

Getting Nowhere



Or
Going Places?



Students Explore Accessibility in NYC's Public Transit

How can public transit be more accessible and better accommodate people with disabilities?

Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers—that we know of—have mobility-related disabilities. Other disabilities, such as vision impairments, hearing impairments, and many chronic illnesses that might not be visible to other people, can also affect someone’s ability to use public transportation. Even though such a large chunk of the city’s population experiences some type of disability, NYC’s public transit system could use a lot of improvement in terms of accessibility.

In the spring of 2022, CUP and Teaching Artist Cade Smith collaborated with students from KAPPA International High School to investigate this issue. Students explored relief printing and drawing, surveyed community members, and interviewed key stakeholders to learn about accessibility in NYC’s public transit system—and learned about accessibility in general along the way, too. The team gathered what they learned and created this booklet to teach others about access to public transportation and how the NYC transit system can better support New Yorkers with disabilities!



“A lot of people kind of become aware of accessibility issues when they become disabled themselves, or when they see a friend become disabled: if they break a foot or sprained an ankle, their perspective suddenly changes. But a lot of people, if they don’t have any challenges [with accessibility], they don’t really see any issues, and they’re not really willing to fight for accessibility, or they may not support it politically.”

— Jessica Murray, Researcher on Transportation Inclusion and Director of Digital Communications, Transformative Learning in the Humanities, City University of New York

What is accessibility?

“I define accessibility making something usable or user friendly, across all abilities. Whether it’s a website or access to a building or braille being installed. Access is... vitally important for everyone. There are a plethora of all kinds of different people and different disabilities in the US and around the world. Including people with disabilities, with all kinds of backgrounds, allows for people to share stories and insights into experiences that may be shared by many people.”

— Eman Rimawi, Access-A-Ride Campaign Coordinator and Organizer, New York Lawyers for Public Interest



“[Access] is very important to me because that’s what gives people the freedom to be creative, to go and visit a friend in a hospital, to go see a doctor, to go to work, to go to school, or at the end of the day to go to a restaurant and have a meal with a friend. That’s what accessibility means to me—giving people limitless autonomy to move around as they want to.”

— Quemuel Arroyo, Chief Accessibility Officer, State of NY Metropolitan Transportation Authority

“Accessibility is, to me, defined as the ability to engage in, participate in, and be able to freely access a place, service, or thing... Accessibility, to me, comes down to freedom of participation, freedom of engagement in our community, in similar ways, to those without disabilities.”

— Alex Elegudin, Co-Founder and Board Member, Wheeling Forward



What does accessibility look like on NYC's public transit today?

The Subway

+Elevators

"In the train systems, about 29% of the system is accessible today. On any given day, you're going to have some elevators that are going to be out of service. So even that number is a little diminished on the daily."

— Quemuel Arroyo

"They just changed the city law to make sure that developers who build buildings right next to subway stations have to consult with the MTA before they do their renovation, or build their building.... It's not like they can just build an elevator, and they're done. It needs maintenance for years, those elevators will have to get replaced every 20 years or so. So every new station that they make accessible, they're kind of adding a little bit more cost to their ongoing budget."

— Jessica Murray

+Priorities

"Within the last 10 years, the MTA was doing maybe three subway station accessibility upgrades a year.... Now they're doing about 10 a year. So there's been a great acceleration in terms of the investment, the prioritization, how it's happening. Obviously, it's a huge system, it has [nearly] 500 stations. So even if we have 150 [accessible stations], that means there's 300+ more to go."

— Alex Elegudin

"Art [in subway stations] is great but not more important than ramps, elevators, braille, tactile installations, etc. that have to do with accessibility."

— Eman Rimawi



WATCH

YOUR

STEP



The Bus

“The buses are 100% accessible in terms of having wheelchair ramps and things but still presents some challenges [like] making sure you can get picked up, making sure that there’s a seat available.... The buses are a great tool, but at the same time, they don’t always get you borough-to-borough and allow you to travel the long distances that the subway does.”

— Alex Elegudin

“They’re working on trying to make bus stops more accessible, adding shelters, adding seating. Making sure that that there’s space so the passengers that use wheelchairs can board easily at the at the bus stops.”

— Jessica Murray



The Streets

“[The MTA is] fixing the curbs to make sure that they have curb cuts at all the corners.”

— Jessica Murray

“[They’re putting] accessible pedestrian signals for people who are blind so that they can know when it’s safe to cross the street. They can hear an audible signal that tells them when they can cross.”

