

DERRIÈRE LES APPARÉNCES

#7

AUGUST 2025

Debates on free travel



Free public transport is emerging as one of the themes of the 2026 municipal elections in France. Keolis has undertaken several recent studies dealing in part with free transport and its financing. If the idea is unanimously supported at the outset, all citizens' groups take on the airs of the film *12 Angry Men*: one or a few participants start pointing out the limits. After a few minutes, or a few hours depending on the format, the consensus was unanimously against free transport, with a few rare exceptions.



"At first, I thought free was a great idea. But if it's to have crowded buses and less frequency, I still prefer to pay."

Retiree, participant in a Keoscopie qualitative group

KEO
SCOPIE

IMAGINING TOMORROW'S MOBILITY

Objectives and impacts of free transport, the LAET measure

Historically, free public transport has often been motivated by social reasons and accessibility to public services. Nevertheless, the report points out that in many countries, user contributions remain a fundamental principle, with funding supplemented by local authorities and specific taxes paid by companies.

In French cities that have adopted free travel (such as Aubagne, Dunkerque or Châteauroux), the motivations are mainly social (making transport accessible to all, without discrimination on the basis of financial resources), economic (boosting the attractiveness of the city center in the face of competition from outlying shopping areas), or linked to the idea of better filling buses that often run empty.

The report by the Laboratoire d'Économie des Transports (LAET), carried out for SYTRAL in May 2019, analyzes in detail the issues associated with the introduction of total free travel in urban public transport (TCU) shows that free travel does indeed lead to a significant increase in initial ridership. However, the effect observed remains nuanced in the medium term:

-> In Aubagne and Châteauroux, ridership rose sharply as soon as free travel was introduced, but then levelled off, thus limiting the lasting effects on the attractiveness of the network and also limiting the modal shift from car to public transport.)

-> In Gap and Vitry, the impact was more limited, as free travel was not accompanied by significant investment in improving the quality of service.

Overall, the increases observed are mainly due to additional journeys made by users who are already captive (windfall effect), rather than a real modal shift from the car to public transport. Free travel thus attracts more pedestrians or cyclists for short journeys, rather than motorists forced by other factors such as comfort, frequency or speed of service.



A false good idea: "you can't have everything"

At the request of Métropole de Rennes, Keolis conducted an in-depth study in 2025 on the apprehension of free access, which spontaneously emerges as an attractive idea for citizens, supported by an intuitive perception of social justice and the enhanced attractiveness of cities. The study was structured around several complementary phases, enabling us to capture both spontaneous perceptions and evolving positions as we exchanged and learned more. First of all, the participants - 26 residents of Rennes of different ages, socio-economic backgrounds and frequency of use - were invited to keep a personal blog about their use and perceptions of public transport.

A group briefing then shared key data on the operation, financing and challenges of the STAR network. This transparent step was essential to establish a shared basis of understanding. At the end of the morning, participants drew up an initial ranking of fare scenarios and the consequent adaptation of the transport offer.

Thematic workshops then brought together groups divided according to their affinities in terms of responses (pro-weekend free travel, pro-targeted free travel, pro-development of the transport offer), enabling more in-depth analysis of motivations, trade-offs and realistic budget projections. In these workshops, discussions revealed the complexity of the subject: "I'm in favor of free travel in principle, but not if it means reducing bus lines during weekends. You can't have everything," said one participant in the "free weekend" workshop.

The more participants understand the system, the less they adopt free access

First and foremost, the exchanges clearly show that the use of public transport (PT) in the Rennes metropolitan area is not fundamentally dependent on price. While the cost of journeys is sometimes mentioned as an obstacle, it is in fact a secondary motivation. The real levers are linked to the quality of the network: frequency of service, range of hours, comfort, speed of journeys and feeling of safety. Cost only appears marginally, often in comparison with the overall cost of a family outing, or in the case of exceptional journeys, where the price-practicality ratio becomes more sensitive.

Universal free travel, initially very appealing to the majority of citizens surveyed, quickly proves less obvious once confronted with the budgetary reality and operational consequences. Total free travel represents an estimated annual loss of 51 million euros for the STAR network, requiring significant compensatory measures. Faced with these figures, participants become aware of the extent of the concessions required, particularly in terms of reducing the offer or finding revenue elsewhere. One participant sums up the process: "Initially, I was in favor of free access, but now I understand that it poses a lot of problems. It's not that simple."

“

At first, I was in favor of free access, but now I understand that it poses a lot of problems. It's not that simple.

“

"I don't really see the point of making it free for a billionaire, although I'm not sure he would take the bus."

Keoscopie panel participant

Communicate more effectively on existing solidarity and social fares

Moreover, the approach reveals a clear consensus around the principle of solidarity-based pricing. Participants strongly endorse this approach, where everyone contributes according to their financial means. What was surprising, however, was the discovery of an already very generous fare structure in Rennes, where 30% of residents could benefit from advantageous fares, or even free travel for some. This generosity, generally ignored by many, tempers the initial interest in universal free travel. Thus, when fare solidarity is known and understood, it appears sufficient in the eyes of the majority of participants. "I don't really see the point of making it free for a billionaire, although I'm not sure he would take the bus", says a participant on a Keoscopie panel.

