

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 86: Transportation

Guest: Maddy Ruvolo

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

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Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Howdy, people! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode is about transportation with Maddy Ruvolo. Maddy is a disabled urban planner who is passionate about transportation access for the disability community. She just graduated this year from UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs. Maddy will share how she first became interested in transportation and the results from a survey she conducted of people with disabilities in San Francisco about new mobility technologies and services. You'll learn more about new mobility and Maddy's vision for inclusive and accessible cities in the future. Are. You. Ready? [electronic beeping] Away we goooooo!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: Maddy, thank you so much for being on my podcast today.

MADDY RUVOLO: Thank you for having me!

ALICE: So, Maddy, why don't you introduce yourself, if you don't mind.

MADDY: Sure. So, my name is Maddy Ruvolo. I'm a disabled transportation planner. I've worked on transportation in several major California cities on a variety of issues, and I'm especially passionate about transportation access for the disability community. So, I went to grad school for Urban Planning specifically to combine my disability advocacy and transportation planning backgrounds. And by the time this episode is released, I will hopefully have my Master's degree.

ALICE: Woohoo! 2020 is not all bleak!

MADDY: [chuckles]

ALICE: Fingers crossed, right?

MADDY: Yes, definitely.

[super chill music break]

Transportation in Oakland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles

ALICE: You mentioned that you did work for transportation agencies for three major cities in California. That's Oakland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. I was wondering if you could describe kind of just what's unique about each city's systems and the issues you see that each city faces regarding transportation.

MADDY: First, I should say that I'm speaking for myself here and not on behalf of any current or former employers. So, with that said, they're all large cities with significant transportation infrastructure. They all have large public transit systems. They're all working to various degrees to build better pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. They're grappling with new mobility like bike share and scooters. They also all have substantial housing and homelessness crises, which affects the transportation system. And they're all cities where car travel has long been prioritized at the expense of other modes. And this is true for most major cities in the United States and many major cities around the world.

I would say that some of the major differences between the cities have to do with their land use and density. San Francisco, for example, is the most dense city of the three and is able to support the best public transit as a result. L.A., on the other hand, is famously a car city. L.A.'s transit ridership strongly skews low income, and most of the people who ride transit in L.A. do so because they cannot afford cars. Whereas in the Bay Area, there's more of a socioeconomic mix on transit because far more people are choosing transit over other options. Oakland's really been a leader on transportation equity. Working for the Oakland Department of Transportation, I really felt like I connected in particular with a lot of people over transportation equity and mobility justice. And I really had the opportunity to work more on transportation access for people with disabilities.

[super chill music break]

Mobility justice

ALICE: For those who are new to it, how would you describe what mobility justice is?

MADDY: Sure. So, I would say mobility justice is concerned with sort of the idea that mobility and how people are moving through space and moving through their communities is deeply political. And that in order to have mobility justice, or thinking about things like racial equity, disability justice, ensuring that all people are able to sort of move through their communities without being policed, without facing accessibility barriers, without facing other kinds of sort of structural obstacles. And so, there are a lot of people, particularly people of color, within the transportation space who are doing work. There's an organization in L.A. called People for Mobility Justice that does really great work. And there's also an organization called The Untokening, which is led primarily by Black and brown women and non-binary folks who are transportation planners and who've done a lot of work that I look to and whose leadership I try to follow in really pushing forward this new wave in transportation planning around mobility justice.

ALICE: And I feel like this is so connected with housing justice—

MADDY: Yes.

ALICE: —and the broader social justice and racial justice, and clearly, disability justice. I was wondering just to step back, how did you become interested in urban planning and transportation?

MADDY: Yeah. So, my first job out of college was at a disability rights organization. And one of the major issues for community members that I encountered in that job was transportation. I am disabled, and my disability does affect how I use transportation. But that was the first time that I was hearing a lot of stories about, say, bus drivers passing up wheelchair users at bus stops. And so, that experience spurred some interest. And then I joined the San Francisco Fellows program, which prepares young professionals to work in city government. And I ended up at the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, or SFMTA, working on pedestrian and bike planning. And I just loved it. I really, really loved it. And I started thinking more about how mobility and transportation are so deeply political: how the ways that people move through their communities are contested and shaped by social forces like racism and sexism and of course, ableism. And so, when it was time to go to grad school, I wanted to focus my research on transportation access for the disability community. And there aren't that many disabled folks working in transportation planning, or at least not that many who are open about their disabilities. And so, I felt and feel that because I am not just disabled, but also really connected to the disability community and am accountable to the disability community, that I could bring a specific vantage point to the transportation planning field.

ALICE: I love it. I love anybody who's like a total nerd for infrastructure.

