

Welfare ticket atlas: Mapping the social discounts for public transport in Germany

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ABSTRACT

Public transport is essential for people on low incomes, but fares pose a major barrier to everyday mobility. In 2023, the “Deutschlandticket” flat-fare was introduced as a nationwide travelcard; since then, its price has increased to €63 per month. Although the German government discussed a nationwide subsidy, a uniform discount for low-income travellers is not expected to be introduced in the foreseeable future. Instead, 31 federal states and local authorities provide subsidies, while hundreds of municipalities continue to offer their local welfare tickets to tackle transport poverty.

This atlas maps the welfare tickets in Germany for the first time. Information on almost 300 subsidies was collected; granted according to various criteria, they are differentiated by fare type, price, area of validity and eligible group, among other categories. A comprehensive and openly available data set, the atlas contains an explanation for each ticket as well as useful links for further information.

The atlas shows that 48% of welfare recipients can purchase the “Deutschlandticket” for a discounted price. Furthermore, 71% have at least one welfare ticket available where they live. The variants include more than 300 offers including pay-as-you-go tickets and travelcards as well as two municipalities with free travel. In most cases, these tickets are facilitated by a social pass, which is usually issued to people on welfare allowance such as “Bürgergeld”. Subsidies are often granted in urban areas where public transport provision is relatively good. In contrast, the vast majority of rural areas has no welfare ticket. 243 out of 497 municipalities do not; and in at least 148 cases the implementation of a local welfare ticket has failed.

The wide range of welfare tickets reflects Germany's political federalism. Further, this comprehensive data set shows that the public transport system demands a lot from those entitled to buy a welfare ticket. There are no standardized criteria for eligibility, and the process often involves outdated or contradictory information. A first step could be to standardize the criteria to reduce barriers. A nationally valid and uniformly subsidized welfare ticket would serve as an effective solution.

1. Introduction and background

Access to affordable public transport (PT) plays a vital role in tackling transport poverty (Aberle and Gertz, 2025; Bondemark et al., 2021; Lucas et al., 2016). In Germany, ticket prices have historically posed significant barriers for low-income earners, particularly before the “Deutschlandticket” was introduced in 2023 that offers nationwide PT use for a €63 flat-fare (Aberle, 2026; Rozynek, 2024). While the “Deutschlandticket” aims at simplification and affordability, it reaches the most financially vulnerable mainly where a targeted subsidy is in place. After the federal government refrained from implementing a unified welfare version, a patchwork of 31 localized subsidies emerged

that complemented a number of more than 200 existing schemes, reflecting Germany's federal structure and local fiscal capacities. This study presents a nationwide overview of such welfare tickets and examines their spatial distribution, design features, and accessibility barriers. It is the English synopsis of a report that I published on behalf of the welfare association *Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband* (Aberle, 2025). To align with the scope of the *Visualising Transport Geography* section, the article focuses primarily on the thematic maps.

