

Transportation Accessibility

Transit Options Limited for People with Physical Disabilities

Equality Indicators Findings

The New York City (NYC) [Equality Indicators](#) includes two indicators under the topic [Transportation](#) that speak to the challenges that people with [physical disabilities](#) (defined as difficulty walking or climbing stairs; using a wheelchair, cane, crutches, or a walker; or having a condition that limits physical activity) may face in accessing subways and taxis in NYC. We found that 82.3% of subway stations in NYC were not wheelchair accessible, and 89.1% of taxis were not wheelchair accessible.

Many people will likely experience some sort of limited mobility at some point in their lives. In addition to physical disabilities, age and injury make it more likely that people will experience difficulties in accessing transit options, which in turn makes it more difficult for them to connect with jobs, social services, healthcare, schools, or any vital service necessary for health, well-being, and economic livelihood.

Who May Be Affected?

- 30.6 million people [with a physical disability](#)
- Seniors
- People with temporary physical injuries

The Americans with Disabilities Act

How public transportation providers serve their customers falls within the purview of the 1990 [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) (ADA). These providers must ensure that people with physical disabilities can effectively access these services in an equal manner to those without a physical disability. These requirements apply to all public forms of transportation including vehicles (such as buses), public rail (such as subways), and other modes of transport (such as ferries). The ADA standards these providers must meet are set by the [United States Access Board](#). This federal agency offers guidelines to assist transportation providers who have questions around accessible design for those with a physical disability.

Despite these rules and regulations, the [American Association of People with Disabilities](#) (AAPD) notes that ADA standards for transportation providers are not always followed or enforced by the [Federal Transit Administration](#) (FTA). The [Government Accountability Office](#) has documented the limitations in enforcement. Instead, [legal action](#) is the primary method for airing ADA complaints and changing the way transportation systems operate. However, individuals with physical disabilities may have problems pursuing legal action for a variety of reasons. These may include being physically unable to contact a lawyer or being financially unable to pay for one: according to [the most recent American Community Survey](#), the median income for individuals with disabilities (\$21,054) is considerably lower than for those without disabilities (\$31,446). Often ADA suits are brought by advocacy groups or city council members, as they can draw from larger financial resources. In some cases, the [Department of Justice](#) will bring a suit for large-scale non-compliance by cities or states.

Examples of recent suits include the February 2017 legal action by NYC public advocate [Letitia James](#) against the City on behalf of the United Spinal Association, which centered around the deteriorating condition of sidewalks which limited mobility those with a physical disability. Two years before this suit, [Los Angeles](#) settled a \$1.3 billion suit over inadequate sidewalks for those with a physical disability, one of the largest settlements of its kind.

Transit Access in Rural and Urban Settings



Although urban areas are the most widely discussed in terms of transportation accessibility, individuals with physical disabilities living in rural areas have the fewest transportation options. According to the [National Council on Disability](#) (NCD), “lack of public transportation is one of the most serious, persistent problems reported by people with disabilities who live in rural America today.” Inequalities in federal funding to rural areas are considered the root of this problem. NCD documents the imbalance in allocation of federal transit funding: while 25% of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, they receive just 6% of federal transit funding. [TRIP](#), a private, nonprofit national transportation research group, notes that 40% of rural counties have no public transportation.

In contrast to rural areas, large urban metropolitan areas have more variety in transportation options, but these may not all be accessible to people with physical disabilities. For instance, of the [top five urbanized areas](#) with the most transit travel in 2016 (NYC; Los Angeles; Chicago; Washington, D.C.; and San Francisco), just two—Chicago and D.C.—made it into [Wheelchair Travel’s](#) top five cities ranked for wheelchair accessibility.

Transit Accessibility in NYC

According to the [Center for Independence of the Disabled, New York](#) (CIDNY), more than 500,000 New Yorkers (or 7.1% of the NYC population) have a physical or ambulatory disability. While NYC offers many modes of transportation (taxis, buses, subways, ferries, paratransit services), CIDNY assesses how accessible they truly are to people with physical disabilities. Lack of [subway elevators](#), inadequate numbers of [sidewalk curb cuts](#), and [taxis](#) that are not wheelchair accessible are all obstacles to the mobility of people with physical disabilities.

