



# Disability and Transportation in Southeast Michigan

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440 Burroughs  
Detroit, MI 48202

(313) 963-8872

[info@DetroitTransit.org](mailto:info@DetroitTransit.org)  
[www.detroittransit.org](http://www.detroittransit.org)

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**ABOUT THE RESEARCHER:** Kristen Milefchik is a 36-year old northern Oakland County native who has muscular dystrophy and is a lifelong wheelchair user.

Kristen has a BA in social work and is graduating with her master’s from Wayne State University in May 2018. Her personal experience with the challenges of obtaining the transportation necessary to accomplish her goals and live a fully inclusive life prompted her to conduct the research that is the subject of this report. Kristen is an advocate for people with disabilities and has done public speaking to raise awareness of disability rights issues as Ms. Wheelchair Michigan 2015, as well as a public mental health professional, and an intern for Transportation Riders United (TRU).

TRU is a nonprofit organization that advocates for more and better transit in Metro Detroit since 1999. They are committed to promoting public transportation to restore urban vitality, ensure transportation equity, and improve quality of life.

## Problem

Transportation is fundamental to the integration of people with disabilities in the social, professional, and spiritual spheres of life. Quality of life issues that are impacted by a lack of viable transportation options have been the subject of research ranging from outdoor play decisions by caregivers of children with disabilities to people with disabilities' ability to obtain food.<sup>1</sup>

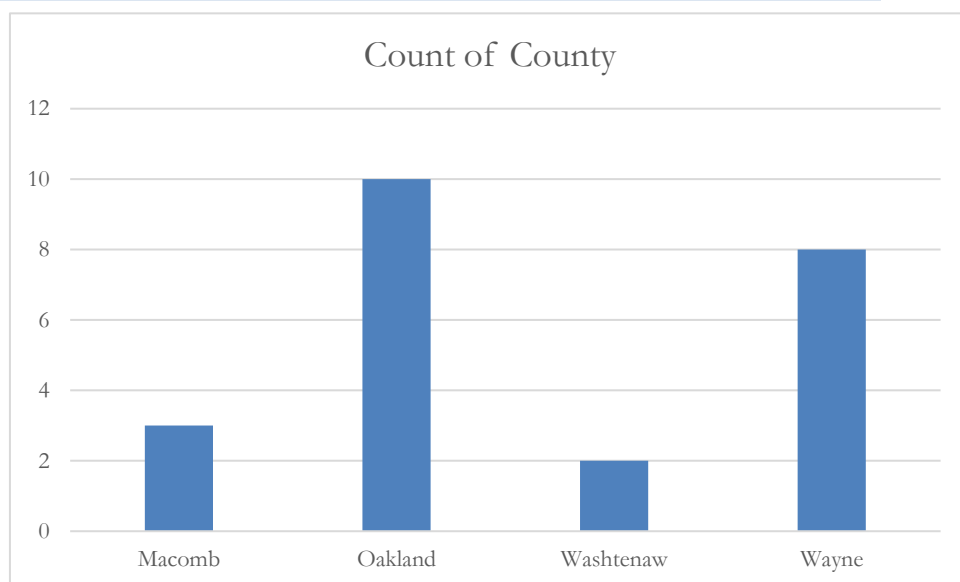
- Transportation is the single most reported problem for people with disabilities.<sup>2</sup>
- A lack of transportation has been charged as being a primary contributor to the unusually high unemployment rate among people with disabilities compared to the rest of the U.S. population: 17.9% of people with disabilities were employed versus 65.3% of the population without disabilities in 2016.<sup>3</sup>
- Over a half a million people with disabilities in the United States cannot leave their homes due to insufficient transportation and difficulties accessing transportation, corresponding to the 46% rate of feelings of isolation among people with disabilities as compared to the 23% rate reported by those without disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

Ninety-two percent of jobs in Southeast Michigan cannot be reached within 60 minutes of using existing transit.<sup>5</sup> Their reports also cite data from the National Transit Database that indicate this region has the lowest investment in transit, per capita, of any large metropolitan region in the entire country, spending less than smaller regions like Miami and Phoenix.

Because of the magnitude of its influence, the lack of transportation options for people with disabilities in Southeast Michigan, particularly regional public transit, needs increased attention. **The purpose of the research is to analyze the real-life impact of transportation options for people with disabilities living in Southeast Michigan and to elevate the voices of participants to advocate for change.**

## Demographics

We obtained participation from 23 respondents from throughout the region. All respondents are working-age adults who have primarily physical or developmental disabilities, including cerebral palsy, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, spinal cord injuries, or blindness. The following chart (at right) shows the distribution of participation by county of residence.



