

# **PUBLIC TRANSPORT OPTIONS FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES: A REVIEW OF NEEDS, CHALLENGES, AND INITIATIVES**

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## **SUMMARY**

Despite the importance of ensuring mobility options and public transport (PT) access to all, relatively little is known about provision of PT options for young people with disabilities (YPD). Youth For Public Transport (Y4PT) is an international NGO acting collectively with the youth of the world to educate, disseminate, innovate and improve the urban world through development of public transport, sustainable mobility and related issues. As such, Y4PT is interested in accessibility and mobility contexts experienced by all young people. This paper is motivated by Y4PT's desire to better understand implications for a young person to use, try to use, or want to use PT when having to deal with a disability. Hence, this paper looks into what is currently achieved to strengthen connection between offering sustainable PT options and meeting travel needs of YPD.

To that end, a web-based review was conducted to document existing researches and practices that have previously investigated travel needs of YPD. The objectives of the review were to: report on the importance and role that PT options can play in lives of YPD; identify barriers that challenge YPD and restrict their mobility and access to PT; identify leading organizations working towards facilitating access to PT for YPD; bring voices of YPD to the forefront.

Findings suggest that more attention should be given to mobility needs of YPD so as to enable their freedom of movement, independence and active participation in society. To implement more targeted solutions and orient future actions, YPD should definitely be heard and involved in PT planning. Involved actors should also exchange best practices at local, national and international levels. Indeed, this first attempt to review best practices related to PT and YPD has revealed that information on that topic is not easily accessible. A centralized source could certainly benefit dissemination and innovation regarding this topic. This review also allows to conclude that, beyond qualitative approaches, quantitative mobility analysis based on more detailed data are also needed.

**Keywords:** youth; disability; accessibility; travel needs; public transport options

## **INTRODUCTION**

Around the world, there are more than 650 million people with disabilities (PWD) from which approximately a third are youth and 80% of that youth live in developing countries [Schindlmayr, 2007]. In the last ten years, youth and disability have been key topics on international agenda. In 2001, youth was identified as one of European Disability Forum's (EDF) priorities. A Youth Committee was even created to ensure that needs of YPD were taken into consideration [European Disability Forum, 2009]. Then, 2003 was the European Year of People with Disabilities. At that time, more than 200 disabled and non-disabled young people participated in the European Youth Conference entitled 'Towards a barrier free Europe for young people with disabilities' [European Disability Forum and European Youth Forum, 2003]. Youth involved recognized necessity to ensure full participation and equal opportunities for all young people. In 2009, one of the annual priorities of the Youth in Action programme of the European Commission was to promote inclusion of YPD. Then, 2010-2011 was the United Nations International Year of Youth.

YPD have the same aspirations as their non disabled peers, but in many cases institutional, physical, and attitudinal barriers created by society prevent them from living their life at the fullest. At international level, rights of children and PWD to social inclusion, to education, and to participation are acknowledged through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) respectively [Savage, 2011]. However, for these rights to be respected, accessibility requirements have to meet needs of YPD [European Disability Forum, 2009]. Worldwide, lack of adequate and accessible transport is still one of the main reasons cited by YPD as preventing them to participate in more activities. Despite all these facts and the recognized importance of ensuring sustainable mobility options and transport access to all, relatively little is known about provision of PT options for YPD.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This paper aims to look into what is currently achieved worldwide to address the gap existing between offering sustainable PT and meeting travel needs of YPD.

## **METHODS**

To do so, this study conducted a web-based review of existing researches and practices that have addressed travel needs of YPD worldwide. Based on findings of the web-based review, this paper first reports on the important role that PT options can play in lives of YPD. Then, barriers that challenge YPD and restrict their mobility and access to PT are reviewed. It is followed by presentation of inspiring actions undertaken by various organizations in order to facilitate PT access for YPD. The paper then brings voices of YPD to the forefront by presenting initiatives they themselves undertook to address PT issues. Finally, based mainly on solutions and actions specifically identified by YPD, seven recommendations are issued. They represent the directions to take to remove existing barriers and address PT needs of YPD. A brief summary and concluding remarks end the paper.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Importance and role of public transport for YPD