Over and above the financial aspects, the approach also enables us to explore other risks perceived as major in the case of total free travel. Fears include increased network saturation, particularly at peak times, and a deterioration in the user experience. Indeed, free travel could attract new users without any additional resources to absorb the extra ridership, thus increasing discomfort.

They aspire to real solidarity, while remaining attached to an individualistic and pragmatic vision of the personal benefits derived from their use of public transport. This approach clearly shows that total free travel, while attractive from a symbolic and social point of view, is in fact very unrealistic in the eyes of the public once they become aware of the concrete implications. As a participant in one of the Keoscopie workgroups put it: "I wasn't aware of it at all, but it's true that the fares that already exist are quite well thought-out, depending on people's abilities." It's also essential to communicate on the range of services included in the subscriptions:

"I didn't know that the STAR network offered so many things, especially for bicycles and car-sharing. I was really surprised by the richness of the offer."



"I've experienced free parking in another city and I've seen a real deterioration in the atmosphere."



"The ticket is also a form of filter. If there's nothing left, it's going to become a jungle."

Fear of insecurity with the introduction of free travel

Beyond the question of financing, the issue of insecurity linked to free travel emerges as a major obstacle, particularly for women. Universal free travel is feared as a potential catalyst for disrespectful and uncivil behavior, even opening the door to material damage to the network and a heightened atmosphere of anxiety in public transport spaces. The implicit idea here is that payment represents a symbolic form of barrier to entry that regulates ridership and induces a minimum of respect for the service used.

This fear recurred very frequently in the qualitative groups conducted by IFOP (on behalf of Keolis) in preparation for the 2026 municipal elections, with the idea that "If it's free, everyone will get on, even those who have nothing to do with it". This idea of the ticket as a filter was very explicitly expressed: "I'm afraid that free travel will attract more delinquency or unsocial behavior", because "The ticket is also a form of filter. If there's nothing left, it's going to become a jungle."

One last speaker finally swayed the group against universal free parking: "I've experienced free parking in another city and I've seen a real deterioration in the atmosphere."

Low fares compared with neighbors, but little appetite for paying more

The average cost of public transport in France remains moderate compared with many comparable countries, particularly in Europe. According to data compiled by the International Association of Public Transport (UITP) and national observatories, most networks have implemented differentiated fare policies according to profile (students, senior citizens, job-seekers) and significant social discounts in many conurbations.

On average, the cost of a monthly pass is 50€ per month for networks with heavy mode and 28€ for networks without heavy mode. The actual cost for schoolchildren, students, employees and pensioners is on average half these costs, i.e. between €25 and €15.

In comparison, Berlin has a monthly pass at 86 euros, London often exceeds 150 euros for zones 1-3, and Zurich peaks at almost 90 euros. Although some cities, such as Vienna (365 euros per year) or Milan (330 euros), offer attractive annual passes, French public transport fares remain among the cheapest.

On average in France, fare revenues cover around 25% of the real cost of the service, excluding capital expenditure. This level of subsidy, coupled with partial or targeted free travel policies, makes public transport relatively accessible. Nevertheless, the cost of public transport weighs heavily on household budgets. For the 10 to 12 million French people who travel by car every month and who don't benefit from an adapted fare due to a lack of knowledge, every euro in the budget weighs down. As one of the participants sums up:

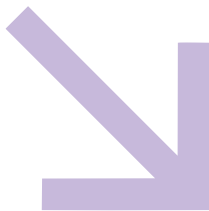
"Honestly, I don't really care whether it costs more in London, Beijing or Peking. What I see is that I'm sometimes overdrawn on the 10th of the month, and that's an expense on top of water, electricity, rent and telephone bills, and I can't get by."

This last statement is not an isolated one. The answers given by the people questioned in an IFOP survey carried out for Keolis in the Paris region are edifying: only 14% of those questioned were prepared to see an increase in service financed by an increase in fares, and only 2% were prepared to see an increase in local or regional taxes to finance an increase in service.



CONCLUSION

Free travel, a false good idea



As citizens come to understand how transport networks really work, and the economic balances that underpin them, free travel - so intuitive at the outset - is gradually shedding its aura of miracle solution.

The discussion groups held in several regions confirmed this: the more information circulates, the more lucid the decisions become. The ticket, initially perceived as an injustice, is often rehabilitated as a regulator, a filter, a marker of respect for public service. Far from caricatures, citizens are expressing nuanced positions: supportive, but concerned about quality; in favor of appropriate fares, but worried about a deteriorating climate on board; desirous of fairness, but aware of collective budget constraints.

This observation points to a new requirement: that of a pricing democracy, where the debate on prices is not reduced to a binary opposition between free and paying. It calls for a better explanation of existing systems (solidarity pricing, school passes, multimodal offers), and for the benefits included in passes to be made visible. In the end, far from dividing people, free travel reveals a common ground: a shared attachment to a high-quality, equitable and sustainable public service - provided that everyone knows what it costs, what it offers and what it enables. The key lies not so much in abolishing the ticket as in recognizing its symbolic, social and operational value.