PRISON TRANSPARENCY PROJECT

Research Assistant Travel Expense Protocol

Updated July 2026

Purpose

This protocol establishes a framework for reimbursing research assistant (RA) travel associated with Prison Transparency Project research, fieldwork, conferences, training, and academic collaboration. It draws on the principles of the Canadian Tri-Agency travel expense guidelines and the National Joint Council (NJC) Travel Directive while adopting a **frugal-spending standard** appropriate for RAs and publicly funded research.

1. Guiding Principles

Research assistant travel expenditures must:

1. Be directly related to approved academic, research, or professional-development activities (see Item 2. Travel Expense Authorization, below).
2. Represent the lowest reasonable cost that meets safety, accessibility, and academic requirements.
3. Be approved before travel occurs.
4. Avoid premium services unless a documented accessibility, medical, or operational justification exists.
5. Use virtual participation when it provides substantially equivalent academic outcomes at lower cost.
6. Events that include multiple PTP members will generally be given precedence over PTP-related individual travel.

2. Travel Expense Authorization

All travel funding requires prior written approval from:

- The RA's immediate supervisor (co-I) or the principal investigator (PI) and
- The project manager

RA must submit a PTP RA Funding Request which includes:

- Purpose of travel

- Destination
- Dates
- Estimated budget
- Funding source(s)
- Justification if proposed costs exceed standard caps

3. Transportation

3.1 Air Travel

Standard

- Economy class only.
- Lowest logical airfare available at the time of booking.
- Students should book at least 21 days in advance when feasible.

Not Reimbursable

- Business class
- Premium economy
- Seat upgrades
- Priority boarding
- Airport lounge access
- Additional baggage beyond one checked bag unless required for research equipment

Airfare Cap

Students should generally seek fares within:

Trip Type	Preferred Maximum
Domestic Canada	$700 round trip
Canada–US	$900 round trip
International	$1,800 round trip

Exceptions require written justification.

3.2 Rail and Bus Travel

Rail or bus should be used when:

- Travel time is reasonable (typically less than 6–8 hours), and
- Total cost is lower than flying.

Only standard/economy fares are reimbursable.

3.3 Personal or Rental Vehicle

Ride shares or carpooling must be used when possible. Use of a personal or rental vehicle is reimbursable only when:

- It is cheaper than available alternatives,
- Required for fieldwork, or
- No practical public transportation exists.

Mileage reimbursement:

- CAD $0.40/km

This intentionally falls below typical government reimbursement rates and reflects fuel, maintenance, and depreciation costs while encouraging use of shared or public transportation.

Parking and essential tolls may be reimbursed with receipts. Toll roads should be avoided if possible.

3.4 Local Transportation

Preferred order:

1. Walking
2. Public transit
3. Shared shuttle
4. Ride-share/taxi (when justified)

Daily Local Transportation Cap

- CAD $25/day

Higher claims require receipts and justification.

4. Accommodation

Standard Expectation

Students are expected to select the most affordable housing reasonably available. In order of preference:

- Non-commercial accommodation

- University residences
- Student housing
- Hostels with private rooms
- Budget hotels
- Shared accommodations with other students where appropriate

Accommodation should be safe, reasonably located, and suitable for academic travel. This aligns with government principles that accommodation should be safe and practical rather than luxurious. (Canada)

Accommodation Caps

Canada

Location	Maximum Reimbursable
Small/medium city	$150/night
Large metropolitan area	$200/night

United States

Location	Maximum Reimbursable
Most cities	$175 USD/night
High-cost cities	$250 USD/night

International

Category	Maximum Reimbursable
Standard destination	$180 USD/night
High-cost destination	$275 USD/night

Examples of high-cost destinations include London, Paris, New York, San Francisco, Tokyo, Geneva, and Singapore.

Non-commercial Accommodation

When staying with friends, family, or colleagues:

- No accommodation reimbursement is normally provided.
- A hospitality allowance of up to **$40/night** may be claimed (maximum 5 nights).

