

Barriers to Independent Living: Public Transportation

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Intro:

Railways, buses, subways, and streetcars are linked by a long-regarded benchmark in society called public transportation. Each of these forms of public transportation attempts to function as equalizers in major cities and small towns worldwide, but they are not always the equitable vehicles they were created to be. Though the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) enforces [the ADA's 2006 accessibility standards for transportation](#), people with disabilities still face particular barriers that make public transportation more difficult. Older infrastructure, inoperable lifts and ramps, transportation availability, and added stigma against disabled people are just a few of the daily hurdles faced by millions.

The current transportation landscape

The majority of households in the United States have access to at least one vehicle. Everyone else uses either rideshares or paratransit, taxis, walks, rides a bike, takes public transit, or uses a mix of these. But the disparities between those with and without disabilities are significant. Non-disabled people use personal vehicles nearly 10 percent more than disabled people. Also, rather than driving, people with disabilities are passengers in a higher portion of their trips than people without disabilities. This fact is especially true for 6.6% of the U.S. population living with an ambulatory disability, an impairment that prevents or impedes walking.

Overall, people with disabilities tend to travel less than people without disabilities. In fact, [according to the Bureau of Transportation](#), over one-third of people with disabilities ages 18-64 make nearly no trips at all. The reason? Many disabled people are either housebound or do not have access to the necessary accommodations for travel. For people with mobility impairments without access to personal vehicles, of which walking or bike riding are not options, public transportation seems a helpful alternative. That is if their public transit or paratransit is available in their area, and such likelihood lessens every year as the use of public transportation in the United States continues to decline.

As of 2015, around [one-in-ten Americans](#) report using public transportation on a daily or weekly basis. However, this number varies tremendously depending on the region. For example, 39% of people use public transit in New York City, versus just around 3% in the country's most rural towns. Currently, disabled people using public transit are protected under ADA accessibility standards, stating that people with disabilities have equal access to public transportation. Disabled people cannot be required to surrender a seat, use special seating, be accompanied by an attendant, or be denied service because of their disability. And all service animals must be

allowed on board when accompanying a person with disabilities. Transit facilities must meet all ADA standards, including accessible travel paths, boarding ramps, wheelchair-accessible bus stops, and more. Still, older infrastructure and overworked network operators lead to obstacles blocking such accommodations.

The high cost of travel

Due to inadequate funding and lack of enforcement of ADA standards, physical obstacles around public transit are vast. Furthermore, confusion around 2006's ADA standards makes updates on public facilities move slower. The ADA requires that ADA standards be met by public facilities if such a feat is "readily achievable," meaning restructuring should occur without much difficulty or expense. So there's less strain from government officials on pre-existing public facilities to meet ADA standards if specific funding is not allotted to them.

However, the high cost of travel for people with disabilities doesn't necessarily mean financial strain. Much time and energy go into travel planning for people whose disabilities are not sufficiently accommodated. Long distances between stops can be the difference between staying home board and leaving the house. Buses that don't run as frequently mean excessive planning necessary for mobility-impaired passengers to reach those stops in time.

The stress of planning around public transportation's shortcomings can be endless. But sometimes, even perfect planning isn't enough. Disproportionate space between platforms and public vehicles makes it sometimes impracticable for passengers with wheelchairs to board. Frequently broken bus ramps and lifts lead to drivers even declining some disabled people's service altogether. So what happens when the public transportation available doesn't accommodate an individual with disabilities? Well, sometimes paratransit is the only alternative.

[Paratransit is a shared-ride public service](#) for individuals with disabilities who cannot access their local fixed-route transit system. Individuals must complete an application to qualify for paratransit under one or more of the ADA's three eligibility categories. And though paratransit is considered a cost-effective alternative to fixed-route systems, one-way trips are over three times more expensive than their counterpart, and that's the minimum. Moreover, paratransit is an option only if such a program exists in your area. The more rural a location, the less likely paratransit is available because meagerly funded transit systems cannot afford it. In fact, approximately 33 percent of people in the U.S. report having limited or no public transportation at all.

What does progress look like?

With 25 million people living with at least one travel-limiting disability, accessible public transit is becoming a high priority. Growing numbers of disability advocates and lawmakers are urging

transit systems across the country to prioritize renovations and public vehicle modernization. For example, Chicago Transit Authority's rail stations went from only 6 percent accessible to currently 70 percent. In 2018, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) of New York City hired its first accessibility chief, Alex Elegudin, who promises that over half of NYC's stations will be fully accessible by 2029 and all by 2034.

There are even talks of improvement to the pricey and often inaccessible local paratransit. Lawmakers explain that possible collaboration with rideshares like Lyft and Uber may solve the transportation alternative's most outstanding issue, the lack of accessible vehicles ready to accommodate passengers in need. The bottom line is more money continues to go into the many necessary updates for a more accessible public transit landscape. As long as this trajectory continues, public transit will continue to improve in its accessibility.