

**TESTIMONY
OF THE
NEW YORK PUBLIC INTEREST RESEARCH GROUP
BEFORE THE
NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES ON TRANSPORTATION AND
INFRASTRUCTURE AND GENERAL WELFARE
May 6th, 2026
New York, N.Y.**

Good morning. My name is Natasha Elder, and I am the Regional Director for NYPIRG, the New York Public Interest Research Group. NYPIRG is a non-partisan, not-for-profit research and advocacy organization. Since 1979, the Straphangers Campaign has advocated on behalf of the millions of riders who rely on New York City’s public transit system every day.

Thank you to Chair Abreu, Chair Hudson, and members of both Committees for holding today’s hearing on Fair Fares.

New York City’s transit system is the backbone of our economy, but for many riders, the cost of using it has become a growing barrier to opportunity. With the base fare now at \$3.00 following the most recent increase, even routine trips—getting to work, class, or a medical appointment—can add up quickly over the course of a week. This is happening at the same time that the cost of living in New York continues to rise across nearly every category, from rent to food to utilities. For low-income New Yorkers, transit is not discretionary spending—it is a prerequisite to participating in daily life.

Recent data underscores the scale of the problem. According to the Community Service Society’s Unheard Third survey, nearly one in five New Yorkers reported struggling to afford subway and bus fares, and that number rises to roughly 30 percent among households living in or near poverty.¹ These are not occasional riders—these are people who depend on transit and are being forced to make tradeoffs between transportation and other basic needs.

Fair Fares Works — But It Leaves Too Many Out

Fair Fares has proven that targeted intervention can make a meaningful difference. Since its launch in 2019, the program has provided reduced fares to hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers, with enrollment now exceeding 360,000 participants.² At the same time, the gap between those who are

¹ Community Service Society of New York, *When You Can’t Afford the Fare: How Expanding Fair Fares Can Help Working New Yorkers*, Unheard Third Transit Brief (2024).

²New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA), *Fair Fares NYC Program Data and Enrollment Figures*, accessed May 2026, <https://www.nyc.gov/site/fairfares/index.page>

eligible and those who are actually enrolled remains significant. Census data indicates that roughly 900,000 New Yorkers are living below the federal poverty line, while estimates suggest that hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers eligible for Fair Fares remain unenrolled.

One of the central limitations is the current income cap, which restricts eligibility to individuals earning up to 145 percent of the federal poverty level—approximately \$23,940 annually for a single adult.³ In a city where basic costs far exceed national averages, that threshold does not reflect the reality of what it takes to get by. As a result, many working New Yorkers who are struggling to afford transit are excluded from the program.

The burden is especially visible among students. While New York City provides free transit to K–12 students, CUNY students—many of whom are low-income, working, or supporting families—must cover their own commuting costs. A report from the Center for an Urban Future found that transportation is one of the most commonly cited financial barriers to completing a degree.⁴ When the cost of getting to class becomes a deciding factor, it directly undermines the City’s broader investments in higher education and workforce development.

The City Has a Clear Path Forward

The Council has already recognized many of these challenges, and today’s hearing reflects a growing consensus that Fair Fares is a great program that must be strengthened. The question is no longer whether the program works—it does—but whether it is reaching enough people.

Expanding Fair Fares would be one of the most immediate and effective ways to address transit affordability.

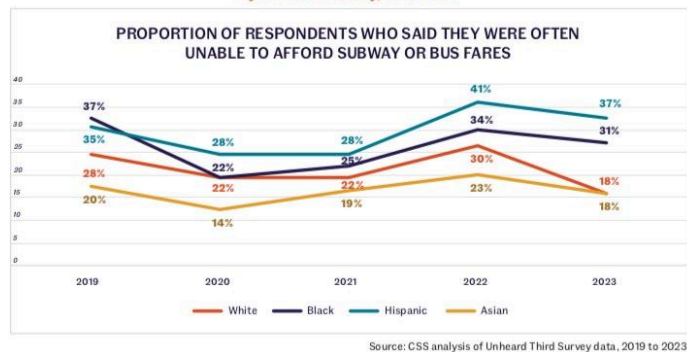
We call on the City Council to support a Fair Fares program expansion that:

- Increase eligibility to 300 percent of the federal poverty level to better reflect the City’s cost of living.
- Make transit fares fully free for those under 150 percent of the poverty level to ensure that the lowest-income riders are not priced out of the system entirely.