[super chill music break]

Capstone survey for disabled people in San Francisco on new mobility

ALICE: So, for your capstone project, you conducted a survey of people with disabilities in San Francisco about new mobility technologies and services. So, before we get started digging into this, what is new mobility?

MADDY: Yeah. So, new mobility, also known as emerging mobility, refers to transportation services that are generally available on demand and usually rely on technology like mobile apps and real-time location data. This is sort of like this new wave of transportation services that use technology. And so, things like Lyft and Uber bike share, car share, scooters are all considered new mobility.

ALICE: Mmhmm. 'Cause I think ride share is something that people are pretty familiar with. But this broader category of new mobility, do you think that's still new or not that new?

MADDY: I think it's still new, but it does change really quickly. Bike share systems launched, in I think most cases, less than a decade ago. Scooters really came about just in the past few years. Uber and Lyft, sort of like mid-2010s, became much more widespread. Of course, one of the things that's been an issue with Lyft and Uber, at least in California, is that they're regulated at the state level by the California Public Utilities Commission because they argue that they are not a transportation service, that they are a technology service, and therefore that they should not be regulated by transportation regulators who would almost inevitably put more restrictions on them and require more from them in terms of sharing data. They're contested in terms of their accessibility, and many of these services have argued that they think that the ADA, the Americans with Disabilities Act, does not apply to them again, because they argue that they are merely a technology platform and not, in fact, a transportation service.

ALICE: Yeah, thank you for that. And I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about the origin and the purpose of the survey.

MADDY: On the one hand, it's frustrating that some starry-eyed transportation planners look at inaccessible scooters and think, you know, this is the future of cities while the sidewalks around

them are cracked and the curb ramps are missing. But on the other hand, the conversation about new mobility is happening, and I want disabled folks to be part of that conversation. Thirty years after the ADA, these companies launched entirely without accessible options, and that's a problem. And then on a practical note, there was a gap in the data. Transportation agencies love data. And SFMTA, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, wanted to understand how disabled folks felt about these services and what their experiences had been. And so, that's what prompted this study.

It was definitely a process finding the right questions and the right language, because, of course, I didn't wanna ask leading questions, but I also wanted to make sure that survey respondents had the opportunity to share experiences that I knew anecdotally were common. So, for example, I asked about different new mobility modes in neutral terms. And I also asked if they had experience with a scooter or a bike blocking their path of travel, because that's something that comes up a lot in just conversations with people. And I also asked a number of open-ended questions to give people the opportunity to share more about their experiences in their own terms. And I also got really valuable feedback from several disabled folks, yourself included, as I crafted the questionnaire. And then I worked with the folks at SFMTA Accessible Services on the types of questions they wanted to answer to sort of create a survey that felt useful and balanced. I also worked with a community-based organization, Senior and Disability Action, too. I did some pre-survey testing with them, and then also worked with them to distribute survey questionnaires, which were available on paper and also online. And then I worked with SFMTA Accessible Services to distribute the survey to their contacts and then reached out personally to other community organizations in San Francisco.

[lounge music break]

Survey results and findings

ALICE: So, your survey ended up with 218 participants, which I think is pretty fantastic!

MADDY: Yeah, I was excited! I mean, of course, you always want even more responses. But this was about a 10-minute survey, which means that disabled folks in SF spent over 2,000 hours sharing their experiences and opinions with me! I wanted to make sure that I captured people who didn't have Internet access at home or didn't have a smartphone: people who wouldn't stumble onto the online SurveyMonkey like through something that somebody had shared on Facebook or Twitter, which is why, of course, I also had paper copies and why having the partnership with Senior and Disability Action was so valuable.

ALICE: That's wonderful.

ALICE: What were some of the major findings of your survey?

MADDY: The big sort of takeaway is that opinions about new mobility among the disability community are mixed, which is probably unsurprising given that people have so many different kinds of experiences. And I did find different results, especially by age, income, and disability type. So, a slight majority of the survey respondents believed that new mobility has a positive effect on their ability to travel. But survey respondents also reported an inability to access new services, and they were concerned about the effects of these services on their broader transportation system. Out of all of the new mobility services, people were most interested in some form of accessible on-demand vehicle transportation, which could be through Lyft or Uber or potentially accessible taxis. Over 80% of respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 said that new mobility services has had a positive impact on their ability to travel, while only a quarter

of those 65+ said the same. So, that's a pretty large gap, and it is actually a gap that you see in the non-disabled population as well.