# Methodology

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To understand which transportation options exist in the region and how the existence of certain types of transportation options over others impacts the quality of life of individuals with disabilities living in Southeast Michigan, we developed six open-ended research questions that encompass the issue. These questions are:

1. How do you currently get to the places you need to go including work, education, recreation, shopping, or any other activity of community living?
2. How does your access (or lack thereof) to public transportation impact your quality of life and ability to be active in your community?
3. How do you feel accessible transportation, including paratransit services, could be improved in your community?
4. How can people with disabilities appeal to other stakeholders who are against raising taxes for public transit to see the benefit of improving the current transportation system?
5. Are there other means of providing needed, accessible transportation services in the region that doesn't depend solely on publicly funded resources?
6. If you had access, or more or better access, to public transportation, how would it change your life?

We offered four types of participation methods to suit the preferences of varying physical and communication abilities/limitations and to maximize the number of participants. These methods are:

1. online focus group,
2. online individual interview
3. verbal individual interview
4. online survey

# Results

The data is organized by the themes we identified across all responses and participation methods.

**Theme 1: Many people with disabilities are highly dependent on public transportation.** Our analysis of the responses indicated that people with disabilities in Southeast Michigan use public transit and depend on it to the extent it is an option to get where they need to go. Twenty-one out of 23 participants shared their method of getting where they needed to go. Only two of these 21 participants is able to drive themselves. The self-driving participant from Sterling Heights in Macomb County, however, stated they use public transportation often when visiting Detroit because having to push themselves in their manual wheelchair from municipal parking was too far. They also stated that if more public transportation was available in Macomb County they would “absolutely” use it.

Our analysis also revealed that even in areas where limited public transportation exists, such as areas that have a locally-based paratransit or a senior bus option, people with disabilities take advantage of these services. However, most people living in areas with less public transit options rely more heavily on rides from paid caregiving staff, family, or friends, and only use public transit when its an option to get where they need to go.

Most Detroiters, on the other hand, rely much more heavily on public transit than on rides from others. Out of the 21 responses that indicated the respondent’s mode of getting around, four were from Detroit, and three of these rely on Detroit public transportation and paratransit (Metrolift) services. Two of the three only get rides from others occasionally, while one stated that they are exclusively dependent on public transportation and paratransit for all their transportation needs. This participant stated that if they did not have access to public transportation **“it would be a tragedy.”** Another stated, **“I would be lost without public transportation.”** Unlike the paratransit services available in Oakland County or Macomb County, Detroit MetroLift runs on a 24-hour schedule.

One participant lives in Ann Arbor, in Washtenaw County, five days a week where they work Monday through Friday, and stays at their parents’ home in Novi on the weekends due to limited personal-care staffing hours per week. They stated, **“I used the city buses in Ann Arbor as well as the paratransit for a few months before being able to buy my accessible van. I don’t use public transportation as much anymore, but it’s just reassuring to know that I have a back-up mode of transportation to get to work in case my van breaks down. I don’t have that option in Novi.”**

In most cases, where absolutely no public transit or paratransit options exist, people depend on staff, friends, or family for rides. However, one participant who lives in White Lake/Oakland County stated that their staff are not allowed to drive them anywhere for liability reasons and that they use their power chair “in all types of weather” to get to their job which is next door to the mobile home park they live in. **“I have to do what I have to do,”** they stated.

## Participant Response Example

- Rochester/Oakland County participant: “My primary source of transportation is an accessible van that is driven by my boyfriend primarily, (...) In Rochester Hills we have an agency called the OPC (Older Persons Commission) that has a donation-based bussing program for the elderly and the disabled. I used that for a while to get to and from school sometimes (...) it only runs during the day so no night classes, and I’ve only been dating my partner since May 2016 so that made my school schedule very rigid.”

**Theme 2: People with disabilities are dependent on others for transportation needs, impacting emotional health, isolation, and quality of life.** The data indicates that there is a significant correlation with a high level of dependency on others for transportation and high levels of isolation, depression, and lack of motivation.

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**From focus group discussion:**

-- Ypsilanti/Washtenaw County participant: “[I use] Paratransit or friends or my husband [to get where I need to go] and it makes me feel like a huge burden because paratransit only goes so far.”

-- Clarkston/Oakland County participant 1: “You know what, I used to feel the same way about asking my friends to pick me up, about being a burden to them”

-- Westland/Wayne County participant: “I’ve felt the same way. I only ask a few people for rides.”

-- Clarkston/Oakland County participant 2: “Me too.”

-- Shelby Township/Macomb County participant: “I feel the same sometimes.”

