Disability, Mobility and Road Risk in the Kyrgyz Republic

A survey into the mobility needs and challenges of persons with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan
Disability and road risk are closely interlinked. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), every year 20 to 50 million people are injured and 1.24 million are killed on the world's roads. Road crashes are the primary cause of head injuries, and it is estimated that some 30% of those injured on the roads remain permanently disabled.\(^1\)\(^2\)

Road injury is not just a major cause of permanent disability – people with disabilities are also more at risk on the roads. The WHO World Report on Disability points out that “People with disabilities are at a higher risk of non-fatal unintentional injury from road traffic crashes” and other causes.\(^3\)

A number of studies have shown greater risks faced by people with different disabling conditions – for example, an injury rate over two times higher for children with autism than for other children.\(^4\)

Little statistical data exists, however, on the specific road risks faced by people with disabilities and the impact on their lives. Road casualty databases do not routinely collect information on the exposure of people with disabilities to road risk even in countries with well-developed data collection systems such as the UK.\(^5\)

The extent to which people with disabilities may avoid traveling due to the road safety environment and poor access to transport is also not generally recorded. However sources such as the UK National Travel Survey\(^6\) show that people facing mobility challenges – in particular those who have difficulty traveling on foot or by bus – make fewer trips, on average, than others in their age groups. An analysis of data from the National Household Travel Survey in the US concluded that “concerns about getting into an accident, congestion, price of travel, aggressive or distracted drivers, access to transit, and lack of walkways are important issues for a large percentage of the population, but they tend to be more important for people with disabilities or medical conditions...”\(^7\)

The same study found that people with disabilities make fewer trips a day than others in the population, though not necessarily by choice. Among those surveyed who had not made a trip at all during the past week, people with medical conditions or

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2 The WHO and World Bank noted that estimates of post-crash disability vary from 2-87%, World Report on Disability, 2011, p.34.
3 WHO and World Bank, Ibid., p.60.
7 Jeremy Mattson, Travel Behavior and Mobility of Transportation – Disadvantaged Populations: Evidence from the National Household Travel Survey, Small Urban & Rural Transit Center, North Dakota State University, 2012, p.47.
disabilities were more likely to want to get out more often – indicating that for many people, a lack of mobility reduces their quality of life.

The framework of UN Sustainable Development Goals has set a tough target of 50% road fatality and injury reduction by 2020. It also makes a commitment to people with disabilities that governments should:

“By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons.”

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises “the importance of accessibility to the physical, social, economic and cultural environment, to health and education and to information and communication, in enabling persons with disabilities to fully enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms.” If an individual’s mobility choices are so severely limited that they are unable to participate fully in society or fulfil their own potential, their rights are being denied.

8 United Nations, Transforming Our World: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development, Outcome Document for the UN Summit to adopt the post-2015 development agenda, August 2015, goal 3.6, p. 16 and Goal 11.2, p. 20.
The Eastern Alliance for Safe and Sustainable Transport (EASST) is an independent UK-registered charity working to promote road safety and sustainable mobility across Central Asia, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

It is estimated that around 172,000 people in Kyrgyzstan are living with disabilities. 13,000 suffer from visual impairments. Sadly, many of these people are hidden. They are unemployed and isolated from society, largely as a result of poor road infrastructure and a lack of facilities and transport options that enable them to travel safely and independently.

Poor mobility can mean that many people with disabilities are marginalised. EASST and its local road safety partner NGOs across the region are conducting a series of studies into the relationship between disability, mobility and road risk, and providing recommendations to policy makers on how to address this important issue.

Based on work already carried out in Moldova and Belarus, EASST partners, Public Association ‘Road Safety’, have now also conducted survey work amongst people with disabilities in Bishkek. The aim of the survey was to obtain information that will help us understand how people with disabilities travel, and what problems they face as pedestrians, public transport users, and, in rare cases, as drivers.

Between December 2016 and March 2017, representatives from ‘Road Safety’ surveyed 100 people with disabilities in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek.

A number of organisations that work with and/or provide services to people with disabilities were approached in order to conduct the surveys as well as more in depth interviews. Questions primarily centred on issues related to public transport use, road surface convenience and the attitudes of other road users towards people with disabilities. ‘Road Safety’ also visited hospitals to survey people and in a small number of cases, the survey was completed online.

While, the goal of the exercise was to reach as wide a target group as possible, it is possible that the sample may contain a bias towards those who are better able to access services and engage in public life. Especially, as the study began in winter and it was difficult to reach participants in their homes. It was found that many people with disabilities simply do not venture out during winter months due to slippery and icy roads and pavements. This just shows how difficult and restrictive mobility can be.

Poor mobility can mean that many people with disabilities are marginalised.
Among those surveyed:

- **50% had loco-motor impairments** (using wheelchairs, walking sticks, etc.)
- **50% suffered from visual impairments**
- **45% were men and 55% were women**
- **80% were of ‘working age’** (between 20 – 60 years old)

Of those respondents with loco-motor disabilities, 38 per cent were unemployed compared to 18 per cent of respondents with visual impairments. Most respondents, however, reported experiencing difficulties in receiving an education and/or finding a job due to an absence of quotas for disabled people.

