Ryerson for a more inclusive future. Let's write the next chapter together. https://www.ryerson.ca/next-chapter/

Summary

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, municipalities have implemented a variety of street reallocation measures. We explore the use and public support for new bicycle lanes/paths, street closures, slow/quiet streets, and street cafés/patios in three major Canadian urban areas - Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, using data from an online survey of 2,078 adults. Between 45% and 55% of respondents have used the reallocated street spaces since March 2020. A large proportion (45% to 56% respondents depending on the type of street reallocation) thought that the number of projects in their communities were "just the right amount," and a small proportion of people (17% to 32%) opposed their future maintenance or enhancement.

This study is part of a larger research program titled "Active Transportation Planning and Travel Behaviour Change in Post- COVID-19 Canada," which is a collaboration between researchers from Ryerson University, University of Toronto, McGill University and Simon Fraser University. The Centre for Active Transportation (Toronto), Vivre en Ville (Montréal) and Hub Cycling (Vancouver) are contributing as community collaborators. The study is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Background

During the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Canadian municipalities, like other municipalities across the world, have undertaken various street reallocation initiatives to facilitate active transportation, enable physically distanced social interactions, and support businesses. Approaches include new bicycle lanes, slow streets, and street patios/cafés, among others. Arguably, the focus on active transportation during the pandemic period may represent a critical juncture leading to a shift in political, professional, and popular conversation, creating a new baseline for active transportation planning in the future. In addition, short-term use and public support of reallocated street spaces can indicate their potential for longer-term permanency and enhancement.

We conducted an online survey in the three largest urban areas in Canada in July 2021 to understand how often people are using reallocated street spaces during the pandemic, and also to explore the level of support toward street reallocation measures and their future maintenance and/or enhancement. This report summarizes preliminary results from our survey.

Data and Methods

We explored pandemic-time street reallocations in:

1) the City of Toronto (population of 2,731,600)
2) the City of Montréal (population of 1,704,700)
3) the City of Vancouver and seven surrounding municipalities (Surrey, Burnaby, New Westminster, District of North Vancouver, City of North Vancouver, West Vancouver, and White Rock; with a combined population of 1,654,400).

An online survey (7-8 min completion time) collected data from 2,078 adult residents aged ≥18 years. All three regions were in stage 3 of "reopening," when most of the economy was open (after months of lockdowns), with some physical distancing regulations in place. We hired an independent market research firm, Canadian Viewpoint, who recruited participants from SurveyLion online panel of nearly 300,000 panelists, using a quota sampling based on age, gender, and area-level income. The sample represents the population-level age distribution (18-34 years, 35-54 years, 55 years and above) within ±3 percentage points, and 50% are women. We categorized urban and suburban neighbourhoods in each region (defined by forward sortation area-FSA) into five quintiles based on median household income, and our sample represents population distribution for income within ±1 percentage points.

We specifically focus on four types of street reallocations common in these regions:

1) New bicycle lanes/paths (temporary or permanent)
2) Closure of least one lane of a street to cars for pedestrian and bicycle use (week-long, or during weekends)
3) Quiet/slow streets that discourage through automobile traffic
4) Street cafés/outdoor dining areas in curb lanes and parking spaces

For each type, we asked a respondent's self-reported level of use since March 2020, using a four-point scale ("never," "less than once a month (one or more times in the past year)," "once a month or more frequently but less than once a week," and "at least once a week").

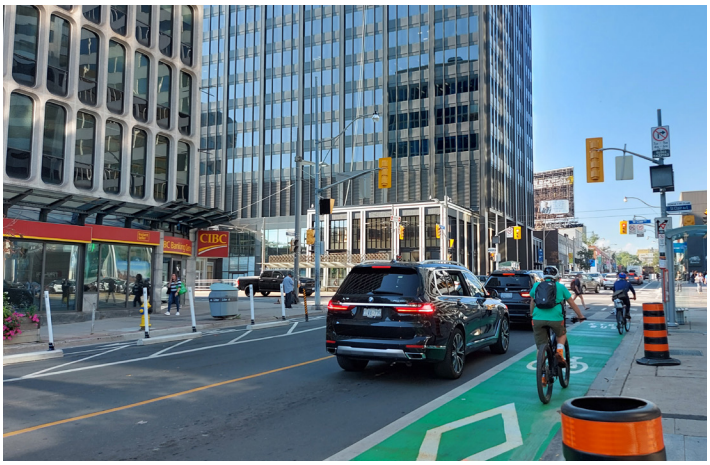
We assessed public perception and support using two questions. The first focused on the adequacy of facilities: "Do you think that during the COVID-19 pandemic, municipalities in your region implemented the right amount of street reallocation initiatives to meet the needs of your community?" (Response options: "much too little," "rather too little," "just the right amount," "a little too much" and "much too much"). The second question focused on support for continuation into the future: "When the current pandemic is over, do you think municipalities in your region should maintain or enhance the street reallocation measures similar to the ones that were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic?" (Response options: "strongly oppose," "somewhat oppose," "neutral," "somewhat support," "strongly