Shared Accommodation

Students are encouraged to share accommodation when:

- Attending the same conference or event.
- Privacy or safety concerns do not arise.

5. Meals

Daily Meal Caps

Canada

Meal	Maximum
Breakfast	$15
Lunch	$20
Dinner	$30
Daily Total	$65

United States

Meal	Maximum
Breakfast	$15 USD
Lunch	$20 USD
Dinner	$35 USD
Daily Total	$70 USD

International

Meal	Maximum
Breakfast	$20 USD
Lunch	$25 USD
Dinner	$35 USD
Daily Total	$80 USD

Meal Rules

- Itemized receipts are required.
- Alcohol is never reimbursable.

- Meals provided by conference, or included in airfare or accommodation cost cannot also be claimed.
- Group meals paid for by others are not eligible.
- Entertainment expenses are not eligible

6. Conference Registration

Registration fees are reimbursable when:

- In-person participation is approved in advance.
- The student is presenting, networking, receiving training, or participating in activities relevant to their academic program.
- Attendance is confirmed.

Students should use:

- Student rates
- Early-bird registration
- Virtual attendance options when appropriate

7. Long-Term Travel (More Than 30 Days)

For extended stays:

Accommodation

Students should use:

- Non-commercial accommodation
- University residences
- Furnished apartments
- Shared housing

Accommodation costs should generally not exceed:

- CAD $1,800/month (Canada)
- USD $1,500/month (most international destinations)

Meals

Daily meal limits reduce to:

- 75% of standard rates after 30 days

This reflects reduced costs associated with access to kitchens and mirrors the principle used in NJC extended-travel provisions. (Canada)

8. Non-Reimbursable Expenses

The following are not eligible:

- Alcohol
- Personal entertainment
- Mini-bar purchases
- Room service (unless no alternatives exist)
- Airline upgrades
- Travel insurance already provided through the university
- Clothing
- Passport fees (unless specifically required by the project)
- Personal sightseeing expenses
- Companion or family travel costs
- Traffic fines and parking violations

9. Documentation Requirements

After travel, create and send a folder that contains the following information:

- Approved travel authorization
- Itemized receipts sent as individual files (not compiled into a document or pdf)
- Descriptions of what each receipt was for
- Conference programs & registration confirmation
- Travel destinations, addresses
- List of meals that were paid for by other sources
- Boarding passes if applicable
- Brief post-travel report (1–2 pages) summarizing outcomes
- Other relevant travel documents

If requesting a travel advance (i.e. payment ahead of time for plane tickets, hotel bookings, etc.), you must provide **both**:

- Receipts for initial purchase, at the time of purchase, and
- Proof that the travel happened, in the form of final receipts, boarding passes

If expenses are incurred in a currency other than Canadian dollars, documentation showing the amount converted to Canadian dollars (CAD), such as a bank statement, credit card statement, or other receipt, must be provided. Any unrelated transactions or personal information not relevant to the expense claim must be redacted.

Claims must be submitted within 10 days of return and take an average of 2-3 weeks to process after filing.

10. Exceptional Circumstances

The PI or supervising co-I designated authority may approve costs above the stated caps when:

- Safety concerns exist.
- Accessibility accommodations are required.
- Travel occurs in unusually expensive locations.
- Research needs necessitate specialized transportation or lodging.
- No lower-cost alternatives are available.

Written justification must accompany the request.

Summary of Standard Student Travel Caps

Category	Cap
Accommodation (Canada)	$150–200/night
Accommodation (International)	$180–275 USD/night
Meals (Canada)	$65/day
Meals (International)	$70–80 USD/day
Local Transportation	$25/day
Personal Vehicle	$0.40/km
Hospitality Allowance	$30/night
Domestic Airfare	$700 round trip target
International Airfare	$1,800 round trip target

This framework aligns with Tri-Agency and NJC principles of reasonableness and accountability while establishing expenditure levels more appropriate for research assistant travel and stewardship of research funds. (Canada)