Four per cent of respondents classed themselves as entrepreneurs. In at least one case, bad weather and slippery road surfaces in the winter mean that they have to halt their work until the spring.

PA ‘Road Safety’ collect surveys at the Society for Disabled Girls
SURVEY RESULTS

Road infrastructure

Of all those surveyed 85 per cent described moving about as pedestrians as either “impossible” (46%) or “very difficult” (39%).

Of those with loco-motor impairments, 70 per cent reported that moving about the city as a pedestrian is “impossible or not available”.

Among the main reasons for this feeling was the high prevalence of uneven and broken roads and pavements. Almost 90 per cent of respondents with loco-motor impairments urged that if there could be one change to improve mobility for disabled people, it would be resurfacing work on roads and pavements.

Other issues raised included:

- an absence of ramps in public spaces
- high kerbs at the bus stops
- quick changing traffic lights (not leaving enough time to time cross the road)
- in some cases, an entire absence of traffic lights and road marks
- open hatches/grates on pavements
- steep steps at entry ways to buildings
- many places do not have elevators

Of those with visual impairments, moving about as a pedestrian is still problematic but not impossible. 48 per cent of respondents reported that they were able to move about on a daily basis compared to just 4 per cent of respondents with loco-motor disabilities.

When questioned further, a number of respondents with visual impairments reported that it was difficult to begin with but as they got to know the main routes and learned to move with a stick, things got easier.

For all respondents, slippery, icy walkways during Kyrgyzstan’s long winter months were highlighted as a serious issue. As the ‘Road Safety’ team began conducting their research in December, they were unable to meet with a number of respondents who were “forced to stay at home”.

It was found that many disabled people were actually forced to halt work on developing their own small enterprises during the winter, as they simply could not leave the house due to untreated walkways and roads. Ukay Muratalieva, Head of the Society of Disabled Girls, characterised this sad situation, saying, “We get out in the spring”!

Those respondents who did not experience any problems or reported few difficulties on the roads had accompanying assistants and acknowledged that they would have experienced enormous difficulties without them.
Respondents with loco-motor impairments: How difficult is it for you to travel as a pedestrian?

- 60% No problem
- 32% Sometimes difficult
- 8% Difficult
- 2% Impossible or not available

Respondents with visual impairments: How difficult is it for you to travel as a pedestrian?

- 58% No problem
- 24% Sometimes difficult
- 16% Difficult
- 2% Impossible or not available

Images demonstrating infrastructure issues affecting mobility in Bishkek
Using public transport

From the survey responses of people with loco-motor impairments, it is clear that public transport is not available to most people with disabilities in Bishkek:

90% never use a bus

96% never use a trolley-bus

86% never use mini-buses (marshrutki)

The main reason given for the lack of public transport use were the high steps preventing people with disabilities from boarding the vehicles. Although the city has recently purchased a number of low-floor trolley buses with ramps, most disabled people are not aware of this.

Access to public transport was found to be slightly better for those with visual impairments, who use public transport more often to get to work or college. However, well over half still reported difficulties such as overcrowding and a lack of auto-informers announcing stops and route numbers meaning that they have to rely on the help of others. This is particularly difficult with marshrutki which stop frequently and are often crowded.
Taxi: a dangerous alternative?

As an alternative, taxis are used more frequently by people with disabilities, but even so, 75 per cent reported using them only once a month or less.

Taxis are expensive, and for wheelchair users, do not have space to carry their wheelchairs. For those with visual impairments, 59 per cent of respondents reported no problem with using taxis. The main issue raised was that often the drivers don’t notice their disability and therefore it can be difficult for them to approach the vehicle.

Taxis can also be, for young women in particular, a dangerous alternative. As girls from the 'Nazik kyz' Association, an organisation for girls with disabilities, reported; there are frequently incidences of harassment by the drivers who take advantage of their vulnerability.

So while taxis may be somewhat easier than public transport, the added risks and expense mean they are not a viable alternative for people with disabilities.

Respondents with visual impairments:

How difficult is it for you to travel by bus?

How difficult is it for you to travel by trolley-bus?

How difficult is it for you to travel by mini-bus (marshrutka)?
Public attitudes

Public attitudes towards people with disabilities were reported as being largely positive. More than 80 per cent of respondents noted the loyal attitude of others and a willingness to help.

Some respondents however did report cases of indifference and irritation. In these cases, there was a desire from the respondents for the media to take a greater role in raising awareness of people with disabilities and their needs to encourage a more sensitive attitude amongst the wider public.

Tolkunbek Isakov, Head of Legal Assistance to Disabled People, talked of his own experience. He described how his disability affects his abilities and self-confidence but said that the “situation is changing” as people with disabilities are beginning to declare their rights and realise the opportunities available to them.

