



IMPROMPTU ENCOUNTERS AND CONNECTIONS RELATING TO PUBLIC TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE IN THRIVING CITY INITIATIVE LOCATIONS

By Maya Ljubojevic

INTRODUCTION

Infrastructures can be defined as “systems or networks that enable exchange and circulation” (Marklund and Rüdiger, 2016, p. 1), with the central dynamic being “the facilitation of activity” (Latham and Layton, 2019, p. 3). Perhaps it is time to reflect on the infrastructure’s capacity to have a central dynamic of the facilitation of connection. Public transport - a key infrastructure - by nature involves travelling with others, hence providing opportunities for social interaction while travelling (Currie and Stanley, 2008). There is a wider conception of ‘the urban’ as a meeting place (Simonsen, 2008). Research across disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and urban geography has investigated mundane intercultural interactions in public spaces (Ganji and Rishbeth, 2020; Neal et al., 2015; Wessendorf, 2016; Wise and Velayutham, 2014). This paper explores these convivial interactions in the context of public transport.

Photo credit: Chris S, Pexels, Young Adults Relaxing on a Bench in Brighton, England, UK, 2025.

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/young-adults-relaxing-on-a-bench-in-brighton-33711341/>

Research has engaged with how feelings of connectedness can develop in spaces of public transport by way of intensity and close corporeal proximity to others beyond our own social circles. This facilitates the creation of social environments for ‘situational communities in transit’ to emerge (Te Brömmelstroet et al., 2017, Tonnelat and Kornblum, 2017). The significance of transport spaces as sites of interpersonal negotiation and embodied encounter has emerged through empirical research on public transport and everyday mobile interactions (Kokkola et al., 2023, Wilson, 2011). Valentine (2008) writes about geographies of encounter; how people negotiate social differences and prejudice in their everyday lives, often in public spaces like cafes and on public transport. This can range from fleeting encounters to habitual co-existing such as on commuter routes, in local neighbourhoods, and in the workplace (Valentine, 2013). A concept that may help explain the processes and effects of these small geographies of encounter are bumping places (Ljubojevic, 2025a). How much do these impromptu and convivial encounters - or moments of bumping into one another - on public transport really matter to urban populations in their experiences of connection and loneliness? This paper explored how people experience connection and loneliness in relation to public transport in a post-pandemic world.

CONTEXTUALISING PUBLIC TRANSPORT, CONNECTION, AND LONELINESS

Transport routes, public transport, the street, and connection - public transport as a facilitator

Loneliness can be understood as “*the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relations is deficient in some important way*” (Peplau, 1981, p. 31). Experiences of loneliness and connection have been found to be impacted by social and environmental determinants of health, which include: early life, employment, stress, social gradient, social exclusion, social support, and transport (Kirkbride et al., 2024; Wilkinson and Marmot, 2003). Lawrence (2003) discusses how urban policy and planning have led us to the issues that are currently being faced and challenged.

It is argued that decision makers and planners have largely ignored the complexities of the interrelation of humans and their settlements, glossing over the economic, health, ecological, and other social characteristics of localities. These flaws in urban planning are aiming to be rectified by urban initiatives such as the 15-minute city initiatives, Edinburgh’s Thrive Line, New York’s High Line, and Portland’s collaborative expansion of public transport networks.

A systematic review of studies by Williams et al. (2022) found that public transport is an opportunity for connection, particularly when compared to the more solitary experience of commuting by car. Mobility is, in itself, a form of connectedness, “*mediat[ing] social and spatial diversity and offer[ing] different conditions for exploration, interaction and negotiation of shared (social) space*” (Te Brömmelstroet et al., 2017, p. 9). Spending time with others in the shared space of a public transport vehicle, such as a train, bus, or ferry, facilitates passive and convivial interactions, places where people bump into one another on their commutes or journeys. Bumping places can be understood as places where people meet spontaneously and can experience positive interactions, and places that encourage people to linger and interact in positive ways (Roe and McCay, 2021). The concept is simple: places where people “*literally ‘bumping into’ each other*” (Farmer et al., 2021, p. 10), these can be organic or specifically designed infrastructure (Karg et al., 2021; Lohmeyer and Wong, 2022). Bumping places can be a tool used to create meaningful connections and networks to bolster the resilience and health of populations (Ljubojevic, 2023; Ljubojevic, 2025a). This can be applied to a transport and urban linkage setting. In the context of the concept of bumping places, public transport and transport links in cities can become salient vessels for connection and, through this, vessels for improved public health and wellbeing.