2. Data and methodology

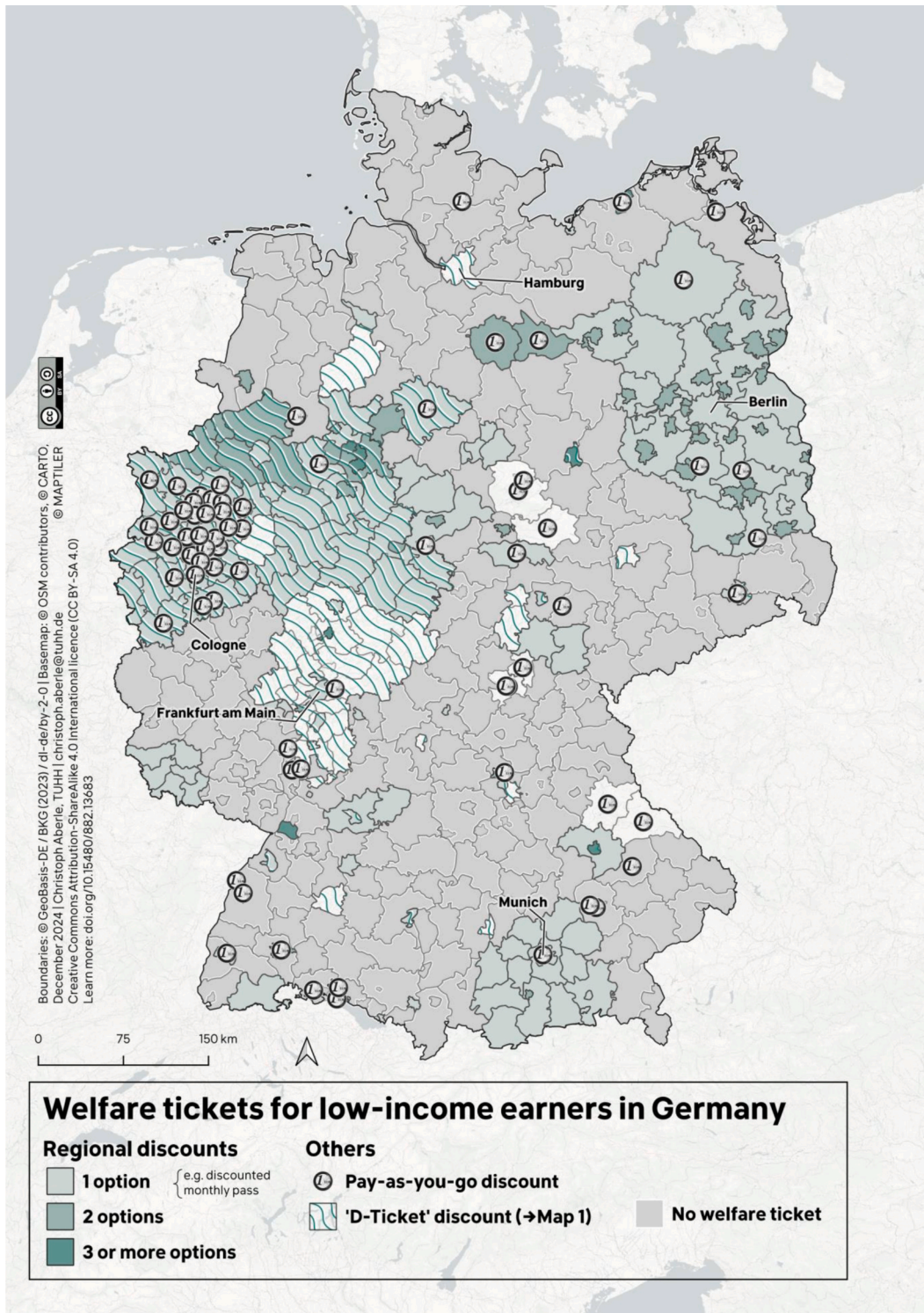
I collected the welfare ticket data between November 2024 and

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Map 1. Welfare discounts for the nationwide “Deutschlandticket”. A total of 31 municipalities or federal states provide such subsidies. The map shows the effective monthly price from the passenger perspective. The €29 threshold was selected because the Social Democratic Party (SPD) had proposed a nationwide welfare ticket at that price. Although the SPD was part of the governing coalition, the ticket was introduced at a higher monthly price of €49. As of 2026, the price of the “Deutschlandticket” has increased to €63 per month.



Map 2. Welfare tickets across Germany (green/hatched) and municipalities without such fares (grey). There are over 200 different travelcard schemes and more than 90 pay-as-you-go fare offers. In some areas, these overlap with the “Deutschlandticket” coverage, particularly in Northrhine-Westphalia (as indicated by many hatched municipalities in western Germany). The ‘note’ column in the raw data set provides explanations for nearly every ticket and for each municipality without a welfare ticket.

