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Access Denied? Perceptions of New Mobility Services Among Disabled People in San Francisco



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Issue

Thirty years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, people with disabilities still face significant barriers to transportation access. Nearly one-third of disabled people describe inadequate transportation as a problem in their lives, and many major transportation systems have large accessibility gaps.

In recent years, new transportation services, often referred to as “new mobility” or “emerging mobility,” all launched without any accessible options. These services include transportation network companies (TNCs) such as Lyft and Uber, plus bike-share, scooter-share, and car-share programs. Whether cities rush to welcome or grudgingly accept new mobility services, disability access is still too often an afterthought.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, home to Silicon Valley and the 2010s tech boom, new mobility services are particularly widespread. TNCs, for example, make up approximately 25% of peak-hour traffic in Downtown San Francisco. San Francisco also has a well-established bike-share system and was among the first cities in the country to see hundreds of scooters on its streets and sidewalks. In light of the prevalence of these services and the significant transportation needs of the disability community, this project examines perceptions of new

mobility among disabled people in San Francisco and makes recommendations for improving transportation access for people with disabilities.

Research Findings

Disabled people in San Francisco see promise in some new mobility services. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the majority of respondents felt that new mobility had a positive impact on their ability to travel. Even so, many people with disabilities currently face significant barriers to use, most notably physical and sensory inaccessibility.

Three findings are especially notable:

- Out of all new mobility options, people with disabilities in San Francisco are most interested in on-demand automobility, e.g. accessible TNCs or accessible taxis.
- Respondents expressed significant concern about scooters and dockless bike-share blocking the path of travel. Nearly 75% of respondents reported that an improperly parked scooter or bike created a mobility barrier for them on at least one occasion. Only 16% indicated that bikes or scooters had not blocked their access to the street or sidewalk.
- With broken sidewalks and missing curb ramps common, people with disabilities still face many

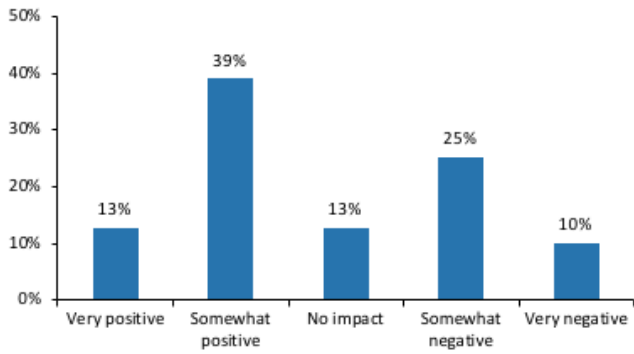


Figure 1. What type of effect do new mobility services have on your ability to travel?

barriers to basic mobility. Some people with disabilities are frustrated by the city’s focus on new mobility services when many disabled people still cannot accessibly navigate their own neighborhoods.

Study Approach

This project examines perceptions of new mobility services among disabled people in San Francisco via a survey of 218 people with disabilities. The researcher partnered with the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) and Senior and Disability Action (SDA), a disability rights organization in San Francisco, to design the survey instrument and collect survey data. SDA staff distributed surveys among their network and collected responses from members of the public at bus stops. Additional respondents were recruited on social media and via other community-based organizations. Respondents were surveyed between December 2019 and February 2020. Disabled individuals who live, work, and/or routinely travel in San Francisco were eligible to take the survey.

Conclusions

Continue advocating for more effective TNC Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle (WAV) regulations at the state level.

In 2018, California Gov. Jerry Brown signed Senate Bill 1376 into law. Also known as the TNC Access for All Act,

SB 1376 charges a surcharge on inaccessible TNC rides. San Francisco should continue advocating through the California Public Utility Commission’s current SB 1376 rulemaking process for more rigorous TNC WAV regulations that will provide equivalent service to wheelchair users.

Address the problem of scooters and bicycles on sidewalks.

New mobility companies need stronger incentives to keep sidewalks clear. Some of San Francisco’s policies have proven effective and should be continued, such as scooter “lock-to” requirements — which ensure scooters are locked in an upright position — and bike rack installation paid for by the scooter companies. San Francisco should consider placing additional requirements on micromobility companies to increase user accountability, such as mandatory user fines for incorrect parking. SFMTA could also pilot interventions such as drop zones and a valet model in select high-use areas, where micromobility staff help riders rent devices and provide in-person guidance on riding and parking requirements.

Build safer active transportation infrastructure to decrease conflicts between modes and make public space safer for vulnerable pedestrians.

People with disabilities reported safety concerns with new mobility services. Building protected bike lanes and wider sidewalks will increase safety among disabled road users, and will enable scooter and bike-share riders (disabled and non-disabled) to use their devices without impeding pedestrian space. SFMTA should also continue its recent practice of conducting project site visits with people who have various disabilities. By gathering firsthand feedback on the challenges of a particular project site, planners will be better equipped to design accessible infrastructure.



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