



People with Disabilities in California Want Density, Improved Streets and Buses to Help Pedestrians, Bus Riders, and Car Drivers

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Project Objective

The project aims to understand the extent to which disability may affect the choices and desires that people have for transportation mode usage frequencies, activity frequencies, and neighborhood features.

Problem Statement

People with disabilities travel less than their peers without disabilities. Much research about the travel patterns of people with disabilities focuses on problems they experience with specific transportation modes, under the assumption that fixing those specific problems is enough to fully include people with disabilities in the broader world. This doesn't account for the connections of different transportation modes to land use patterns, and it presumes what people with disabilities want without asking them.

Research Methodology

Researchers at UC Davis conducted a focus group involving 20 adults with disabilities across California, including those in rural and suburban areas far from the coast. The researchers asked participants about where they usually go locally, how they get around, what challenges they face getting around, and what they want to be farther or closer to them. The questions were open-ended, and the researchers did not ask specific prompts about specific transportation modes or specific types of problems.

Results

People with disabilities use different transportation modes, including driving. Some participants reported driving most places but having used buses regularly in the past, while others reported walking, riding buses, using paratransit, or using taxis. Also, people with some vision impairments can legally drive but may need a lot of help with lighting to drive at different times of day.

People with disabilities want their activity places to be closer to home. Researchers found a majority of participants supporting this idea and no one opposing it, suggesting demand for dense mixed-use development. One participant who spoke of high levels of street crime in a rural part of California still wanted more dense mixed-use development to reduce exposure to crime while walking or using buses (due to shorter trips).

People with disabilities, including drivers in rural and suburban areas, want more street lighting, seating, and shade. Many participants supported these changes and spoke of how requests for such changes keep being denied in their local governments because of cost concerns in rural and suburban areas.

People with disabilities want more frequent public transit service for longer hours. Some participants are or know essential workers with night shifts who cannot consistently rely on public transit to get to or from their jobs. Many participants from rural areas not too far from major cities spoke of there being one bus per day or a few buses per week to get between their rural areas and the central city.

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Paratransit needs to improve. One participant spoke of being injured in a paratransit bus because the bus has essentially useless shock absorbers and riders using wheelchairs are seated at the back. Two other participants spoke of overly long, circuitous routes as well as overly long wait times before boarding.

Proposals for vehicle miles traveled (VMT) fees should make sure to not hurt people with disabilities.

A few participants who spoke of VMT fees were concerned that they would be financially penalized for driving with no other viable option. They wanted to make sure that public transit services would be greatly improved before any proposed VMT fees are implemented.

People with disabilities want their voices to be heard on specific issues of interest to them when free to do so.

The researchers did not prompt participants in any way about specific topics like street lighting, seating, shade, public transit frequencies or service hours, paratransit quality, or VMT fees. Participants raised these issues completely on their own, and the researchers just helped keep the discussion moving to make sure that the focus group did not run long and did not let just a few participants dominate.

The full report, “Disability, Transportation, Activity Performance, and Neighborhood Features in California: Conducting a Focus Group and Designing a Survey” can be found at

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0340w08s>.

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