However, significant barriers to mobility keep people with disabilities isolated from public life and prohibit them from making an economic contribution to society.

Authorities need to take the issue of mobility seriously and commit to improving road infrastructure and transport accessibility to help disabled people integrate into public life and to learn, work and live more fully.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this report has been to highlight the particular road safety and mobility issues faced by people with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan. Many of these issues are challenging for all road users. However, the discomfort, danger and difficulties are accentuated for people with special needs, including disabled or elderly people.

As a member of the UNECE, Kyrgyzstan is a party to the Amsterdam Declaration, a priority of which is to:

“Promote policies and actions conducive to healthy and safe modes of transport by designing and modernizing human settlements to improve the conditions for safe and physically active mobility, including infrastructure for walking and cycling, and efficient and accessible public transport, particularly focused on vulnerable groups such as children and persons with reduced mobility.”

The following set of recommendations, based on this report’s findings as well as suggestions from survey participants, are not intended to be a comprehensive guide but are a basic list of issues requiring more attention from policy makers and city planners.

ACCESSIBLE ROADS AND PAVEMENTS

The biggest barrier to mobility identified by our survey respondents with loco-motor impairments was inaccessible or broken pavements and roads. By resurfacing and covering open grates and hatches, the mobility and safety of people with disabilities will be immensely improved.

SAFER ROAD CROSSINGS

In many cases, people with wheelchairs are forced to travel on the road as kerbs are too high or there are impassable drainage ditches cutting off the pavement to the road. Lowering kerbs, covering drainage ditches and providing better signage and road markings will make road crossings significantly safer for all pedestrians (see our report Pedestrian Safety in Bishkek’s Smart City Concept (2018) for more detail).

ACCESSIBLE BUILDINGS AND PUBLIC SPACES

People travel in order to reach a destination. If they are unable to exit their homes easily or gain access to other buildings and sites, their participation will be impaired. A key issue raised by our respondents was the lack of ramps (or prevalence of steep steps) at many entrance ways. As well as a lack of elevators. The law requiring accessibility to public buildings and institutions needs to be properly enforced as a priority.

ACCESSIBLE PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Our survey found severe inadequacies in terms of inclusive and accessible public transport for people with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan. The biggest issue for people with loco-motor disabilities were high step access to buses. While new low-floor trolleybuses have been introduced they are rarely put to use. For people, with visual impairments the biggest barrier to their mobility was the lack of auto-informers on public transport.

The costs of renewing and adapting all types of public transport may mean that progress in this area may take time. As resources allow and as fleets are renewed, the needs of disabled passengers must be a priority and new features should be communicated effectively.

DISABILITY AWARENESS

Most of our respondents reported a positive attitude of the general public towards helping them. However, the lack of infrastructure and adapted public transport reveals that the needs of people with disabilities in terms of mobility are not well understood at a wider societal level. Public awareness campaigns, including specific campaigns aimed at drivers, will help people to better understand the challenges faced by people with disabilities and encourage them to plan more to ensure their needs are met.

PUBLIC POLICY

Although Kyrgyzstan is a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, this is yet to be ratified. The first step in ensuring the rights of people with disabilities are met is to provide a public policy mandate by ratifying the Convention.

The Secretariat of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is housed within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the UN. UNDESA have published a comprehensive ‘Design Manual for a Barrier Free Environment’ for people with disabilities containing detailed information on improving accessibility of pavements, buildings, roads and crossings, which should be used in conjunction with the recommendations in this report.

Disability awareness training would also be beneficial for policy makers in key areas in order to build understanding of the importance of accessible mobility. Without this understanding, the steps to improve mobility will not be treated with sufficient priority.
In September 2017, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) launched a report aimed at addressing the under-representation of persons with disabilities in political and public life.11 Speaking at the launch event in Warsaw, Dastan Bekeshev, a member of parliament in Kyrgyzstan said “By raising the issue of the political participation of persons with disabilities, ODIHR is making a significant contribution to building a fair system of governance in which every individual, including a person with a disability, can fulfil her or his dreams, can reach out to the government or be represented in it.”12

Fundamental to achieving this is ensuring accessible mobility. We hope that the data and recommendations in this report will go some way towards improving this in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Overcrowded public transport, dangerous crossings and poor roads are hazardous for anyone. For disabled people in Kyrgyzstan, these dangers are accentuated. With many survey participants reporting that public transport is inaccessible or impossible in practice. This has impeded their full participation in social and economic life, and prevented them from playing an active role in their communities.

Ensuring accessible mobility is a challenge for all countries. It will be argued that the changes needed in Kyrgyzstan are expensive and not possible at the current time. However, not only is mobility and access to public services a right that should be accessible to everyone - it is also essential for economic and social development. The evidence of people with disabilities must be taken more seriously by policy makers to ensure adequate priority is given to these important issues.


CONCLUSION