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**From Livonia/Wayne County participant interview:**

“My mother drives me in a van I purchased.” “We have a SMART door-to-door transit system but it limits riders to the boundaries of Livonia and you usually have to call ahead. (...) It is difficult to go out with friends or on dates. My choice of workplace is limited because I have to work around my mom’s schedule. I really only leave the house to go to work so I never get to meet new people and I have very few social interactions. (...) I often find myself sitting at home and depressed and I truly believe a more active lifestyle would improve my mood and attitude about life.”

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Not surprisingly, Detroit participants were the exception to this frequent theme. Again, it is probable that their greater access to public transportation in accompaniment to the higher concentration of social activities located within their city, is what accounts for this discrepancy.

**Theme 3: Limitations to existing public transportation options where they are available.** While our analysis established that people with disabilities in Southeast Michigan do use and desire public transportation, certain problems and limitations to the existing public transportation options people have to choose from did emerge. The most prevalent issues were in the following areas:

- a) **Lateness (*paratransit*).** One issue with paratransit services across geographic areas was lateness. Six out of eight participants that have access to, and use paratransit regularly mentioned a tendency for paratransit to arrive past its “pick up window.” This was for users in Detroit, Washtenaw and Oakland. One respondent reported that her husband, who uses paratransit to get to his job, has had to call off work because of drivers arriving well past the window, or time range, in which they were scheduled to arrive. This suggests that this problem has significance beyond mere inconvenience to users. When relying on paratransit for needs where there is a professional expectation, this complication could be the difference between maintaining employment or not. Note that the small number of complaints about this issue is in relation to an overall small number of people who use paratransit services either because they aren’t available to them, such as those participants living in an “opt-out” community, or because they use other forms of public transportation like fixed-route and connector buses.
- b) **Safety.** Four people mentioned having experienced, or being afraid of experiencing, threats to their safety in using public transportation. Three out of the four had to do with the inexperience of drivers in dealing with people with disabilities and their physical challenges and one had to do with fear of others who use public transportation, or security on buses.
- c) **Lack of regional/ cross-city and county border transportation options** A frequent issue that emerged in responses was the limits of where people could go without regional transit, or public transportation that crosses city and county boundaries. Several of these comments included correlated challenges to employment, in addition to a general lack of destination options.
- d) **Not available for short notice or spur of the moment transportation needs.** A lack of ability to be spontaneous in travel decisions was cited frequently throughout participant responses. This problem applies to a variety of life activities, including attending job interviews, social events, and medical appointments.

## Participant Response Examples:

### Safety concerns:

- Rochester Hills/Oakland County participant: “and sometimes they would be training new drivers who weren't as skilled at driving the busses. I've had drivers take turns too sharply and tip my chair or hop a curb”
- Oxford/Oakland County participant: “A lot of times on the smaller smart bus style buses the driver doesn't know how to be considerate of someone's disability and I was scared of being injured by their driving.”

### Lack of regional/cross-city and county options:

- Troy/Oakland County participant: “Different city and county lines should have designated transfer points connecting one line with another. Regional transportation (no transfers), at the very least in metro Detroit, is the preferred option when compared to this city-by-city piecemeal operation.”
- Clinton Township/Macomb County participant: “(...) do away with opted out communities, stop the political bickering. (...) It could make it easier for me to get around and not limit me to certain areas.”
- Ypsilanti/Washtenaw County participant: “**I can only go as far as the bus line allows.**”

### Lack of spontaneity:

- Southfield/Oakland County participant: “I lack the ability to go to social outings with friends or join groups or anything else spontaneously anything that I haven’t planned out it is very difficult to get transportation for.”

**Theme 4: Lack of access to public transportation harms people with disabilities' employability, and opportunities for economic growth.** Participation responses support that improvement in Southeast Michigan's transit system would allow for greater employability of residents with disabilities and subsequent economic growth to the region. Some individuals, like a participant from Troy/Oakland County, have found jobs in which the employer is willing (and able) to pay a private transportation company to transport them to work. However, private accessible transportation costs are exorbitant, and it is not a realistic option for most businesses. Furthermore, the lack of regional transit has a negative impact on employability as well. As a Detroit participant explained, *“Lack of it [regional transit] is a barrier to getting a job outside the city of Detroit. Most jobs I qualify for are outside Detroit, in the suburbs. Coordination between MetroLift and SMART [Detroit and Oakland/Macomb Counties bus systems] have too many transfers to be practical.”*

A participant who lives in Ann Arbor during the work week, who is from, and resides part-time on the weekends in Novi, is a prime example of how important access to public transportation is to employment, *“I've experienced moving from a place with a lack of accessible public transportation (Novi) to a place with much better options (a2) [(Ann Arbor)], and it did impact my life in a great way. However, a2's bus system only covers routes in a2/some of Ypsilanti. If the routes were expanded to the metro Detroit area, I'd definitely use them! I may even consider job searching outside of the a2/Ypsilanti area (I have a job now but am looking for a new job within the next couple of years, and am limiting my search to a2/Ypsi).”*

Areas that do not have robust transit systems miss out on the economic growth opportunity that eliminating transportation barriers for this niche market bring. For example, an interviewee from Southfield described how transportation barriers have limited their ability to work, even after they have successfully secured a position. They explained that they were accepted for a position at a summer camp for people with disabilities but were unable to arrange transportation for the necessary hours, and thus had to turn it down. This participant stated that they thought there should be a “ride-to-work” program for people with disabilities so they “don't have to turn down jobs or interviews.”

