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Only About 5% Manhattan's Pedestrian Curb Cut Ramps Outside of Accessible Subway Stations are ADA Compliant

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In 2019 disability advocates won a court case against New York City to make pedestrian curb cuts more accessible, but three years later most of Manhattan's curb cuts outside accessible subway stations still are not compliant with the American with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Pedestrian curb cut ramps are ramps cut into the corner of the sidewalk to eliminate the ledge between the sidewalk and the crosswalk. They were first implemented to help wheelchair users or people with other mobility issues more safely and easily navigate the city. They have since also been used by non-disabled people who need to push wheeled objects such as parents pushing their child in a stroller.

In August 2021 the Manhattan Borough President's Office (MBPO), at the time led by Gale Brewer, published a report of 277 pedestrian curb cuts in Manhattan assessing them for ADA compliance. All of the assessed curb cuts were in front of accessible subway stations. Borough presidents in the four other boroughs have not released similar reports, so data is only available for Manhattan.

Accessible subway stations themselves can be hard to find in the city. According to the [New York City Council](#), in 2019 just 23% of New York City's subway stations were fully accessible. Even then, a 2018 [report](#) from the MBPO found that just under 40% of Manhattan's accessible stations needed improved signage and about half of elevators in accessible stations needed to be cleaned, most commonly because of the presence of urine or vomit.

In 2019 the two lawsuits, started in 2014 and 1994, were settled with New York City because of curb cut inaccessibility. In the settlement New York City agreed to survey its curb cuts and report the findings to a monitor appointed by the court.

The curb cuts are slightly better than they were in 2019. Three years ago Gothamist [reported](#) that more than a quarter of sidewalk corners in Lower Manhattan had no curb cut at all. The 2021 report showed only six sidewalk corners with no curb cut.

However, that does not mean there are not still problems. The most recent MBPO report found that only about 5% of the pedestrian curb cuts outside accessible subway stations are ADA compliant.

For a pedestrian curb cut to be considered compliant under the ADA it must fulfill a few [requirements](#). They cannot have a slope of more than 1":12", they need to be more than 36 inches wide, the end must be flush with the road and they must have "detectable warnings," and. Detectable warnings are bumps or ridges on the curb cut that let blind or visually impaired people know they are about to step into the road.

Of the 248 curb cuts the report could determine ADA compliance for, only 14 met all of these requirements.

A curb cut can be fully ADA compliant and still have traits that make it difficult for disabled people to use. One trait is whether the curb cut is a "center cut." A center cut is when the curb cut does not have two separate cuts for each crosswalk at an intersection and instead has one large cut cut around the whole corner of the block, spanning both crosswalks.

Center cuts can be dangerous for blind and visually impaired people because it is harder for them to orient themselves in the correct direction when using a crosswalk.

Sharon Hughey works in information and referral for the American Foundation for the Blind and is herself visually impaired. Hughey said it is already difficult to line up with the crosswalk, particularly because curb cuts are rounded and not straight. She said lining up with the crosswalk is a task that the detectable warnings do not help with.

“So people can, you know, think they're going one direction and kind of veer off down the middle, you could walk right straight down the middle of the perpendicular intersection and not even know it.” Hughey said. “You’re supposed to learn how to tell but it depends on how good your skills are.”

Hughey said that different blind or visually impaired people have different experiences though, and that this task was one that she struggled with because she is not a skilled traveler, but it might not be something other visually impaired struggle with.

Center cuts make lining up with the crosswalk even harder, 62 of the surveyed curb cuts were center cuts. In addition, three of the 14 ADA compliant curb cuts are center cuts.

Hughey said that though detectable warnings do not help with lining up with the crosswalk, they are still important.

“The cane obviously feels different in the ground, and your feet do too, so it's a very clear signal that you're approaching a street.” Hughey said. “There were quite a few times before we had them [detectable warnings], if we had flat curbs I would have been in the street.”

Only half of the curb cuts in the report had detectable warnings. Another 15 curb cuts had detectable warnings that were worn and not ADA compliant.

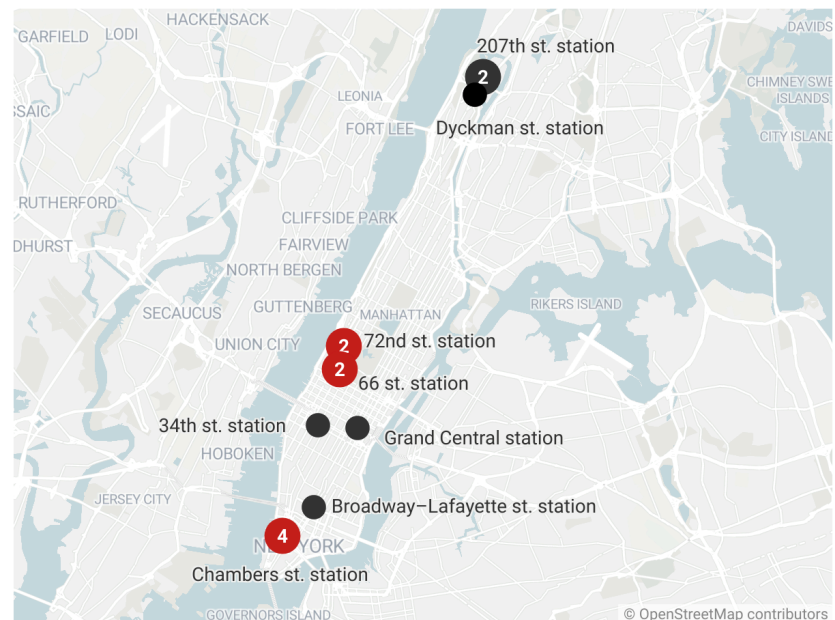
The MBPO also recorded whether the surveyed curb cuts look relatively new, which nearly 70% did not. Of those 70%, six of them were curb cuts that were deemed ADA compliant.

There are only six curb cuts, or 2%, that are ADA compliant, not a center cut, and look relatively new. This paired with the fact that the curb cuts in the report are in front of a mediocre number of accessible subway stations, which themselves have problems making them difficult to navigate, paints a bleak picture of accessible transportation in Manhattan.

The 14 ADA compliant curb cuts are spread throughout Manhattan. There are some in Tribeca, Inwood, Midtown, the Lower East Side, and the Upper West Side. However, there are no ADA compliant curb cuts at all between 75th and 190th street, meaning no curb cuts outside accessible subway stations in the Harlem, East Harlem, or Washington Heights neighborhoods. The only ADA compliant curb cut that is not in a majority-white neighborhood is the one in the Lower East Side.

Accessible Subway Stations with ADA Compliant Curb-Cut Ramps

Numbers indicate when there is more than one ADA compliant ramp at that location. Red indicates when the ramps are also relatively new and not center cut.



Map: Helena Milburn • Source: NYC MBPO • Created with Datawrapper