Previous studies unanimously reveal that PT availability can make a difference at every stage of a disabled youngster life. For young children, PT programs can be of prime importance to allow them access to elementary schools or to any learning center adapted to their disabilities. This is even more critical for children living in rural areas or coming from families living in poverty for whom costs of transport can be too much to support [UN Division for Social Policy and Development and Leonard Cheshire Disability, 2011]. If a family member or a carer cannot help with transport, those children will have to remain at home. As children become teenagers, depending on family members or carers to be able to travel can let disabled young people to experience a more isolated youth from the majority of teenagers [Murray, 2002]. Indeed, not being able to travel freely and independently can negatively impact developing and maintaining friendships outside of school settings [Mason et al., 2008] as well as accessing leisure activities [Beresford et al., 2009]. Sometimes, parents or carers will be too afraid to let their children use PT on their own [Equality of Opportunity Committee, 2007] due to safety concerns such as crossing streets, boarding a vehicle or ability to reach destination. However, it is important that they "support these young people to become independent [as it] will help them as individuals" [Skill - National Bureau for Students with Disabilities, 2007]. Indeed, being able to develop this ability as a teenager ensure for a more successful transition towards advanced education, towards employment opportunities, and towards a full and independent life when reaching adulthood. All actors involved with YPD, not only parents, should hence recognize that it is worth investing in developing skills and confidence of YPD towards independent use of PT from an early age.

### 2. Barriers faced by YPD

However, to ensure YPD can use regular PT network, it must be accessible and it must take into account their needs. Based on statements and views collected among YPD themselves, the next section presents barriers that challenge YPD the most.

#### 2.1 *Institutional barriers*

In many countries, the first barrier YPD face is lack of political and societal will combined with an inadequate financial framework [European Disability Forum and European Youth Forum, 2003]. Even when laws and policies exist that recognize rights of PWD to be included in society and to be recognized as equal citizens, YPD still feel "that their lives [are] not valued high-enough to motivate policy-makers [...], service providers and the general public to make accessibility a priority" [Murray, 2002]. As a matter of fact, a gap between regulation frameworks in place and practical contexts will still often prevent PWD from benefiting from equitable mobility options. Countries that ratified the UNCRPD are supposed to address mobility issues of their disabled citizens, but changes are occurring at a slow pace and a lot of lobbying and peer pressure still must be done to ensure adequate funding and implementation of accessible PT options.

#### 2.2 *Physical barriers*

YPD wishing to use PT remain significantly impacted by lack of accessible services and infrastructure, especially in suburban and rural areas. Even in cities where accessible PT options exist, these options will often be available only at certain times

or for certain routes. YPD ready to join the workforce find this lack of available PT options even more challenging as it can prevent them to access employment [ECOTB, 2009]. According to the Public Service Commission of Canada [2011] that reviewed recruitment challenges of YPD in Canada, United States, United Kingdom and Australia, lack of accessible transport is not only a barrier for young job-seekers, but also for employers disposed to hire YPD. Complex informational structures and inadequate environmental structures can also challenge YPD. In a roundtable held in Australia [Youth Disability Advocacy Service, 2008], YPD gave specific examples of such barriers. Cited barriers included timetable layout and content organization, late cancellations or change of platforms for departure, ramp station design or curb at a bus stop.

### *2.3 Attitudinal barriers*

Negative social perception is also a major drawback for YPD when thinking about using PT. In a consultation from the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities regarding safety issues [2007], YPD have reported their worst experiences of bullying and harassment as occurring on PT. In its report 'End of the Line', an organization of young people with muscular dystrophy living in United Kingdom also stated that they often feel like second class citizens when using PT [Trailblazers, 2009]. One of the cited reasons was poor disability awareness among staff.

## **3. Inspiring initiatives from organizations**

To address these issues specifically faced by YPD, various projects were and are still undertaken worldwide. In this section, a few projects are presented. They were selected with two objectives in mind: (1) to illustrate that there exist various ways to act towards better PT for YPD; (2) to represent realities experienced in several parts of the world. Still, because of lack of information from developing countries, this section is mainly reporting on experiences coming from developed countries.

### *3.1 Awareness initiative*

#### 3.1.1 GoJo publicity campaign - United Kingdom

In United Kingdom, in 2007, the Disability Rights Commission launched a powerful web-based campaign that engaged simultaneously local transport agencies, youth organizations, schools, NGOs, and local businesses. Its goal was to increase level of confidence and journeys taken on PT by YPD [Lamnisos, n.d.]. It also aimed at increasing dissemination of information about travel and disability-related issues. Awareness campaigns can be very effective to address attitudinal barriers and overcome negative perception.

### *3.2 Advocacy initiatives*

#### 3.2.1 Young Voices Project - various developing countries

Young Voices is a project that was first developed by the Leonard Cheshire Disability organization to ensure that YPD living in developing countries could directly contribute into the discussions that led to the UNCRPD. It groups YPD from nineteen countries from Africa, Asia and the Americas. Once the Convention was ratified, the project "continued to build up the skills and confidence of YPD so that they become future leaders in the international disability movement, politics, business and civil society" [Kamara et al., 2009].

#### 3.2.2 Roundtable Consultation - Australia

In Australia, following the ratification of the UNCRPD, the government decided to host a roundtable reuniting various YPD [Youth Disability Advocacy Service, 2008].