Dependency on others for rides to work is also problematic because the work schedule must not be at odds with the availability of those people that those with disabilities depend on for transportation. A participant from Oxford/Oakland County stated, “Before I had my own vehicle it was a huge burden because I always relied on my parents to drive me. Therefore, I had limited options for summer or after school employment. Luckily, I got a job with my mom as her assistant and so I was able to ride with her to work.”

Yet there are many individuals with disabilities who do not have anyone to provide them with rides or have any form of public transportation available. However, the participant from White Lake/Oakland County, that rides their wheelchair to work in all weather conditions, demonstrates the level of determination individuals with disabilities do have to be employed.

As one participant, from Clinton Township/Macomb County put it, “[Public transportation could be improved in my community by] doing away with opted out communities [and] stopping the political bickering. They want economic growth and jobs yet won't support public transit to get the workers. (...) *People with disabilities want to work and contribute their fair share in taxes. However, many either cannot get to the jobs or cannot rely on public transportation to get them there on time.*”



**Summary.** Out of the 23 participants of this research, all believed public transportation would improve the lives of people with disabilities living in Southeast Michigan. Only one respondent stated they would not use public transportation even if it was available to them but stated this was due to their own “psychological issues” and that they still supported public transportation because they knew many with disabilities who would benefit from it. While there are limitations to the types of public transportation currently available, it is evident from this data analysis that greater access and improvements to the current public transportation system would resolve most of these issues. Increased public transportation access, and a regional transit system that spans the distance of all four counties of metro Detroit would increase job access, social opportunities, and the quality of life of people with disabilities in the region.

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*If you had access, or more, or better access to public transportation, how would it change your life?*

- **White Lake/Oakland County participant:** “My world would be bigger and better. Right now it is small.”

- **Shelby Township/Macomb County participant:** “It would greatly improve my quality of life, my mood, and I would not feel so isolated.”

- **Livonia/Wayne County participant:** “I would be able to feel more independent and like a “normal” person. Hopefully, I could meet new people and try new experiences. I often find myself sitting at home and depressed and I truly believe a more active lifestyle would improve my mood and attitude about life. I would also not have to stress about being able to afford the purchase or upkeep of a vehicle which is a large financial burden on a limited budget.”

- **Ypsilanti/Washtenaw County participant:** “I would feel free. I wouldn’t feel as isolated. Like I actually can contribute to society. I’d be able to do things in my ‘own world’ I guess. There are so many little things people with limitless transportation take for granted. Like getting groceries or deciding to go somewhere on a whim. Being able to drive my kid to the dentist. In the small moments that seem insignificant to others, that’s where memories are made.”

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# Recommendations

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We created this report to elevate the voices of the participants on the topic of transportation needs for people with disabilities in Southeast Michigan. Their responses indicate that greater public transportation access and a regional transit system are needed to increase social and professional opportunities for people with disabilities, which would inherently increase their overall quality of life. The participants in this project have agreed to allow their responses to be shared with disability advocacy organizations and groups, transportation providers, and public officials for increasing awareness and advocating for change.

The responses we acquired indicate that the following actions should be taken to improve public transportation services for people with disabilities:

**1. Provide public transportation to people with disabilities in *all* areas of the region.**

People with disabilities do depend on public transportation when, and to the extent, that it is available to them. The higher dependency of people with disabilities on public transportation compared to the general public indicates an increased need for access for this population.

**2. Improve public transportation to alleviate identified problems with existing services.**

- a. Ensure that paratransit drivers arrive within the scheduled pick-up time windows.
  - b. Ensure that drivers are adequately trained on the safety needs of people with disabilities across various disability types.
  - c. While regional transit is a benefit that transportation providers need to continue to advocate for, coordination between transportation providers and more transfer points that allow those with disabilities to get to their designations within the current system are needed.
  - d. Increasing paratransit services/vehicles so that people with disabilities do not have to schedule activities so far in advance, which jeopardizes their freedom to have a healthy social life and participate in many types of activities where advanced notice is not available.
- 3. Create specialized transportation programs that respond to individuals with disabilities employment needs, including interview attendance.**

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