support"). For each question, respondents had an option to identify if they were unaware of that type of street reallocation, in which case they were not asked the subsequent question about perception.

In this report, we present the unweighted summaries of responses to the above questions. Socio-demographic and geographic variations in responses were not captured in this preliminary analysis.

Four Types of Street Reallocations Explored

New Bicycle Lanes/Paths



Pictured above are the temporary bike lanes on Yonge Street installed in April 2021 as part of the City of Toronto's Pandemic Mobility Recovery Strategy.

Street Cafés and Outdoor Dining Areas

Pictured above are outdoor dining areas occupying a lane of St. Clair Avenue West in Toronto, as part of the City of Toronto's CaféTO program.

Lane Closures for Active Transportation

Pictured above is Mont-Royal Avenue in Montréal, which was pedestrianized in Summer 2021 to create a "zone lenteur" (slowness zone) where users can participate in safe, distant, active transportation ((Vivre en Ville, 2021).

Quiet/Slow Streets

Pictured above is Keefer Street in Vancouver, which was designated as a "Slow Street" that only permits local traffic, and advises drivers to be cautious for people walking/cycling on the road (City of Vancouver, 2021).

Preliminary Findings

Our findings show that between 45% and 55% of respondents had used the reallocated street spaces at least once since March 2020, and that between 17% and 20% of respondents used at least one of these types weekly (Figure 1).

With regard to support for these pandemic-time measures, large proportions of respondents felt that their municipalities have implemented "just the right amount" of projects (45-56%, depending on the type) (Figure 2). However, between 20% and 25% of respondents found the amounts to be "too little," indicating a preference for more robust programming, while 20-31% perceived them as "too much."

When asked whether or not the municipalities should maintain or enhance these post-pandemic street reallocation projects, only a small proportion of respondents were opposed to this (17% to 32% depending on the type) (Figure 3). Put differently, 68% of respondents supported or strongly supported future maintenance and enhancements of at least one type of pandemic-time street reallocation. Almost a quarter (23%) were supportive of keeping all types.

The use of and support for reallocated street spaces depend on their availability and accessibility. Municipalities have not been equally robust in where they implemented street reallocations (e.g., which neighbourhoods), when (how soon into pandemic, or seasonality of interventions), or in the treatment (in terms of permanency or maintenance). Geographical variation in policy focus and social-spatial inequity in programming has been highlighted in previous research. Our upcoming research will explore these dynamics more closely.

45%-55% of residents had used the reallocated street spaces at least once since March 2020