The government wanted to make sure voices of YPD would be heard and included into the new National Disability Strategy since this strategy was meant to be the new reference defining how Australia would act on its obligations under the UNCRPD.

Such initiatives are the way to go as they answer a double issue simultaneously: defending rights of YPD and encouraging YPD to take an active role in a matter that directly concerns them.

### 3.3 *Educative initiatives*

#### 3.3.1 School transport assistance programs - Australia

In the state of Queensland, Australia, the government implemented a program assisting parents with transport of their children between home and school [Queensland Government, 2012]. Assistance is provided by PT, through specialized transport or through a transport allowance. As mentioned previously in section 1, PT programs are playing a key role in increasing accessibility to education. Such programs exist in other parts of the world, such as in the United States and in several provinces in Canada [McColl and Stephenson, 2008].

#### 3.3.2 Specific travel training programs for students - Canada

In Vancouver, Canada, the transit agency trains 16 to 21 year old students with disabilities who are preparing to enter the workforce [Weiner, 2008]. This travel training helps increase confidence and lower potential door-to-door transport dependence, making it twice as useful. It has to be remembered that door-to-door specialized transport is, on an operating point of view, a very highly cost service and on a user point of view, a much more restrictive and less spontaneous service than regular PT. The more YPD can shift towards regular PT, the better it is for both parties. Travel training is a tool that is used more and more worldwide.

### 3.4 *Practical initiatives*

YPD also need practical solutions addressing the physical barriers they face.

#### 3.4.1 Waiting room for people with hearing impairments - Germany

In Dusseldorf, Germany, a waiting room for people with hearing impairment was built in a transit hub. It allows these young people to meet and communicate in a comfortable and adapted place. This project was listed into the PTaccess project as a good practice example regarding accessibility in Europe [European Commission, 2008]. One drawback is that it was the only project out of seventy that specifically targeted YPD. It shows that the PT-YPD couple is still not dragging that much attention and that more work has to be done to raise awareness on this matter.

#### 3.4.2 Travel assistance device - France

Currently, new capacities brought by advanced technologies are contributing to the development of new mobility solutions for PWD. The Mobile Transit Companion's application, developed for Paris Metro, is one example. This travel assistance device is able to help people with all kinds of disabilities, through delivery of customized information based on each user profile [Metro Magazine, 2010]. Such devices could definitely help YPD be more independent and more active.

#### 3.4.3 European Mobility Card - European Union

To facilitate freedom of movement for PWD, which is still often prevented due to administrative and geographical borders, EDF [2011] has also proposed the creation of a Mobility Card allowing European citizens with disabilities to benefit from the

same mobility options provided by their country of residence through other Member States of the Union.

### 3.5 *Integrated initiative*

#### 3.5.1 Easter Seals Project Action Initiative - United States

In the United States, Easter Seals Project Action (ESPA) addresses needs of students with disabilities of all ages through projects taking multiple formats [Easter Seals Project Action, 2012]. For example, for students in grades 4-8, ESPA has developed the project '*Buses and Trains for Everyone*'. The dedicated website includes a comic strip, games, information on transit systems, resources for teachers, and more. For teenagers in grades 8-12, since 2005, there is a complete course teaching them about concepts, skills and behaviours required to use PT. In 2005, a step-by-step transport guide was also created to assist job centers helping YPD seeking employment. Then, in early 2012, ESPA created an online forum where students and their families, educators, human service providers, and transit professionals can share stories and strategies, present useful material and tools, post relevant links, and access information related to accessible transport for students. To date, ESPA is probably the most valuable resource regarding integrated and centralized information on the topic of YPD and PT options.

## 4. **Youth voices and initiatives**

As the previous section illustrated, organizations are already making very interesting contributions to help implement adequate PT options for YPD. But as Murray [2002] suggests, "the starting point for meaningful change in the experience of YPD has [also] to come from those young people themselves". Indeed, they are probably the best to know what their needs are and what solutions are best. Worldwide, many youth groups have already taken position in favour of better PT options for PWD and become their own spokespersons. This section presents a few of the initiatives undertaken by young people to ensure their voices are heard.

Youth initiatives are mainly oriented towards awareness and advocacy. In 2009, in United Kingdom, children directly addressed their PT concerns to political parties through the Disabled Children's Manifesto for Change [Campaign Every Disabled Child Matters, 2009]. Lack of accessibility, high costs, hard adaptation to crowded PT, and attitudinal issues were the major issues. Highly supportive, the UK Youth Parliament [2011] centered its annual 2011-2012 campaign around cheaper, better, and more accessible PT for all, including for YPD. It shows that Youth as a whole is concerned by mobility rights of YPD, and not only YPD themselves. Indeed, a barrier-free world is a topic defended by many youth groups, such as the Young Voices group (presented previously in section 3.2.1) that speaks out to change laws, attitudes and societies. In several parts of the world, this group is lobbying using video as a medium to transmit its message of equity and universal accessibility. In Europe, EDF has also created a Youth Committee to raise awareness about the needs of YPD. As the Young Voices group, that group strongly believes that media can empower YPD and can be used as a tool for changing perceptions, diminishing social exclusion and increasing public awareness [EDF, 2009]. Small actions also count. In Uzbekistan, four YPD decided to act and monitored accessibility of PT in their city on their own [Chicherina, 2011]. They obtained very poor results that they shared through media and with their local transit agency that promised to act. It is not known if the agency did or did not act, but what the story says is that each person can make a difference.

