Caption: MTA logo beside active wheelchair icon

Fact Sheet - NYC Subway Accessibility

bit.ly/MTAAccessFacts : Supporting Equitable Subway Access with Data

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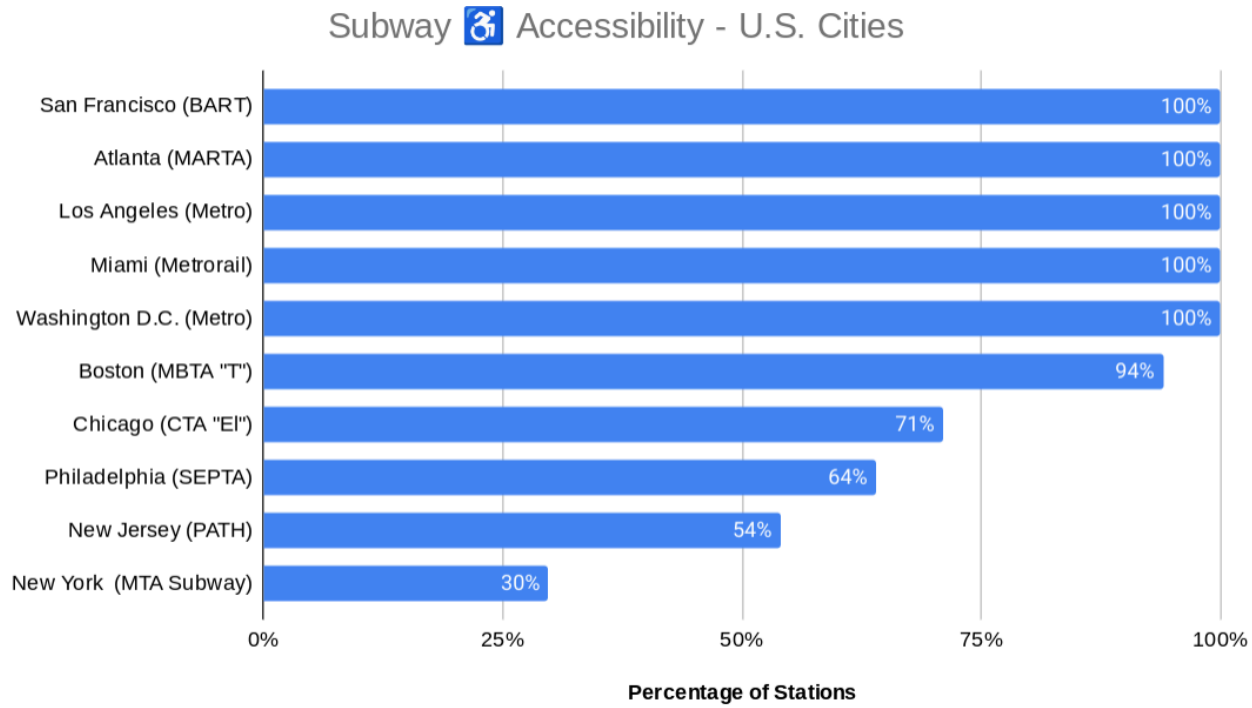
Latest update: June, 2024
Initial version: January 28, 2020 for the Malaysia Goodson Vigil



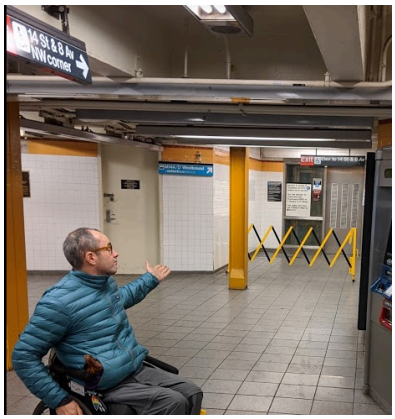
Caption: Bar chart of major U.S. cities, in order of subway station ♿ percentage. 100% for San Francisco, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Miami, Washington D.C. then Boston (94), Chicago (71) Philadelphia (64), New Jersey PATH (54), and NYC (30).