— Jessica Murray

Accessibility isn't only a disability issue!

“The MTA has a policy that if you have a stroller and you want to bring it on the bus, you have to take the baby out of the stroller and fold up the stroller. And this is really hard for some moms, especially if they’re carrying other stuff, or if they have multiple kids that they’re traveling with.”

— Jessica Murray



WATCH YOUR STEP



What is Access-A-Ride?

“Access-A-Ride is the largest Paratransit system in the world. On average we perform about 24,000 trips daily and have close to 170,000 subscribers.”

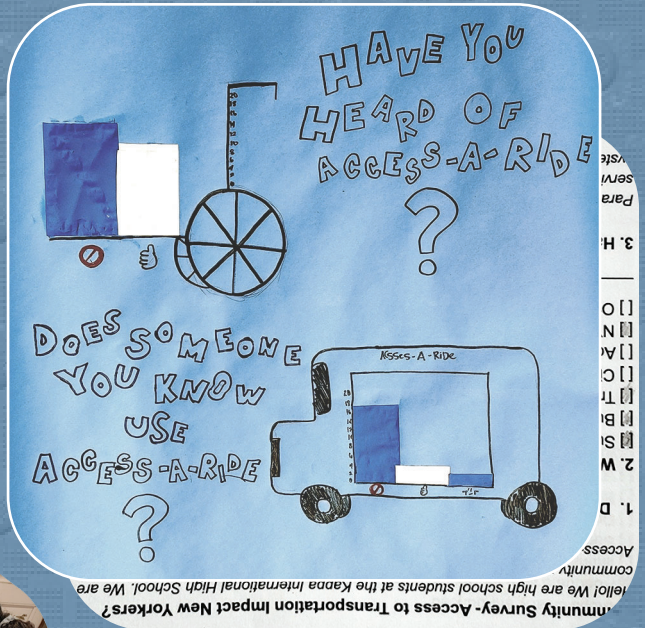
— Quemuel Arroyo

“[Access-A-Ride] exists because the subway stations are not accessible, and it was supposed to be kind of a temporary thing or a way to help people that really just have a hard time taking public transportation at all, but it’s really turned into a massive system.”

— Jessica Murray

“So I can’t use the train station, I can’t use the bus station. Access-A-Ride is my only option.”

— Eman Rimawi



What's the problem with Access-A-Ride?

"It's very inefficient. It's even inefficient for the people that just use it on a day to day basis. So it sounds great on paper, like... we'll just drive people, that helps the problem. But that doesn't actually solve the problem, because there's a lot of traffic... dragging people across boroughs takes a lot of time... so someone's two mile trip might take two hours."

— Jessica Murray

"I had to be [at work at] 9:30 In the morning, and I was leaving my house at like 6:45-7a.m. At the time I lived in Throgs Neck at the top of the Bronx, and our office was in Midtown, and I was just like, 'How early do y'all want me to leave?' I started making a joke. I was like, 'Well, I guess I better bring a cot with me and some pajamas and just live in the office for days when I have to sleep over for early meetings because I don't know what else to do'.... [NYLPI] finally got me an iPad to start working just in case I was still on Access-A-Ride at 9:30."

— Eman Rimawi

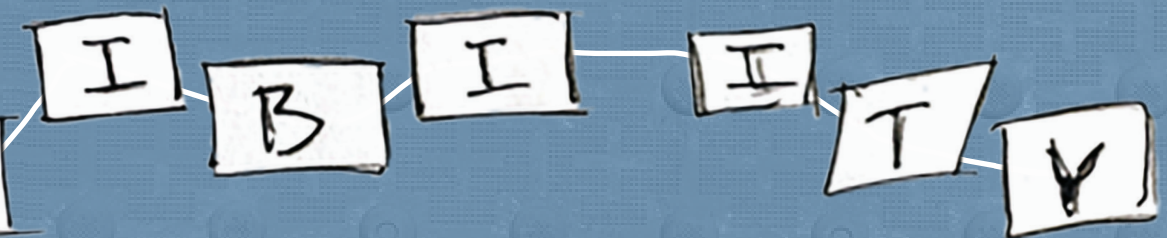
Who's In Charge?

"The MTA takes care of all the paratransit services [like Access-a-Ride]. There are over 170,000 customers who use it on a daily basis... It is supposed to take you anywhere you need to go anytime you want to go. In the last few years the MTA started an on-demand service."

— Eman Rimawi

"Access-A-Ride has made a number of improvements over the years because of the pushing advocates like myself have been doing... We won't stop reminding them that it's their responsibility to provide these services."

