

## **Pedestrian Infrastructure: Accessibility and Safety**

By: Anna Zevarts, Director, Disability Mobility Initiative, Disability Rights Washington

For too long, transportation policy has been written by and for drivers. This creates major barriers for those who cannot drive or cannot afford to drive in order to access school, jobs, medical care, grocery stores, religious services, and everywhere in between. This is despite the fact that almost a third of people living in the United States do not have access to the privilege of driving where they need to go. In fact, only 69 out of every 100 Americans have a driver's license.

Nondrivers include low vision and Blind people (like me); people with physical disabilities; people with epilepsy; people with autism and anxiety; people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); people with other mental health conditions, as well as those who are too young or old to drive, undocumented immigrants, and those with expired or driver's license suspensions. It also includes people who choose not to drive, and those who cannot afford a vehicle, insurance, or gas.

Research from the Bureau of Transportation Statistics found that people with disabilities are four times more likely to not drive a car, and two to three times more likely to live in a zero-vehicle household. People without driver's licenses, those who identify as disabled, and those who do not identify as disabled, are more likely to be African American, indigenous, and people of color.

In November 2020, I launched the Disability Mobility Initiative at Disability Rights Washington and began interviewing nondrivers from every legislative district in Washington state. We documented those stories in our "Transportation Access for Everyone Story Map" (<https://www.disabilityrightswa.org/storymap/>) to increase our visibility and create a political identity as nondrivers. Two years later, it included interviews with more than 200 nondrivers about how they get around, and the biggest barriers they face in order to fully participate in community life.

The knowledge and expertise reflected in the lived experience of nondrivers must be highlighted and listened to - not only to improve the mobility access of nondrivers, but also to improve mobility access for everyone. If we can create sidewalks, roads, and public transportation systems that really work for those who don't have the privilege of driving, people who have that choice will find it easier, more convenient, and more comfortable to reduce their own reliance on driving.

Krystal, a wheelchair user, lives in a low-income apartment complex in Tacoma, Washington. Her two biggest barriers to getting around on her own are the lack of sidewalks and when there are sidewalks the lack of curb cuts. For Krystal not knowing if there are going to be a curb cut at intersections she hasn't been to before dissuades her from taking trips on her own. Missing sidewalks are a constant issue for users like Krystal with fifty-eight percent of arterials in Pierce County, Washington missing sidewalks.

Krystal has many stories like this. She notes:

“I will often have to roll into the oncoming traffic on the street because there are no curb ramps at many intersections and some bus routes stop on inclines. How is a wheelchair user supposed to wait at that bus stop without rolling backwards? “I was trying to get to a Kmart on South Tacoma Way once. The bus dropped me off across the street. The sidewalk was fine but when I turned to go down toward the crosswalk, the sidewalk turned into loose gravel. My wheelchair’s small tires dug in and I couldn’t push myself out. I could see across the street to where I was trying to go, but I couldn’t get to the crosswalk.

“We need to start thinking about public transportation and sidewalks as going together instead of as two separate things. You can’t use the bus if you can’t get yourself to the bus stop.”

Missing and accessible sidewalks and pedestrian crossings were identified as transportation barriers by almost half the disabled nondrivers interviewed. However, this critical connection often receives very little attention from both at transit agencies and traditional urbanist/transportation advocacy nonprofits. This may be because, for able-bodied people, missing pedestrian infrastructure is less noticeable. For example, a cracked sidewalk can be stepped over or an intersection without a light can be quickly dashed across. But for disabled nondrivers, a cracked sidewalk or inaccessible crossing could mean they have to rely on paratransit or rides from friends and family to leave the home, rather than being able to wheel or walk to the nearest bus stop.

Missing and inaccessible pedestrian infrastructure is also a safety issue. People of color, people living in rural areas, and people living on tribal lands face greater risks of being killed in traffic collisions because their communities have higher speed roads that more often lack accessible pedestrian infrastructure. As more low-income and disabled nondrivers are priced out of denser urban areas into suburbs without sidewalks or reliable transit, they face increasing risks. However, change is possible. Through innovative transportation planning, projects, and initiatives, pedestrian infrastructure can become more accessible and safer. The MDOT State Highway Administration (MDOT SHA) works with communities to improve pedestrian safety by identifying challenges; setting goals and objectives; focusing on areas of need; setting priorities; and taking action through the Pedestrian Safety Action Plan (<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/a4c07b80731b4a109a79bf6c86aad4c9>).

*Anna Zivarts is a low-vision mom and nondriver who was born with the neurological condition nystagmus. Since launching the Disability Mobility Initiative (DMI) at Disability Rights Washington in 2020, Anna has worked to bring the voices of nondrivers to the planning and policy-making tables. Through DMI, Anna has built a nondriver storymap, compiled the expertise in these stories into a groundbreaking research paper and launched the #WeekWithoutDriving challenge for elected leaders to understand what it’s like to get around without driving themselves. Anna serves on the board of the League of American Bicyclists and the National Safety Council’s Mobility Safety Advisory Group.*