Impromptu encounters can be – somewhat ironically – planned into the urban space. We can look to interdisciplinary collaboration, across urban planning, policy, and public health stakeholders, to design places and spaces to be more appealing socially and structurally. Social networks are not established or maintained in a vacuum; therefore, it is imperative to have a platform or location for these networks to be built from.

Issues of access

Access can also be conceptualised as mobility- both physical and social. Furthermore, it has been found that access to social ties is linked to mobility trajectories in terms of social capital (Li et al., 2008). Li et al. (2008, p. 394) further suggest in their exploration of social capital and social mobility in Britain that it *“is well known that, cross-sectionally, there is an association between social position and access to social capital.”* This shows that issues of transportation and mobility are linked to experiences of connections and social networks through the restriction or fostering of social capital.

An early form of social exclusion is manifested when individuals possess a poor *“mobility capital”* (Memo et al., 2011); their ability to move is reduced, so they are ousted from all those resources located outside of their space range. People too young, too old, unable to drive, or too poor to afford a car or a plane ticket become *“second-class”* citizens, since leaning on public transportation is often unreliable (Ignaccolo et al., 2016). Public transport can increase accessibility to opportunities, such as education, leisure, employment, and retail, through a reduction in the *“friction of distance”* (Ellegård and Vilhelmson, 2004), as well as through *“time-space compression”* (Cuthill et al., 2019).

It is important to establish that transport disadvantage and transport-related social exclusion are not *necessarily* synonymous with each other. It is possible to be socially excluded but still have good access to transport or to be transport disadvantaged but highly socially included (Currie and Delbosc, 2010).

Ignaccolo et al. (2016) and Lucas (2012) explain that inadequate access to transportation and social disadvantage result in *“transport poverty”*, causing the goods and essential services and opportunities for social interaction to become inaccessible whilst simultaneously detaching citizens from decision-making processes. This resulting social exclusion risks triggering a degrading vicious cycle, which causes an increase in social inequalities as well as less accessible and more centralised transport infrastructure.

In the study of transport-related exclusion, it is essential to recognise that the concept of social exclusion emphasises the interactions between those causal individual factors, such as age, disability, gender, and race, and structural factors of the local area, such as a lack of available or inadequate infrastructure and services (Lucas, 2012).



Photo Credit: Yura Forrat, Pexels, Woman in Red Coat Sitting on Bus Stop with People Passing By, 2021. <https://www.pexels.com/photo/woman-in-red-coat-sitting-on-bus-stop-with-people-passing-by-11960634/>

METHODS

Procedures

An interpretivist phenomenological approach is applied to a wider PhD project from which this paper emerges. The PhD research, based at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, employed a mixed methods approach using Participatory Geographic Information Systems (PGIS), photovoice, and key informant interviews. The PGIS and photovoice elements of the project consisted of submissions from young adults (18–30-year-olds) and older adults (65+-year-olds) in Edinburgh (Scotland) and Balbriggan (Ireland). These two case study locations were chosen due to the presence of different styles of Thriving City Initiatives – a novel approach to population-level public mental health intervention in cities (Ljubojevic, 2025b).

In this research project, photovoice data collection was implemented in both Balbriggan and Edinburgh to explore feelings and experiences of loneliness and connection in cities with Thriving City Initiatives. The first stage involved recruiting the sample in both cities. Introductory training sessions were then hosted either in person or virtually, to explain and demonstrate what is expected of the participants. This was done in accessible, local community centres or online. The participants were then provided with written instructions, an information sheet, and a consent sheet to take away and given a set period in which to complete the photovoice tasks. Within this set of tasks, participants were asked to submit a singular image and caption for each of the following prompts:

"Which spaces and places do you feel least isolated or lonely in?";

"Which spaces and places do you feel most isolated or lonely in?";

and *"What social or spatial barriers or challenges do you face to feeling less lonely or isolated?"*

Participants emailed their submissions to the researcher, and these were collated into a virtual exhibition to be shared with peers and communities. The participants were then invited to participate in focus groups with other participants from their location. These focus groups lasted approximately 1-2 hours. Focus group discussion was prompted by the researcher, but it was reiterated that this was a conversation for the participants to discuss their experiences, opinions, and feelings with each other as peers. Participants were encouraged to reflect on the submissions using the SHOWeD technique. SHOWeD prompts include:

"What do you See here?"