— Eman Rimawi



How does inaccessible and unreliable public transit affect New Yorkers?

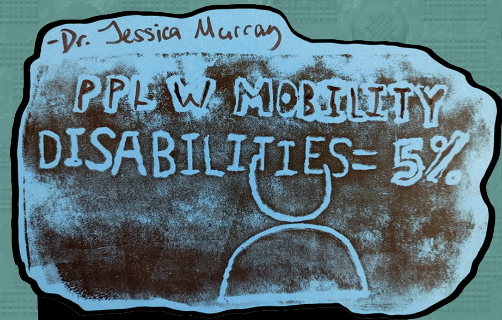
Less access to work and social inclusion

"I don't think anyone's ever done any kind of cost-benefit analysis [for] the benefit of [disabled] people feeling included in society and being able to be productive members of society and work. A lot of people want to work but, you know, transportation is one of the biggest obstacles for disabled people."

— Jessica Murray

"Not being able to have access to, you know, 70% of the subway stations, if you're a wheelchair user specifically, is a big deal. I mean, of course, that means there are certain jobs you can't take, of course, that means there are certain places your friends may want to go, that you can't go to."

— Alex Elegudin



**Not all disabilities are visible!
You see more disabled people than
you realize using public transit!**

Let's go eat!



Can't truly, equitably experience the City

"[Inaccessible public transit affects disabled New Yorkers because] it is that blood system that feeds them, that connects them to the rest of the city. New York City is a very rich city that has a lot to offer. A public transportation system is what gets people to those places.... We are the bloodline of New York and without us nothing moves, people don't get to enjoy what New York has to offer without our ability to get them there."
— Quemuel Arroyo



How Can Disabled New Yorkers Affect Public Transit?

"We have communities of New Yorkers that are engaged with us, that really tell us when we're missing the mark, what they'd like to see more of, and what we haven't really gotten into the system, what they want to see change in our system. Because we engage with stakeholders, we're able to validate that we are delivering what New Yorkers want to see happen."
— Quemuel Arroyo



What prevents changes from being made?

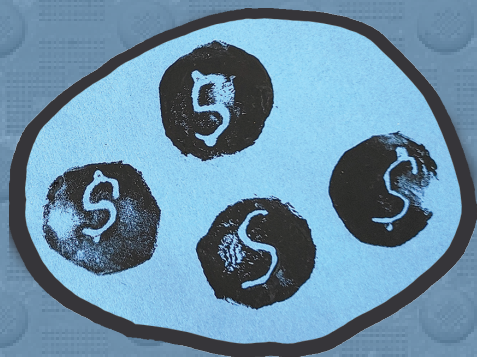
Money!

“It’s expensive to retrofit all of these subways and old buildings with elevators, ramps, braille or captions, but it’s doable.”

— Eman Rimawi

“The biggest problem is money. It’s having people prioritize [accessibility] in the budgets and pay for it.”

— Jessica Murray



Other Priorities

“I think [another issue is] political will... if [the MTA] make[s] the choice to spend a lot of money on accessibility, but other people want other things... Unfortunately, disabled people haven’t always historically had this political power or voice and so their needs [go unmet].”

— Jessica Murray

“There are advocates for many different transit topics, people who want more bus routes, people who want greener buses... there’s a million causes even in the area of transit or transportation.”

— Alex Elegudin



Difficulty Truly Following the Americans With Disabilities Act

“If the ADA says something else, I don’t understand how people are like, ‘Yeah, we’re doing Americans with Disabilities Act compliance,’ but not following the full law. So it’s just a tricky, tricky thing to get Access-A-Ride to do things fully based on the law, because they like to skirt by it... which annoys and frustrates me, but will never stop me from trying to get them to [comply with the ADA].”

— Eman Rimawi



Time and Service

“Even if they gave me all the money in the world, no one would want me to interrupt their commute to school to work.... It’s like, ‘Change my transit system, make it accessible! But don’t stop the train from going there.’ It is practically impossible for me to retrofit a station without stopping service at that location while construction is done.”

— Quemuel Arroyo



What do students think?