³ NYC Fair Fares eligibility guidelines, based on Federal Poverty Level thresholds (2025).

⁴ Center for an Urban Future, *Opportunity Costs* (2023).

Figure 4: Transit affordability hardship rates among low-income New Yorkers, by race and ethnicity, 2019-2023



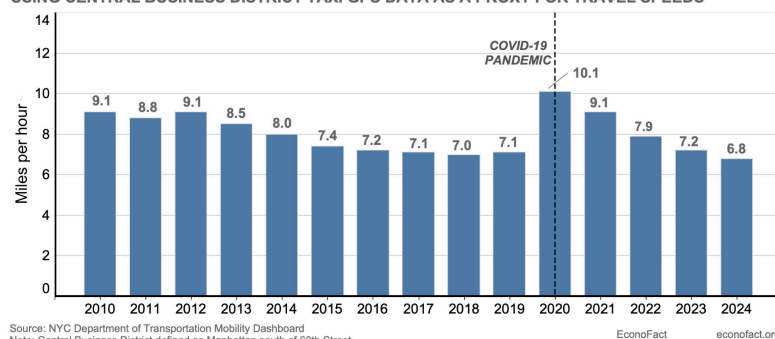
- Extend free fare eligibility to CUNY students to align transit policy with the City’s education goals.
- Expand coverage to include express buses and commuter rail through CityTicket to make the program more usable for riders in transit deserts.

At the same time, improving access to the program is just as important as expanding eligibility. Automatic enrollment, particularly for New Yorkers already participating in other income-qualified benefits, would reduce administrative barriers and help close the gap between eligibility and participation.

Affordability Must Be Paired With Service

Finally, while today’s focus is affordability, it is important to recognize that cost cannot be separated from service quality. For many New Yorkers, especially those in the outer boroughs, buses are not a secondary option—they are the primary way to get around. Yet service remains slow and unreliable. According to the New York City Independent Budget Office, average bus speeds in New York City hover at just over 8 miles per hour. Some routes perform even worse. The Straphangers Campaign’s 2025 “Pokey Award” identified the M42 as the slowest bus route in the city, moving at an average speed of just 5.25 miles per hour.⁵ That reality has persisted despite years of plans and commitments to improve service.

AVERAGE TRAFFIC SPEED IN NEW YORK CITY USING CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT TAXI GPS DATA AS A PROXY FOR TRAVEL SPEEDS



The consequences of slow service are not abstract. When buses crawl through routes, riders experience longer commutes, less reliable arrival times, and increased stress navigating daily travel. These burdens fall disproportionately on low-income riders, who are more likely to rely on buses and have fewer alternatives. In effect, riders are being asked to pay more—through fare increases—while still receiving a level of service that fails to meet their needs.

At the same time, the City has struggled to meet its own commitments to improve bus performance. Data from the New York City Department of Transportation shows that bus lane installation has repeatedly fallen short of the targets set under the Streets Master Plan,⁶ limiting one of the most effective tools available to speed up service. Without consistent expansion and enforcement of bus lanes, buses remain stuck in the same congestion as private vehicles, undermining reliability gains that riders depend on.

⁵ “New York City Independent Budget Office, *Speeding Up Slowly: A Review of Initiatives to Improve Bus Speeds in New York City* (2025); NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign, *2025 Pokey Awards*.

⁶ New York City Department of Transportation, Mayor’s Management Report FY2024–FY2025.

This is why affordability and service must be addressed together. Expanding Fair Fares without improving service risks leaving riders with a system that is cheaper, but still inefficient and unreliable. At the same time, improving service without addressing affordability leaves many riders unable to benefit from those improvements in the first place. Investments in bus priority infrastructure—such as dedicated lanes, transit signal priority, and Bus Rapid Transit corridors—have been shown to improve travel times and reliability, with some corridors seeing travel time reductions of 10 to 20 percent when properly implemented.⁷

New Yorkers deserve a system that is both affordable and functional. Ensuring that riders can pay for transit is critical—but ensuring that transit works is just as essential.

Conclusion

New York City has an opportunity in this budget cycle to build on a program that is already making a difference and expand it to meet the scale of the need. Fair Fares is not just a transportation policy—it is an economic, educational, and equity policy. Expanding it would help ensure that more New Yorkers can access the opportunities this city has to offer.

⁷ TransitCenter, Bus Priority & BRT performance research (various reports).