"What is really Happening here?"

"How does this relate to Our lives?"

"Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?"

"What can we Do about it?"

(Wang, 1999)

Focus groups were conducted over Zoom or in local, accessible community venues, recorded, and transcribed. These were then anonymised alongside photovoice submissions, ready for further analysis.

Sample

A total of 18 people across Balbriggan and Edinburgh took part in the photovoice element of the research during the first six months of 2024; 11 of whom were from Edinburgh. From these 18 participants, 52 images with captions were submitted. Twelve of the 18 participants opted to take part in one of three focus group discussions held to allow participants to discuss their experiences, submissions, and opinions with each other.

Analyses

The photovoice component of the study generated two distinct data sources: visual data (photovoice images) and verbatim data (focus group transcripts and photovoice captions). Both were analysed using thematic analysis. In alignment with the recommendation by Tsang (2020), to mitigate distortion of meaning, analysis began by reviewing the photographs prior to engaging with the accompanying captions. The images were successively categorised and re-categorised until thematic saturation was reached, with analytical notes and memos recorded throughout the process.

Subsequently, the same iterative categorisation process was applied to the visual data in conjunction with participants' narratives. Captions and images were initially analysed in handwritten form - due to the ease of annotating printed images and short pieces of textual data - before transferring the codes into an Excel spreadsheet. NVivo software was employed for the analysis of focus group transcripts due to its suitability for large text-based datasets.

Coding was conducted separately for each photovoice prompt, and images and captions were initially coded independently to allow themes to emerge organically. The data was further segmented into the categories "All", "Balbriggan & Edinburgh", and "18-30-year-olds" & "65+ year-olds" for comparative purposes. These groupings were visualised using Excel, enabling the identification of overarching themes from the broad initial codes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 18 participants, 7 explicitly reference public transport in their captions or capture imagery of public transport in their photographs. It is important to note that participants in this research were requested to submit only one image per prompt, with the implication that their submission represents the most salient evidence of their experiences of connection, loneliness, and barriers to connection. The most relevant findings from the participants' responses fall into four main categories:

- Public transport as an opportunity for connection
- Public transport as a place of loneliness
- Public transport as a barrier to connection
- Hubs for connection and disconnection

These are discussed individually below.

Public transport as an opportunity for connection

Streets and roads are interesting in terms of conception as spaces of connection. Stilwell (2017, p. 123) explains that *“from path, to larger road, and then on to the permanency and official function of a paved street, there is a social significance in the phenomenon of the creation and use of streets.”* Streets can be understood as connectors, facilitators of connection. Kaltmeier (2016) conceptualises streets not as places in and of themselves but as a means of connecting places to each other. Spatial linkages, such as those facilitated by public transport, appear to be important for creating a sense of connection to both space and other people. Putnam (2000) feels that this mobility undermines social capital. Larsen et al. (2006) combats this thinking and instead argue that travel, and in this context scale of connection, builds social capital.

Figure 1: Photovoice from submission participant E8 for ‘least lonely’ prompt



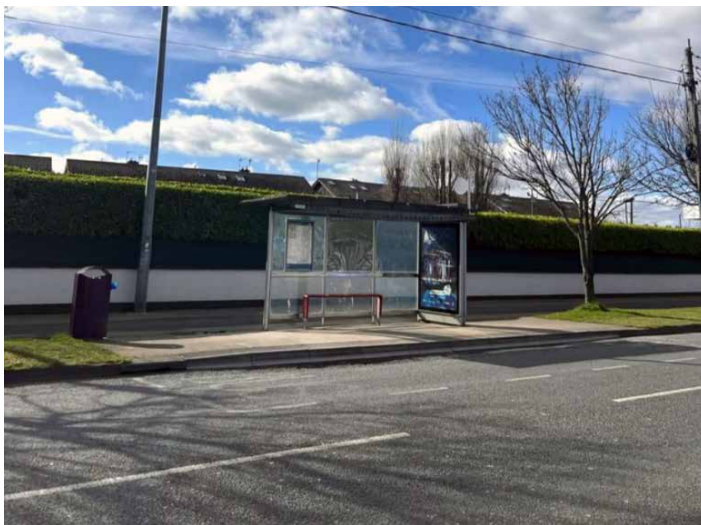
“I love seeing the Muslims go to their mosque to pray from the bus. They go to their place to pray and we go to our church to pray. There is a place for everyone and we are all connected like that.” - Participant E8