In addition to physical inaccessibility, cost was a major barrier for people in accessing these services. And then finally, three quarters of survey respondents had experienced scooters or dockless bike share blocking the sidewalk, and 70% had experienced a close call with a scooter rider on the sidewalk. And I thought this was notable because there was a recent study that found that only 2% of scooters were improperly parked. And they actually looked at San Francisco, among some other cities. That 2% figure—and I have no reason to doubt that that's correct—it doesn't capture what people's experiences with the scooters have been. One thing that really came through in some of the open-response questions was that encountering a scooter or a dockless bike in your path of travel is not just a logistical inconvenience, although it is that, of course. But it also communicates to people that they're not welcome in public space and that their needs aren't important.

I think a lot of transportation planners are really frustrated that there's been all this talk about scooters being a problem when a lot of people in transportation planning really feel that cars are the major problem. To me, it was one of the more interesting findings was thinking about people's experience and in the context of sort of this larger transportation world and the things that planners are focusing on and the things that planners consider important.

ALICE: I've definitely experienced a scooter just blocking my way, but I would also say that what's not taken into account is the condition of the sidewalk in which you encounter the scooter. Because as you know, there's a lot of sidewalks where they're poorly maintained. They may be really narrow. Some sidewalks, there are a lot of trees with the roots, so that we really don't have that much clearance to begin with, on top of a scooter in the way. So, sometimes all of these things converge into a pretty negative experience.

MADDY: Right. This is definitely something that came through in the survey responses where some people asked—and I think this is a fair question, you know, asked—like, well, why are you even doing this survey? Why are you focusing on this, right, when people still have these basic needs that aren't met. And I think oftentimes, people in the transportation planning world don't even realize or recognize a lot of the time sort of the basic, fundamental mobility struggles that disabled folks still face on a daily basis.

ALICE: We could talk about sidewalk access and the ADA and public transportation, but that doesn't mean that we should care about new mobility.

MADDY: Right.

ALICE: There has to be room for all of that. Yeah. And again, new mobility is definitely something that's here to stay. So, it's absolutely important to think about the access aspects and the way that disabled people are gonna be impacted by it.

[lounge music break]

MADDY: Even before new mobility came around, disabled folks were not always well served by more traditional forms of transportation. And then also, we just really can't let new transportation services that are totally inaccessible go without any kind of pushback. Sure, some disabled folks may not be interested in these services, may never use these services. For some disabled folks, they could be really valuable. I mean, sort of using myself as an example, right, my disability's a chronic illness. And so, something like a scooter could actually be useful for me. I think there

are possibilities here for disabled folks, and then there are also possibilities with adaptive scooters and adaptive bikes. But we have to have the conversations, and we have to say, you know, you can't just ignore our community.

Actually, another sort of interesting response where answers were totally split was I asked, "Would you support an inaccessible new mobility service if there was a fee on that service that went to funding better accessible transportation?" So, an example of that might be something like you have like a scooter share system maybe that's not accessible or that maybe has some adaptive scooters, has like three-wheeled scooters or seated scooters. But for every trip taken on an inaccessible scooter, there's money that goes into a fund. And then that fund goes to pay for better ramped taxi service. And people were really split, interestingly enough. There's not necessarily one right answer. But certainly just totally excluding the disability community and saying, like, "This isn't for you. We don't understand why you're upset about this," is the wrong answer.

ALICE: Right. And I feel like number one, nothing about us without us, and number two, anytime we wanna make a case for something, we need data. Because anecdotal evidence is incredibly important that's based on a lived experience, but also, these larger-scale studies and surveys really can also bolster any sort of policy change.

[lounge music break with a snappy beat]

Policy change recommendations

ALICE: And speaking of policy change! Even though the findings were not definitive in terms of a majority felt one way very strongly, are there any policy recommendations that you think would theoretically make sense based on what you learned from this survey for cities?

MADDY: Yeah, definitely. So, actually, it's interesting. You said a couple minutes ago, you know, new mobility isn't going anywhere anytime soon. And I actually think that we don't know that for sure.

ALICE: Ah!

MADDY: So, I guess this is, again, where I feel like we have to give the disclaimer that we're recording this in April 2020 in the midst of a pandemic. And by the time that people hear this, the world in general and the new mobility landscape in particular might actually look very different. But of course, one of the interesting things here is just sort of that these are, for the most part, private companies or public-private partnerships. And that does, in some ways, make them less permanent. But I guess first I'll say that one recommendation that I feel very confident about giving that is evergreen is that cities need to listen to disabled folks and have disabled people in decision-making roles. That's not even really a policy recommendation. That's just something that they should be doing because we are such a huge part of the population, and our needs are so often overlooked. And when you don't have disabled people in decision-making roles, you make mistakes that are really damaging to people.