## 5. Recommendations

Of course, challenges, issues and needs for PT options will vary according to the different contexts worldwide. Nevertheless, following this web-based review of current state of practice regarding PT and YPD, it was possible to identify recurring matters that need to be addressed to ensure best deployment of PT options for YPD. Five major recommendations are issued based on solutions and actions specifically identified by YPD as the way forward to remove barriers and address their needs related to transport access [Murray, 2002; European Disability Forum and European Youth Forum, 2003; Emerson et al., 2007; Equality of Opportunity Committee, 2007; Easter Seals Project Action, 2010]. Two other recommendations (5.6 and 5.7) are added based on what could be observed while conducting this web-based review.

### 5.1 *Involve Youth (and relatives)*

- As a first way to implement more targeted solutions, YPD should definitely be involved in the planning process of PT as they are the best voices to tell what they need. Involving families into the process should also be considered.

### 5.2 *Educate and inform*

- Educate students and parents early regarding transport choices.
- Ensure that appropriate training and information are given to PT staff related to needs and rights of YPD so they will know how to act and interact with them.
- Encourage PT agencies to fully understand specific travel needs of YPD and to propose adapted solutions. YPD should not be left last. They have the right to live spontaneously like everyone else.
- Build community awareness. Awareness-raising campaigns can help to showcase positive benefits of transport for YPD.

### 5.3 *Respect regulation framework*

- Ensure that, when legal, regulation, and policy frameworks exist, they are disseminated and respected. Organizations that help YPD regarding PT as well as YPD themselves are not always aware of legal context prevailing.

### 5.4 *Monitor implementation of accessible PT*

- Ensure that accessible transport is part of planning, both in urban, suburban, and rural areas, and not just a concept that stays on paper. That also implies making sure the service is adequate for all types of disabilities.

### 5.5 *Facilitate integration*

- Support travel training and other programs helping YPD to fully integrate PT.
- Ensure that PT options are as affordable for YPD as they are for young people without disability.

### 5.6 *Document and disseminate best practices*

While conducting this web-based review, it could be observed that organizations and projects addressing the topic of PT and YPD are not currently well inventoried. This is also acknowledged by the National Children's Bureau in UK [2011]: "Examples of good and innovative practice exist, but they are isolated and often not replicated. For improvements to happen [...], good practice needs to be disseminated and acted upon". In the future, facilitating access to information regarding YPD and PT has to become a priority. The Disability-Oriented Organizations portal created by the United States International Council on Disabilities and the WiderNet Project [2011] is a good example of how this can be done.

### 5.7 Collect data and develop statistics and indicators

This web-based review has also revealed that comprehensive quantitative analysis regarding YPD and PT are not yet performed. Beyond qualitative approaches, surveys have to be conducted and more elaborated indicators characterizing mobility patterns of YPD need to be derived. This is crucial in order to allocate resources optimally and to ensure decisions taken by planners, leaders and all other actors involved are the best to address problems faced by YPD.

## CONCLUSION

This paper represented the first step towards understanding how PT and YPD were related. It confirmed that more attention should be given to transport needs of YPD as PT enables their freedom of movement, their independence and their active participation in society. As of now, many barriers still challenge YPD and restrict their mobility and their access to PT. Types of barriers faced by YPD were found to be similar to those faced by adults with disabilities, namely institutional, physical and attitudinal, but they sometimes trigger proper emotions and raise distinct issues due to distinct life contexts. This review also revealed that some organizations and YPD themselves are already contributing to the understanding, dissemination, and implementation of the PT-YPD duo. Initiatives undertaken to address PT challenges faced by YPD were found to be of different types and to cover a range of areas, mainly awareness, advocacy, education, and practical context. Seven key recommendations regarding PT access, from which five are based on prime aspects identified by YPD themselves, could also be formulated. This first attempt to review state-of-practice regarding PT and YPD has also revealed that information on that topic is not easily accessible. Of course, it is still an emerging topic, but effective dissemination of best practices and collection of more detailed quantitative data should definitely be considered as crucial issues to address in the near future. Finally, this review has raised Y4PT's own awareness on the importance to include YPD and their travel needs in its own initiatives and projects.

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