Note that the map shows fares, not service levels; most of the grey areas do have at least a basic level of PT service. However, there is a relation between service levels, degree of urbanisation, and the availability of welfare tickets, as evidenced by [Table 2](#) and [Table 3](#).

January 2025 via structured web scraping and manual validation of over 100 PT associations covering 497 municipalities.¹ For all offers, I documented eligibility criteria, fare reductions, geographic coverage, and official sources. Subsidy schemes were classified into three types: “Deutschlandticket” subsidies, regional discounts, and pay-as-you-go discounts. Only tickets priced below the “Deutschlandticket” price—set at €58 during the sampling period—were included. Furthermore, I sampled spatial characteristics such as PT service density and spatial type to contextualize the ticket distribution. Following a previous list by the left-wing party (DIE LINKE, 2010), this atlas can be considered the first comprehensive register of all welfare tickets across Germany.

3. Results

3.1. Welfare ticket types and geographic patterns

I identified three main types of welfare tickets:

- (1) Subsidies on the nationwide “Deutschlandticket”: Offered by 28 municipalities and three federal states (Hamburg, Hesse, Northrhine-Westphalia), with final prices ranging from €15 to €53 per month (Map 1).
- (2) Local and regional discounts: 226 offers, typically monthly tickets valid in a single transport association (Map 2).
- (3) Pay-as-you-go discounts: 79 schemes, including multi-journey tickets as well as unique models such as “VRR FlexSozial” in the Rhine-Ruhr conurbation, allowing 50% off per trip after a monthly payment of €3.20 (Map 2).

Eleven percent of local tickets offer validity across an entire PT association. Some small municipalities, such as the towns Ingelheim or Isny, provide fare-free public transport (FFPT) for eligible residents. Additionally, certain family or partner subscriptions e.g. in Lemgo/Northrhine-Westphalia are less costly than welfare tickets. This underscores the fragmented nature of the system.

3.2. Spatial distribution and inequality

Of Germany's 497 municipalities, 254 offer at least one welfare ticket. These areas account for roughly 60% of the population and 71% of all recipients of “Bürgergeld” allowance² (Table 1, Table 2). The urban-rural divide is stark: while 75% of urban municipalities provide a welfare ticket, only 31% of rural ones do. Moreover, welfare tickets are more common where PT service levels are higher (Table 3).

In at least 148 cases, local welfare ticket proposals have failed due to budget constraints or political opposition. These failures were predominantly documented in smaller municipalities. While FFPT

internationally “cannot necessarily be labelled as a left-wing or right-wing policy” (Kębiłowski, 2018: 4), in Germany it is mainly left-wing and progressive parties that try to subsidise (or abolish) fares, as evidenced by the data set (see ‘note’ column in the supplementary data).

3.3. Administrative and information barriers

Despite existing subsidies, access remains cumbersome for those in need. Eligibility criteria vary widely, and information is often inconsistent or outdated. To keep the maps clear and interpretable, eligibility criteria were not mapped but are documented in the data set. For example, the “most generous” welfare ticket in Greifswald is available to 15 different groups, while the “strictest” pass in Würzburg is issued only to “Bürgergeld” recipients who are single parents of a young child or enrolled in an education programme. However, according to a 2014 court ruling, it is unlawful to treat low-income groups differently – even in the case of a voluntary benefit such as the welfare ticket (Augsburg, 2014). Five cities stand out for providing guidance in easy-to-read language, but none of it is fully up to date. Such obstacles disproportionately affect those most in need of affordable PT.

4. Conclusion

Welfare tickets in Germany remain a fragmented means to combat transport poverty. Their availability is highly dependent on local political will and budgetary leeway. A unified, national welfare version of the “Deutschlandticket”, subsidized across all regions and valid nationwide, could significantly improve equitable access. As a first step, standardizing eligibility criteria and simplifying application procedures would reduce access barriers and increase uptake.