Contents:

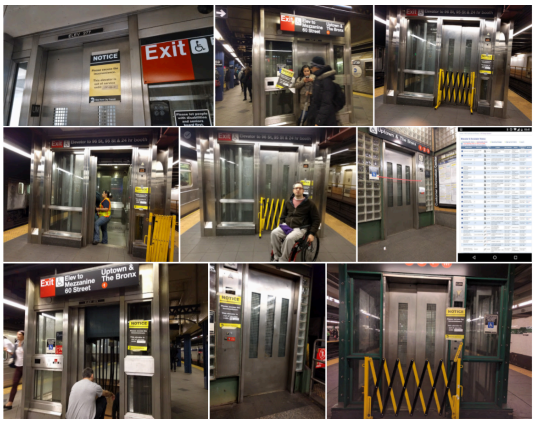
NYC subway numbers:

- Percent Accessible: 30.14 in September, 2024 - [NYC ♿ Station Tracker] for details
- Ridership: 3.6M Daily, 1.16B annually (per [MTA 2023 stats])
  Other sources: [2020 Gothamist infographic], [MTA official accessible station map]

Outage frequency? 25 daily breakdowns, with a 4 hour median repair time[1]



Caption: Wheelchair user at closed subway station elevator.



Caption: Photo collage of gated-off elevators.

Unreliable elevators are:

- **Uniquely harmful for New York City**: The subway is NYC's most important, iconic form of public transportation. That's because it's the only way to move rapidly within and between

[1] Per most recent full-year audit data available, 2014-5: [http://bit.ly/MTAELevatorOutages2015] ; [a January, 2023 a city council study] found an average of 34 elevators and 33 escalators out at any given time.

boroughs, while avoiding (and not worsening) surface traffic congestion. Yet we remain last among large US cities in providing disability-inclusive access to our subway. Cities with equally old systems – like Boston, Chicago and Philadelphia – have made a vastly higher proportion of stations accessible, benefiting disabled riders as well as rides with strollers, luggage or deliveries.

- **Increases paratransit (Access-A-Ride) demand and budget**: Without reliable elevators, many riders who use wheelchairs – and would rather take the subway, but can't risk being stranded – have no choice but to use paratransit. Which is generally slower, less-flexible and vastly more expensive for the city. Thus increasing overall paratransit demand and budget, and reducing the availability and quality of service to riders who would not take the subway even if they could.
- **A problem for 1 Million New Yorkers (and more)**: Nearly 12% of Americans have serious difficulty climbing stairs, a proportion that will grow with the rapidly aging global population. With a total population of 8.4 million, that means ~1 Million New Yorkers – **and** any family, friends and visitors traveling with us. Riders who would otherwise ride and **pay** for public transit.
- **Constant, Frequent and Unpredictable**: The MTA Elevator and Escalator Status page shows current elevator breakdowns (examples). There are ~25 daily breakdowns, or ~9000 per year (source: spreadsheet of 2014-5 outages)
- **Widespread**: The system has approximately 150 accessible stations, so nearly 1 in 6 become unavailable at some point daily.
- **Repaired slowly**: Outages have a 3 hr, 50 minute median repair time (half shorter, half longer) in the most recent full year data available. Without personnel posted to notify and assist passengers during breakdowns, riders can be stranded for hours until workers arrive (see this this gallery of outage photos with few personnel in sight).
- **Under-announced / reported**: Outages strand passengers, but are not announced on public-address systems, or in subway cars. Instead, they are silently posted on the Elevator status website, and the MyMTA app. Eventually, yellow gates and paper signs appear by broken elevators (photographs above, and more in this gallery). Rather than being urgently, promptly announced like other unexpected failures (e.g., a sick passenger or train derailment; see these audits for more).
- **Highly disruptive**: A single outage completely disrupts a trip, as the nearest working elevator may be many stations away.

  Dangerous: Without redundant entrances and exits -- a basic requirement for safety in fires or other emergencies –riders who need elevators are trapped.
- **Deceptively hard to avoid**: The MTA reports 96% systemwide elevator "uptime" (cited in this article). Sounds good for a test score, but doesn't meaningfully represent the actual path-of-travel for PWDs! Why? Even a one-way trip, with no transfers, typically requires 4 individual elevator rides (street -to-turnstile, turnstile-to-platform, repeat on way out) . The probability of all four elevators working is 85% (0.96^4). For a round trip, that's 72% (0.96^8).

- **Case in point**: EL277 at Columbus Circle broke down approx 300 times in 4 year period; (photos / analysis: http://bit.ly/EL277MTAFail). For a single year (2014-5), that included 15

entrapments (i.e. riders stuck in elevator)**.** In 2018, an entrapment / rescue at EL277 was caught on photo/video: bit.ly/MTAElevatorRescue2018

improvements needed:

- **Maintenance**: A Comptroller's 2017 audit found "MTA not performing all scheduled preventive maintenance on nearly 80 percent of sampled escalators and elevators at subway stations ... one-third scheduled preventive maintenance assignments were completed late, if at all."
- **Decrease overloading** How?