Public transport can be understood as an opportunity for encounter, bolstering social acceptance, openness, and connection. ‘Passenger’ on - and to - public transport may involve a wider range of activities and mundane events, providing opportunities for interaction with unfamiliar people or environments (Bissell et al., 2011, Currie and Stanley, 2008, Te Brömmelstroet et al., 2017). The improved access to a greater range of places outside of one’s immediate local area facilitates other social participation, such as meeting with friends or family and taking part in activities. Individuals with access to reliable public transport tend to have more social contacts (Frei et al., 2016) and, further, more interactions with these contacts (Utsunomiya, 2020).

Much literature concurs that public transport is a vessel for connection (Amin, 2002; Bovo et al., 2023; Cuthill et al., 2019; Matsuda et al., 2019; Tuvikene et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2024; Wilson, 2011). Public transport, with its inherent movement and potential for encounters, can function as a “mobile” bumping place, facilitating interactions across routes and stops. There is a togetherness to sharing space on public transport (Tuvikene et al., 2023). This was echoed in some submissions as part of this research project. As noted by participant E8, public transport allows us to passively share space with others and also to observe others whom we may not interact with otherwise: *“there is a place for everyone and we are all connected like that.”* This relates to work by Amin (2002) on living in diverse locations, having convivial encounters on or from public transport can help build connections.

One can understand everyday encounters as a vessel for integration, an education on others, and exposure to others. It can bolster the sustenance of existing societal support networks and pave the way for new ones (Ganji and Rishbeth, 2020; Ljubojevic, 2023). Bumping into others and having impromptu interactions on public transport can support the negotiation of differences and unite citizens from different ethnic, economic, social, and cultural backgrounds (Bovo et al., 2023).

Figure 2: Photovoice submission from participant B2 for ‘most lonely’ prompt



“I feel most lonely on my commute to college. Hours every week spent in solitude. Surrounded by people but in ways completely alone. It’s the worst part of my week. I think many people living in a commuter town feel like this.” - Participant B2

Public transport as a place of loneliness

Contrary to much literature and policy beliefs, some do find public transport to be a contributor to feelings of loneliness and disconnection. Public transport arose as a factor affecting socio-spatial connection in both case study locations. Pooley (2016) identifies that the lack of adequate access to public transport contributes significantly to all four dimensions of social exclusion. Further, it can be seen that transport is related to social exclusion: *“While health effects of isolation have been most extensively studied among older... transport-related social exclusion can cause problems for any age group”* (Pooley, 2016, p. 106). The limitations of public transport were not confined to the older population. In Balbriggan, B2’s submission for the most lonely was an image of a local bus stop (above).

Figure 3: Photovoice submission from participant E1 for prompt ‘most lonely’



“This photo was taken on Princes Street on a busy Saturday afternoon. This image captures how overwhelming it can feel to live in a busy urban environment. While cities are a great place to meet new people (and combat any feelings of loneliness), sometimes the sheer amount of people makes this prospect overwhelming and thus contributes to feeling potentially isolated. For example, it can be harder to establish a sense of community as people are often rushing, on the move, and busy. These feelings contrast to how I would feel at home, or University, where I was more likely to bump into people that I know. Being new(ish) to the city means that this doesn’t happen very often, and I have fewer shared experiences with the people around me. This image and what it represents to me is also a direct contrast to the previous image and caption of Holyrood Park.” - Participant E1

Sitting in a shared place for hours every week should provide an opportunity for connection, yet it somehow creates an experience of solitude, clearly evoking negative emotions for the participant. Interestingly, a systematic review of studies by Williams et al. (2022) found that public transport is an opportunity for connection, particularly compared to commuting by car. This clearly is a stark difference from B2’s experience and perceived shared experience with other commuters. This can be potentially explained by culture. Williams et al. (2022, p. 25) go on to explain that *“the culture around public transport and active travel is critical to whether these are modes of travel where there is opportunity, and it is acceptable to interact with strangers.”* Once again, there is an implication that the way and places in which our society perceives interaction to be acceptable or not seem to impact how people perceive and experience their simple, daily interactions or routines.

