

Making Space for Physical Distancing in Canada's Urban Centers: A Case Study of Vancouver's *Slow Streets*

Executive Summary

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (2020) declared COVID-19 to be a global pandemic. The effects of COVID-19 had an immediate impact on all facets of daily life as global efforts focused on slowing the spread of the virus. Emergency measures, such as travel bans, school and workplace closures, and limits on social gatherings, were ordered by governments around the world. Despite these orders, people still needed to access essential jobs, make essential trips, and engage in regular exercise to maintain their physical and mental health. To reduce the spread of the virus, health officials recommended physical distancing and limiting close contact with people outside of your immediate household. Specifically, the Government of Canada (2020) recommended keeping a distance of 2 metres apart when around other people.

Maintaining physical distancing presented major challenges for mobility, particularly in dense urban spaces like public transit, sidewalks, parks and plazas. For example, the sidewalk width of most streets in North America is less than 2 metres, thus making it challenging for people to pass one another safely. To address the challenge of inadequate space for physical distancing on sidewalks, cities across Canada implemented temporary interventions to make it easier for people to practice physical distancing while engaged in active transportation (e.g., walking, bicycling). Examples of rapid responses include temporary pedestrian and bicycle lanes, pedestrian waiting areas, and traffic diversion (Federation of Canadian Municipalities, 2020). This report focuses on one of these interventions, Slow Streets, using the City of Vancouver as a case study. The research was guided by the following research questions:

- 1. What was the level of active transportation engagement in Vancouver prior to COVID-19?*
- 2. Why, how, and where was the Slow Streets program implemented?*
- 3. What were the challenges, successes, and impacts of the Slow Streets program?*

These questions were addressed using a mixed methods study design. Data was collected through a literature review, Census analysis, Trip Diary analysis, GIS mapping, document analysis, and key-informant interviews. The first research question was answered in Chapter 4 using descriptive statistics from the 2016 Census and TransLink's 2017 Trip Diary, as well as the City of Vancouver's Transportation 2040 Plan. It was found that active transportation rates were

highest among children and varied only slightly by gender and household income. Chapter 5 focused specifically on the process of implementing the Slow Streets program, answering the second research question. Key findings included the Slow Streets' focus on recreation and location on existing local bikeways. The areas with the highest rates of active transportation, downtown Vancouver and the West End, were not part of the Slow Streets network, while several neighbourhoods with the highest levels of deprivation, namely the Downtown Eastside and South Vancouver, were captured by the network. Chapter 6 addresses the third research question reflecting on the challenges, successes, and impacts of the Slow Streets program. Interview participants agreed that the main challenges were the barriers used to identify the Slow Streets and the impact of COVID-19 on the ability to conduct in-person public engagement. The Slow Streets received positive feedback in initial public surveys and interview participants praised the success of expanding the existing bikeway network and the traffic calming upgrades that occurred in later phases of the program.

The main recommendations that emerged from this research are the importance of investing in durable materials and prioritizing maintenance, being ambitious, trying and testing new projects, engaging the public, and prioritizing equity.