Figure 1: Frequency of using reallocated street spaces

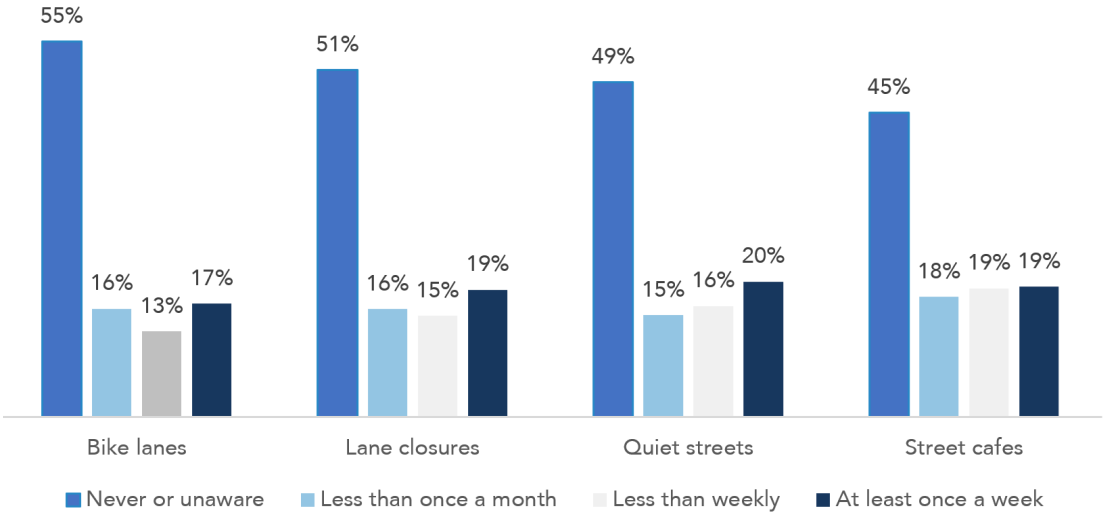


Figure 2: Satisfaction with the Amount of Street Reallocation

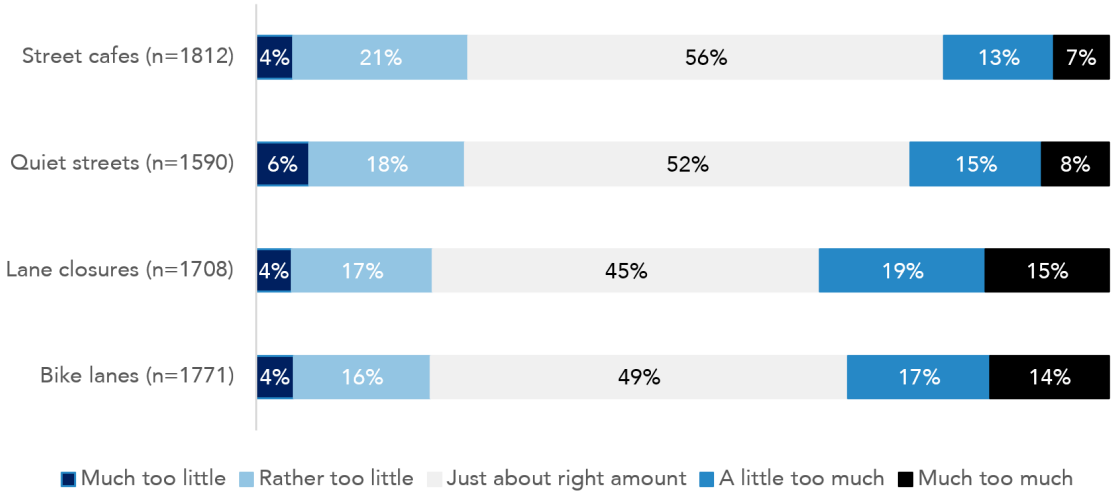
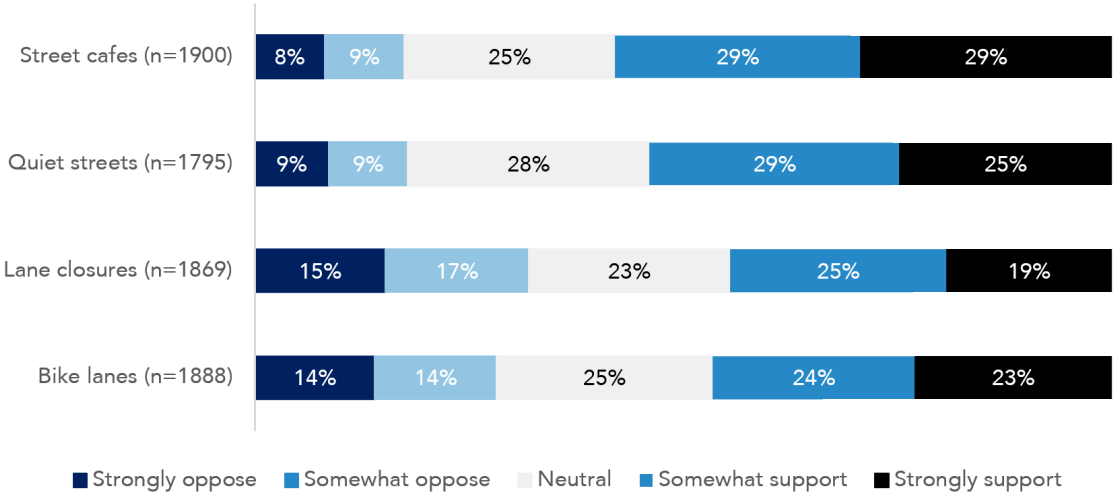


Figure 3: Support Toward Maintenance or Enhancement of Pandemic-Time Street Reallocation Measures



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