Bumping places, or impromptu interactions, and a reframing of how we view spontaneous interaction in shared spaces could alleviate this barrier to an extent.

In wider literature, finding public transport a disconnected experience does not appear to be the norm (Matsuda et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2024). However, studies suggest that cultural and climate differences appear to be influential on experiences of loneliness on public transport (Williams et al., 2022). Transport is rarely suggested as a culprit for loneliness epidemics in a UK context (Salutin, 2025); however, the experiences of the participants in this project speak to lonely experiences on shared forms of transport. In B2's submission, we see a belief that many commuter-town citizens feel lonely on their commutes. Delmelle et al. (2013) find that, controlling for all other factors, commuting time has a significant impact on individual social satisfaction. As noted, they are surrounded by people but often fail to interact. Perhaps this lack of engagement with others is what is truly causing these feelings of loneliness. Feeling alone in a crowd is an isolating - yet commonplace - experience (Bennett et al., 2018).

Discourse is suggesting more recently that it is the quality of transportation that has the most salient impact on how loneliness is felt in relation to public transport (Salutin, 2025). However, it appears that this cannot be the explanation of loneliness on public transport for all. Perhaps it is an underestimation of others' willingness to connect and interact (Epley and Schroeder, 2014)? When people choose to remain in relative solitude on public transport, they accrue much lower levels of well-being than if they take the opportunity to interact with those around them. As B2 explains in their caption, *"Hours every week spent in solitude. Surrounded by people but in ways completely alone."* Epley and Schroeder (2014), in their study on connecting to strangers, actively asked respondents to engage in conversations with fellow passengers, finding a reported higher sense of well-being than those who sought solitude, extending even to the strangers with whom they engaged.

Public transport as a barrier to connection

Informal discussions with older groups, especially in hilly Edinburgh, revealed that mobility was a major barrier to connection and reducing loneliness. Participant E7's "Barriers" submission highlighted that public transport was not only a socially isolating experience but also often structurally restricted access to people and places, acting as a barrier to connection. This was due to issues of access and accessibility in many instances. Access can also be conceptualised as mobility- both physical and social. Social ties are linked to mobility paths regarding social capital (Li et al., 2008). Li et al. (2008, p. 394) further suggest in their exploration of social capital and social mobility in Britain that it *"is well known that, cross-sectionally, there is an association between social position and access to social capital."* This shows that issues of transportation and mobility are linked to experiences of connections and social networks through the restriction or fostering of social capital.

Figure 4: Photovoice submission from participant E4 for 'barriers' prompt



"The Edinburgh transport is really good and relatively cheap; however, there is limited Edinburgh buses to where I live. This means to meet people, sometimes I will have to take two buses, which can seem time-consuming and a lot of work to just meet someone for a coffee for an hour. However, I do appreciate that buses are free. I feel more bus routes could enable people to travel to new places and meet new people. I also feel as a student, driving can be very expensive with parking costs and fuel. Therefore, more bus routes could help students to travel and meet friends more conveniently without the stress and time of getting multiple buses. It could also help to offer more options for things to do, for example, visit the beach over the weekend with a friend."

- Participant E4

While participants varied in social position, it was clear from both informal and formal discussions that these differences shaped their experiences of connection. Memo et al. (2011) explain that an early form of social exclusion is manifested when individuals possess a poor "mobility capital."

Figure 4: Photovoice submission from participant E7 for 'barriers' prompt



"The bus stop where I have to climb a very steep hill to get and there is only one bus we can get, the 44" - Participant E7

"Due to relying on public transport, the times I made it to the beach were sporadic so the time of day or flow of the tide would never be the same when I got to the beach itself" - Participant B6

Access interlinks heavily with ideas of social exclusion, which have consequences on mental health and well-being outcomes. In 2000, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation identified four dimensions of social exclusion: impoverishment, or exclusion from adequate income or resources; labour market exclusion; service exclusion; and exclusion from social relations (Gordon et al., 2000).

Experiences identified in this photovoice project share some prominent resemblances in relation to exclusion through transportation access. Both older and younger participants reported that unreliable or limited public transport reduced opportunities for connection. For example, one Edinburgh participant described avoiding the office because the bus was inconvenient and unreliable. As Pooley (2016) notes, high expectations of mobility can amplify frustration and exclusion when unmet, leading to poorer health and reduced social opportunities. Local accessibility was also key: if social spaces and networks were closer, frustrations might be reduced, though this would not replace opportunities to meet established connections or visit new places.