NYC by the Numbers

- 82.3% of [subway stations](#) are not accessible to people in wheelchairs
- 90.5% of Manhattan [curb cuts](#) are not ADA compliant
- 89.1% of [taxis](#) are not accessible to people in wheelchairs

The [FTA recently advised the Metropolitan Transit Authority](#) (MTA) to increase the number of elevators in its 469 NYC Transit subway stations, which serve Brooklyn, the Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens. Of the 10 largest subway systems nationwide, NYC has the smallest number of accessible stations, [according to the FTA](#). Increasingly, people with physical disabilities must rely on paratransit vehicles to get around NYC through the [MTA’s Access-A-Ride](#) (AAR) program. The [Citizens Budget Commission](#) (CBC) estimates that paratransit services are used more than 6 million times annually. But AAR is a costly program: the CBC puts the cost of each paratransit trip at \$71, the highest cost of paratransit in the country. Annually this costs the MTA around \$500

million dollars. To supplement paratransit services, currently the MTA is [exploring using on-demand](#), “e-hail apps” through Uber, Arro, or Curb for paratransit users. But Uber’s involvement in this exploratory phase has drawn criticism from disability advocates (who claim [Uber discriminates](#) against wheelchair users since none of its cars are mandated to be wheelchair accessible).

Exploring Use of Technology

For many public transportation experts, solutions to better serving people with physical disabilities lie in technology. While some cities are exploring using apps and ridesharing programs (see Box 1), the U.S. Department of Transportation’s [Accessible Transportation Technologies Research Initiative](#) (ATTRI) leads efforts to research, develop, and implement solutions to transportation issues using technology. [ATTRI](#) works on lowering or removing barriers to transportation in four primary disability categories: visual, hearing, cognitive, and mobility (for those with physical disabilities). According to ATTRI, a range of technologies can help provide access to [real-time situational data sources](#), which could help pedestrians with visual or hearing impairments navigate. ATTRI is also exploring the use of [self-driving, automated vehicles](#) as a potentially game-changing solution for increasing mobility for individuals with physical disabilities.

Box 1. Pilot programs in New York and Boston to increase transportation options
New York
<p>Since 2010, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) has operated a pilot program for Access-A-Ride customers to pay for yellow taxi service using an MTA-issued pre-paid Chase Visa Card. They have also begun using ridesharing companies like Uber and Lyft to fill in gaps in paratransit service. But advocates are concerned that ride-sharing companies will provide better service to people with physical disabilities who can walk, creating an unequal, two-tiered disability transit system.</p>
Boston
<p>In Boston those who need paratransit services to get around face a number of limitations: paratransit routes are inflexible, and riders must reserve them a day ahead of time. They are also costly, averaging between \$3.15 and \$5.25 per trip. In response to these inefficiencies, the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) decided to experiment with using Uber and Lyft as alternatives. Under a year-long pilot program, which kicked off in September 2016, paratransit customers can request rides, on-demand, using mobile apps, and Uber and Lyft discount these rides, charging paratransit customers \$2.00 per ride. In turn, the MBTA subsidizes the cost up to \$13 per customer.</p>

What Lies Ahead

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to increasing transportation accessibility for people with physical disabilities. Yet there is much work being done today to improve the situation. While a fully accessible system for everyone has yet to be designed, the [National Council on Disability](#) has provided a framework for how those in federal, state, and local government should approach transportation planning issues with an eye towards accessibility.

The Equality Indicators is a project of the [Institute for State and Local Governance](#) (ISLG) of the City University of New York.

The project measures progress towards greater equality across six themes related to **Economy**, **Education**, **Health**, **Housing**, **Justice**, and **Services** using 96 indicators. Each indicator is scored from 1 to 100, where 1 represents the most inequality and 100 the least inequality. For more information please visit our website at equalityindicators.org and follow us on twitter [@equalityISLG](https://twitter.com/equalityISLG)

In this issue of *Narrowing The Gap*, we focus on one of the groups adversely affected by inequality: **Individuals with a physical or intellectual disability**. Other issues describe inequalities faced by children, immigrants, individuals currently in jail or on probation, individuals living in poverty, individuals with less than a high school diploma, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer individuals, racial and ethnic minorities, religious minorities, seniors, single parents, and women.