The welfare ticket atlas contributes to improving public transport by providing a comprehensive data set for policymakers, the PT sector, and transport researchers. For the first time, it maps the wide range of faresubsidies from the perspective of low-income passengers. Although the introduction of a nationwide discounted “Deutschlandticket” has been discussed, its introduction is not expected in the foreseeable future. As a result, the potential for an affordable and uniform welfare ticket remains untapped.

A detailed discussion of the methodology and findings is provided in Aberle (2025). The original report also includes a map showing “Deutschlandticket” discounts for pupils and apprentices.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Christoph Aberle: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Appendix A. Annex: Result tables – Deviations from 100% are due to rounding

Table 1

Distribution of welfare tickets across the total population, by spatial type. ‘WeT’: at least one welfare ticket available, ‘WeDT’: at least one welfare “Deutschlandticket”

¹ “Municipality” here refers to the 400 districts and district-free cities of Germany (Landkreise/Kreisfreie Städte), as well as an additional 97 subordinate towns and cities identified during the research (Kreisangehörige Städte).

² “Bürgergeld” is Germany's main welfare allowance for individuals considered fit for work but unemployed for at least 12 months. Introduced as the successor to the “Hartz IV” scheme, it is governed by the Social Code Book II (Sozialgesetzbuch II). As of 2025, a single recipient is entitled to approximately €560 per month. From July 2026 onwards, “Bürgergeld” will be renamed “Grundsicherung”. This article uses the former term for consistency with the underlying publication.

available, '>2 WeT': more than 2 welfare ticket offers available. Based on the total population as on 31 December 2022 regardless of their income. Spatial type largely according to EU NUTS-3 (Agora Verkehrswende, 2023).

Spatial type	% Municipalities			% Population						n (Population)	n (Municipalities)
	no WeT	WeT	WeDT	no WeT	WeT	1 WeT	2 WeT	>2 WeT	WeDT		
urban	25%	75%	61%	16%	84%	33%	12%	39%	61%	36,509,474	97
intermediate	48%	52%	18%	53%	47%	24%	12%	12%	25%	34,945,635	277
rural	69%	31%	7%	76%	24%	14%	9%	1%	8%	12,903,736	123
all	49%	51%	24%	40%	60%	26%	12%	22%	38%	84,358,845	497

Table 2
Distribution of welfare tickets across "Bürgergeld" welfare recipients, by spatial type. Based on the average number of "Bürgergeld" recipients in 2022 [30]. Due to data availability, only for the 400 districts/district-free cities.

Spatial type	% Municipalities			% "Bürgergeld" recipients						n (Population)	n (Municipalities)
	no WeT	WeT	WeDT	no WeT	WeT	1 WeT	2 WeT	>2 WeT	WeDT		
urban	25%	75%	61%	9%	91%	37%	10%	45%	66%	2,985,073	95
intermediate	59%	41%	18%	52%	48%	26%	12%	10%	27%	1,690,989	196
rural	74%	26%	7%	71%	29%	16%	11%	2%	8%	524,321	109
all	55%	45%	25%	29%	71%	32%	10%	29%	48%	5,200,383	400

Table 3
Distribution of welfare tickets across the population, by public transport departures per km² of built-up area (according to Agora Verkehrswende [31], municipalities divided into terciles). Due to data availability, only for the 400 districts/district-free cities.

Departures/km ² (tercile)	% Municipalities			% Population						n (Population)	n (Municipalities)
	no WeT	WeT	WeDT	no WeT	WeT	1 WeT	2 WeT	>2 WeT	WeDT		
many (3)	34%	66%	44%	21%	79%	35%	10%	34%	53%	41,421,289	145
medium (2)	63%	38%	23%	55%	45%	20%	15%	11%	34%	25,329,931	136
few (1)	71%	29%	5%	69%	31%	21%	8%	3%	8%	17,607,625	119
all	55%	45%	25%	41%	59%	27%	11%	20%	38%	84,358,845	400

Data availability

Full data set: <https://doi.org/10.15480/882.14843>.

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