Currently, elevators are the only vertical stair-free vertical transport provided (in accessible stations, inaccessible statins have stairs only). This means that even when platforms are close together, like 15 ft -- those elevators are in constant use. Packed with strollers, luggage, and MTA employees hauling heavy construction material and garbage, there is little time for maintenance and doors are frequently held/squashed, causing long outages (anecdotally, maintenance crews report door issues are majority of outages) .

  - Alternative: a "Ramps First" procurement model could reduce the load on those elevators and quicken trips for passengers who'd rather take ramps than wait for the next elevator to come. Observation of the 42nd St Port Authority A/C/E station, or the West 4th St A/B/C/D station, which both use ramps, confirm the efficiency of this method.

Why is our access so far behind every other US City, 30 yrs after ADA? Two frequent rationalizations from MTA:

- NYC subway is **old**. True, but Boston MBTA/Chicago CTA older, and Philadelphia SEPTA is close.. They're done/doing full accessibility, against similar constraints.
- NYC's system is **big**. Again, true. Boston / Chicago both have ~⅔ fewer stations. BUT, their revenue/budget are proportionally lower.. An analogy to show size argument doesn't hold? There are more streets in NYC too, but we manage to pave every one. Same thing for building restrooms in every school. New York is bigger so we can't do these things? False. You build for the city you have, with the resources you have. New York's needs are larger, but so are our resources.

The root cause? A procurement pipeline that does not require the governor (and MTA board they appoint) be a good steward of MTA budget. The RampsFirst proposal details this analysis, and suggests one potential way to address it.

What about buses?

Ridership: 2M Daily
Pct ♿ Accessible: 100%
Overall: Good,not perfect, and no substitute for subways
Issues:

- The slowest speed and more limited range of buses makes them impractical for longer-distance, inter-borough trips, and particularly vulnerable to surface conditions (traffic, weather).
- Limit of 2 wheelchair spots per bus means wheelchair users must wait, even as other passengers board / stand / shift.
- Boarding requires complex, slow choreography. Driver must flip up seats, requiring passengers in priority, front-of-bus seating to move (often older adults). This zero-sum way of "accommodating" is poorly thought out, when better solutions exist (e.g. London buses with self-serve, mid-bus boarding ramp to open area).
- Bus stop conditions make wheelchair boarding difficult / impossible because ramp cannot be lowered safely onto the curb due to (1) other vehicles (delivery vans stc), (2) uneven / unplowed sidewalks.
- Inconsistent announcements / signage needed for ppl w visual / aural / cognitive disabilities.
- Good news:
    - Select Bus where non-disabled riders board mid-bus reduces front-of-bus traffic
    - Operators typically are consistently kind and helpful to riders w disabilities

Access-A-Ride Paratransit

- Annual Budget: ~$620M (~9M annual trips, ~$80/trip avg cost = $620M annual budget)
- Ridership: ~30k / day. From 150k "eligible" riders in system. Why so few eligible, and so few rides?
    - Difficulty signing up! Complex, paper-based application followed by in-person appointment at certification -- see see NYLPI's great AAR fact doc.
    - Service: Shared ride; 24 hr advance booking, etc: Britney Wilson, an NYC lawyer, describes in On NYC's Paratransit, Fighting for Safety, Respect, and Human Dignity (also a version on This American Life: https://www.thisamericanlife.org/629/expect-delays).
- Summary
    - Service offered is vastly inequitable to that which no-disabled ppl get from MTA: Inexpensive, spontaneously available service that lets ppl study / work / live in NYC.
    - Improving AAR difficult while demand (ppl who unable to ride public transit) vastly outstrips supply (And the imbalance results not from actual difficulty of "certifying" riders, but artifact of system constrained by budget -- giant even with severe constraints to "qualify."
    - Operator profit model doesn't align with better access for PWDs. That is, guarantee of demand that far exceeds supply will never decrease while subway so deeply inaccessible. With more accessible subways, there would be room/budget/possibility to remove barriers for requesting ParaTransit (why not just 1-800 number or whatever? You have to pay a fare, ppl aren't taking just for

run). If demand decreased bc better subway/bus access, would allow service improvements (a la E-Hail).

Summary

These are basic, on-the-ground (yet little known) facts of Subway / Bus / AAR inaccessibility.

Are there other issues beyond wheelchair/mobility inaccessibility? Definitely! Lack of announcements / signage discriminate against people with visual / aural deficits, and other inconsistencies problematic for ppl w cognitive deficits.

Wheelchair inaccessibility is merely a more visible aspect, and frankly one which is easier for non-disabled folk to grasp. But all of these things are Curb Cuts -- once they become standards, and are fixed “for” vulnerable populations, vastly larger swaths of the population will benefit: https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_curb_cut_effect .