People's attitudes and expectations relating to mobility significantly influenced their feelings of connection. Pooley (2016) describes this as a paradox: while modern travel networks enable unprecedented connectivity, heightened expectations and car dominance leave those at the edges feeling excluded - problems that were less pronounced when expectations were lower.

The barriers associated with public transport for young people are not limited to social and cultural barriers. A young person in Edinburgh described an issue of access and quality of public transport infrastructure in their submission for 'Barriers', exemplified in Figure 4. The provision of public transport appears to be irregular, and the costs associated with private, personal transportation are high. The participants identify that public transport is available to gain access to the locations that they need. In the focus group discussions, another participant explained that *"the reason why I don't go into the office as much is because it's outside of town, and I have to get a bus to get there, and it's quite unreliable."* Edinburgh's tram expansion and Balbriggan's coastal links suggest strong population-level connectivity, but individual perceptions often tell a different story. In Balbriggan, new northern developments lack adequate infrastructure, with the only bus route from Flemington ending before 8 pm, limiting evening activities for those without cars. Poor planning here undermines community initiatives, highlighting the need for cross-disciplinary coordination.

The cost of transportation was seen to be a barrier to connection. Those on lower salaries can experience disproportionately higher levels of loneliness and disconnect compared to wealthier peers in their local areas (Beller, 2024; Macdonald et al., 2018). Young participants noted the value of Scotland's Young Scot card, which provides free bus travel under 22, but criticised its early cut-off, especially for students in longer degree programs: *"I feel like it is really great that they offer free transportation, for under. I think it's like under 22. And I just feel like it could maybe expand more in different areas."* It should be noted that many young-adult participants in Edinburgh expressed that they felt most lonely in their work-from-home environments, suggesting a need for casual interactions across the workday. Participants of all ages felt that the costs of mobility were a barrier to connection, particularly in the age of a cost-of-living crisis (Neal and Webster, 2022).

Barriers that limit opportunities for social connection - such as insufficient, unreliable, or expensive transport routes - restrict people's ability to physically access social or restorative spaces, restricting prospects for encounters. Barriers to connection - whether due to inadequate transport, high costs, or inaccessible spaces - affect the most vulnerable most severely (Currie, 2009; Currie and Delbosc, 2010; Guzman et al., 2017). Effective policy must account for this, ensuring truly public and accessible spaces. As Larsen et al. (2006) note, increased transport and communication networks mean people can remain connected across distances, but only if they can access them in the first place.



Photo credit: Pauline Eccles, Wikimedia, Bus stop by the A48, UK, 2010.
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=14443552>

Concerning spaces and places in the city and how we use them, one needs to reflect upon who the space is for. *Is it truly public? Is it truly accessible?* It is very difficult to create a solution suitable for all, but those most vulnerable have the least capacity to achieve this on their own; therefore, policy and initiatives must appreciate this and act accordingly. Increased access to others through the development of transport and communication systems means that the distance at which people can remain connected has increased: *"people can travel, relocate, and migrate and yet still be connected with friends and family members back home"* (Larsen et al., 2006, p. 262). Barriers to connection and encounter have been reduced over time, yet barriers and inequalities remain.

Transport could be made more convenient and more efficient; however, largely the infrastructure does exist. In the Pooley (2016, p. 106) historical exploration, they identify that high expectations can lead to ill-health relating to frustration and exclusion. They state that *"a consequence of high expectations is that disappointment and frustration are that much greater if expectations are not fulfilled."* People who are unable to participate fully in the high-mobility modern society are likely to experience both relative and absolute transport-related social exclusion. This leads to reduced employment and social opportunities and poor health, pertaining to feelings of frustration and isolation. This also includes a decrease in opportunity for passive, convivial interactions in bumping places relating to transport networks, highlighting the importance of shared spaces and impromptu encounters.

It further reinforces the idea that our expectations are important in determining our health outcomes in regards to social connection and loneliness – our attitudes and beliefs can act as our own barriers to interactions with others. How our place in society and our entitlement to access and experiences are perceived appears to have a great impact on how connected we feel to others. This is a difficult aspect of public mental health to tackle. Clearly, access to places outside of localities is desired by populations, but maybe there is scope to shift people’s focus onto their local areas through existing transport routes.