Second, having accessible on-demand vehicle transportation was something that really stood out as being important to people. These services should be low-cost or ideally free and could potentially be paid for with fees on inaccessible trips. A lot of disabled folks don't drive, and a lot of disabled folks don't own cars. The most common way that disabled people travel in the U.S. is as a passenger in a car. And so, the ability to have that kind of ride on demand would be really valuable to people.

Additionally, it's clearly very important to people to get these new mobility devices out of the path of travel. So, one sort of potential policy intervention, and I think several cities are doing this. The area that I know best is in Venice, Venice Beach in California, where there's been a fair amount of success with turning excess sidewalk space or space along red curbs into designated scooter parking.

Yeah, I gosh, I have so many more, but I guess the last one I'll share for now is that cities should build safer pedestrian and bike infrastructure that is accessible to everybody. Several people said that they would be interested in accessible bike share or accessible scooter share, but they were nervous about riding alongside cars. We know that disabled folks are disproportionately likely to be injured or killed in collisions. So, widening sidewalks and building bike lanes, as long as accessibility is front and center in designs—and I say that again because there are also ways to design bike lanes that make things less accessible for disabled folks—but doing so correctly makes streets safer for disabled folks and also for all vulnerable road users. And if bike and scooter riders had their own lane, disabled folks a, might feel more comfortable trying these services if there were accessible options available. And then all riders, disabled and not, would be out of the way of pedestrians. And so, that's something that's not specific just to new mobility, but is sort of a big, ongoing issue within transportation.

Oh, and just to get back to what I sort of mentioned before about these private transportation companies: I guess my sort of big takeaway here is just to be skeptical of these private transportation companies. They're mostly backed by venture capital. They're not making a profit. Honestly, it's really expensive to provide transportation, which is why it's primarily been done by the government in the U.S. for the past long while. Yeah. I mean, you know, it's actually not out of the range of possibility that every single scooter company could fold by the time this episode comes out. I guess we don't know what will happen with the economy in the next few months specifically, but really, a lot of these companies are in precarious situations. And so, I do think public transportation agencies have to focus or have to know where they have leverage. And you just don't have as much leverage over private companies that you're permitting to operate versus transit service that you yourself provide or even some of these bike share partnerships where there's a contract in place. And so, public transportation agencies have to think long-term, and they have to protect the public interest.

ALICE: That's great.

[super chill music break]

The future of transportation and inclusive cities

ALICE: I was wondering, is there anything else you'd like to share as maybe the future of transportation and just kinda what your vision of transportation can be like?

MADDY: Yeah. I think one thing you posed to me prior to this episode was that if I were a wizard and sort of had a magic wand and could design an accessible and inclusive city, what would that look like? You know, that's something that I sort of am always thinking about a little bit, but was thinking about especially. And I think, I mean, starting from like a transportation standpoint, right, we want high-quality, fully-accessible, free transit that runs 24 hours a day. We want publicly-owned and operated bike share with a variety of accessible options. You know, I want a future where people take most of their trips either by transit, walking or rolling, or bike, which reduces vehicle congestion, which reduces emissions, and then also for those who do need to travel by car, makes necessary vehicle trips less of a hassle. Sometimes folks in the disability community get nervous when people talk about reducing car vehicle travel because

some people really do need to travel in a car for accessibility reasons or other reasons. But I think really, the point is to shift all of the trips that don't need to happen in a car away from cars so that it's really only the necessary vehicle trips that are happening in vehicles.

And then sort of thinking bigger picture, right? I wanna live in a city where no one's movement or existence is policed, where nobody is incarcerated or institutionalized, where everybody is housed and fed, and everyone has what they need to live a meaningful life, however they define it. So, that's, I guess, my vision of an accessible and inclusive city. I hope that some of the work that I'm doing can help us move in that direction. And I hope more disabled folks get involved in transportation issues, whether through becoming a planner or joining an advocacy organization or through some other method. Because our voices are really needed. I would love to live in that version of the future, and until then, I'm going to be working in community with folks to try and get there.

ALICE: Well, I want to live in that world with you, Maddy.

MADDY: [chuckles] Yeah! One day.

ALICE: One day, one day. One day.

Well, Maddy, thank you so much for sharing all that you've done and just the future has a little bit of this potential. I'm just really excited to see what you do. And that I am glad that you are gonna be part of this urban planning transportation world.

MADDY: Well, thank you. As always, your wisdom and guidance is invaluable. And you are such a beacon of light in our community.

ALICE: Ack!

MADDY: And we are so, we're, [laughs] we are so lucky to have you!

Wrap-up

[hip hop plays]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Maddy's research on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets! Byeeee!

♪ Rocket to the blast off
Stop, drop dance off ♪