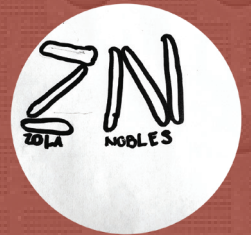
“NYC’s public transit is not safe for disabled people yet, but it’s hard to make changes due to the age of the system.”
— Jay Gonzalez, KAPPA Student

“I think accessibility in NYC public transit is necessary to society. It needs more development.”
— Fatoumata Conde, KAPPA Student



“I think NYC is slowly getting better in public transit. Buses in NYC are really good with accessibility but trains need to do a lot more before they are deemed ‘accessible.’ For example, all train stations need elevators for easier transportation. Overall, accessibility should be a top priority when thinking of ways to update public transit in NYC.”
— Marriyam Halirou, KAPPA Student

“The MTA has poor service and they need better time management.”
— Zola Nobles, KAPPA Student



“Accessibility isn’t just about getting places, it’s also about being able to do it safely.”
— Mayerline Renoso, KAPPA Student





“I think [NYC transit accessibility] desperately needs to be improved for people who are disabled because it’s not fair that someone has to get off their train two stops early because there is not an elevator at their stop.”
— Fallon Johnson, KAPPA Student



“I think the MTA isn’t really accessible. The train stations are very old and out-dated, service-wise.”
— Nyajah Evelyn, KAPPA Student



“NYC’s public transit is not beneficial for disabled people and needs work. The system is old and the wait is often too long.”
— Diogo Holguin, KAPPA Student

“I know that [the MTA] can work on space and giving [disabled people] time to get on the bus and other transit, and the fare should not be too much because not everyone has that much every time going into public transit.”
— Hajarah Sillah, KAPPA Student



“In the MTA, accessibility isn’t where it should be. Disabled people need to be able to transport to all types of places that able bodied are able to easily get to, [but can’t] yet because the system needs reform. People can’t get to where they need to, so improvement is definitely necessary.”
— Valerie Pena, KAPPA Student



How could NYC's public transit be more accessible?

Elevators!

Every person interviewed over the course of this project, as well as many of the students, noted the fact that NYC's subway system needs more elevators to make stations more accessible to wheelchair- and other mobility aid-users.

Fixing Access-A-Ride

"I'd open the on-demand AAR program to all users instead of the 1,200 people that currently get it out of 170,000 customers.... I'd also bring all of the drivers under the MTA and city control, so that the drivers get more benefits and pay. I'd also create a better app for AAR and include all the different vendors available, instead of limiting options."

— Eman Rimawi

More Access for Blind/Low Vision Riders

"People that are blind or have low vision, trying to travel, how can we make it safer for them? A lot of times [an access improvement could be] having some kind of tactile surface that tells people, 'oh, you're walking in a straight line within the station like so you don't get lost.'"

— Jessica Murray



Disabled Voices Speaking Up!

“[Transit agencies are] very used to getting lawsuits, they’re very used to people writing a ton of letters, and doing Freedom of Information acts, and requesting information, but they’re never prepared for 60 or 70 wheelchairs and walkers and folks showing up and taking up all the space in the lobby.”

— Eman Rimawi

“Visibility of people with disabilities is an incredibly powerful tool towards motivating those in government and other stakeholders in this conversation to make accessibility greater.

I use a power wheelchair, and when I worked in New York City Transit, just me being in a wheelchair... makes people aware that like, ‘Hey, you can’t get into the station, you can’t ride the subway, or you can’t do this or that’.... So when those without disabilities, those in power those who run agencies, those who are elected officials, see people with disabilities and see the lack of access, how their fellow citizens, their fellow neighbors, are kind of turned away, I think that sends an incredible message to people’s sense of value, morality, equity.”

— Alex Elegudin

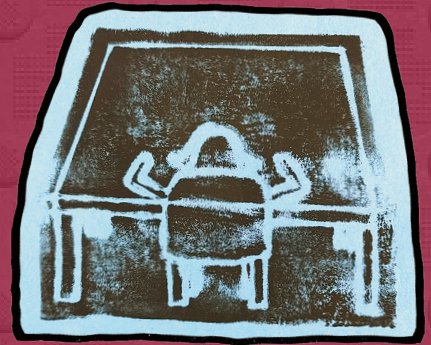


Funding Access Improvements

“This is the first capital plan ever at the MTA where we have an investment of \$5.2 billion for accessibility...”

So we’re putting our money where our mouth is.”

— Quemuel Arroyo





The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) is a nonprofit organization that uses the power of design and art to increase meaningful civic engagement, in partnership with members from historically marginalized communities.

This is one of CUP's **Urban Investigations** – project based afterschool programs in which high school students explore fundamental questions about how the city works. Students collaborate with CUP and Teaching Artists to create multimedia teaching tools that reach audiences in the fields of art and social justice. To learn more about CUP, visit welcometoCUP.org.

CUP

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