Photo credit: Clement Proust, Dusk in Edinburgh City Street with Traffic and Cyclist, Scotland, UK, 2025. <https://www.pexels.com/photo/dusk-in-edinburgh-city-street-with-traffic-and-cyclist-32793386/>

Hubs for connection and disconnection

One’s personal standpoint will impact their experiences of a place or space. From the results of this wider dataset, central and accessible points for connection do not equal uptake of connection. It appears that *facilitation* must be in place to bridge this gap of being alone in a crowd or lonely in a crowd. This again is an opportunity for change to be implemented, where there is scope to facilitate connection for large swathes of a population in a place they already choose to or must spend time in.

Literature suggests that it is not necessarily how frequently public spaces are used that impacts life-satisfaction and loneliness; instead, the effects of neighbourhood, mobility, and personal characteristics were significant in relation to loneliness and life satisfaction (Bergefurt et al., 2019). Results from this research somewhat align with existing results. How an individual perceives opportunities to connect and socialise varies from individual to individual as emerged in the photovoice and focus group discussions. Personality type, physical mobility, and local amenities and opportunities all arose in the conversations. How loneliness and connection are approached and understood differ on an individual basis (Lee and Tan, 2023), making population-wide initiatives to tackle loneliness in relation to health more difficult.

It was the younger demographic in this study that put forward the most suggestions in discussions for solutions relating to activities or changes in culture. This included suggestions for subsidised activities and sports clubs, opening non-alcoholic venues for longer, and changing work habits. The older group tended to focus more on issues of accessibility to social networks and opportunities for interaction, such as public transport, health conditions, and financial strains. This shows there is a slight divide in the priorities age demographics may put forward for changes they would like to see about connection and isolation in their cities. Further, issues of transportation and mobility may be more pertinent to the older generations in regards to urban connection.

Creating hubs and facilitating access to hubs, for connection through public transport infrastructure, conceptualisations, and policies can help bring people together – both socially and physically. Transport links and routes in cities must become facilitators of connection to promote relationship building and connectedness, decreasing experiences of isolation and loneliness. Information provided in qualitative data, such as these photovoice submissions, can help understand the barriers that people face to fully engaging with transport, thus barriers to opportunities to engage with others, and highlight what is resonating with people presently regarding the connective potential of this infrastructure. Bumping places could tackle aspects of wider societal experiences, perspectives, and prejudices relating to some causes of loneliness

CONCLUSION

Public transport emerges as an important social space and social facilitator across age demographics. In a post-pandemic, work-from-home world, impromptu encounters and natural interactions are ever more important. Public transport, and the social networks that this infrastructure supports, are vital. Whilst there are clear connective benefits of public transport, the evidence suggests some room for improvement.

Reflecting on suggestions made in the photovoice element of the project, creating more accessible, reliable, and convenient routes that people can travel through, be it active travel on foot or bike, or using public transport such as buses, should be considered. Using participatory research, reminiscent of that used in this project, could help changemakers identify weak points in the social-spatial connections in order to create action plans that work for those who live there. Initiatives, solutions, and interventions should be designed for and with the communities that they aim to serve.

Interdisciplinary urban action across key social and structural infrastructure is needed in order to tackle loneliness and isolation and, through this, the negative public health consequences that arise from these experiences. Decreasing the barriers to connection related to public transport and increasing the amount of passive connection to others that people may feel on public transport may play a role in this shift.

Prioritisation of creating or facilitating safe, comfortable, affordable (or free), and accessible spaces is needed, in part through improvements to transport cultures, planning, and infrastructure. Creating bumping places within public transport networks, where impromptu, convivial encounters are facilitated, could be a tangible way of achieving this, alongside funding and subsidising, and strengthening transport networks.



Photo Credit: Thomas Balabaud, Pexels, Back View of a Couple Sitting inside a Bus, Dublin, Ireland, UK, 2021. <https://www.pexels.com/photo/back-view-of-a-couple-sitting-inside-a-bus-6447206/>

Author Details:

Maya Ljubojevic is a researcher at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland, who focusses her work on the spheres of loneliness and connection in cities. Her work spans across social science disciplines such as public health, policy, geography, economics, and sociology.

maya.ljubojevic@strath.ac.uk

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