Contents

INTRODUCTION

Despite What You Think, Not Everyone Drives

One-third of people living in the United States don't have a driver's license.[1] This includes people like me who cannot drive because of a disability. It also includes young people, immigrants, people with suspended licenses, and people who have aged out of driving. Additionally, there are many people with licenses who can't afford to own a car or pay for insurance, parking, or gas. But because of who the majority of nondrivers are—disabled and poor people, unhoused or recently incarcerated individuals, undocumented immigrants, kids, young people, seniors aging out of driving—we are largely invisible, far from power structures that would enable us to create a world that could better meet our needs. The consequence of this invisibility is a mobility system designed almost exclusively for drivers. And that system has costs, not just for those of us excluded from it.

The truth is, car-dependent communities aren't just failing those of us who can't drive, they are failing everyone. They fail all of us by forcing us to make the land use decisions that drive up

housing costs and saddle us with the financial burden of owning, operating, and maintaining a vehicle. Car dependency contributes to the public health crises of air and noise pollution and traffic crashes that cause life-changing injuries or deaths, all of which disproportionately harm low-income, Black, Brown, immigrant, and Native American communities. And perhaps most menacing of all, transportation is the leading contributor to carbon emissions. If we're serious about addressing climate change, we have to address our transportation system.

When I share the fact that a third of people in the United States can't, or can't afford to, drive, usually my audience is incredulous. Even among professionals in the transportation field, it's rare that someone grasps how many people are so profoundly excluded, if not severely limited, by not being able to grab car keys and go.

The narrative that everyone in the United States drives both shapes and is shaped by the metrics we use to try to understand mobility. How do we count who is a nondriver, not only those who can't physically drive, but also people who can't afford to drive or who don't have reliable access to a vehicle?

The metric I cite at the beginning of this chapter, that one-third of the people in this country can't drive, refers to the number of people in the United States without a valid driver's license.[2] But a driver's license is a crude measure of access to driving. For example, many seniors who lose the ability to drive still have a valid driver's license, and some people may retain a driver's license even while having a temporary disability that prevents them from driving. On the flip side, some people drive without a valid license, though that ability to drive comes with the risk of arrest.

Another metric used to measure transportation access is household vehicle ownership. Seven percent of American households do not own a car, and an additional 17 percent of households have

a "vehicle deficit," meaning they have more adults than vehicles.[3] The Census asks about vehicle ownership in order to "plan and fund improvements to road and highway infrastructure" and "develop transportation plans and services."[4] But this is also an insufficient measurement of who has reliable access to a vehicle and the ability to drive it. Without understanding who within a household has primary access to a vehicle and the ability to drive, we can't understand disparities of access within households. For example, if a household has one vehicle that is used for one person to go to work, what kind of access do other household members have?

As part of my work in transportation advocacy at Disability Rights Washington, we and our allies successfully advocated for the state to fund a study on the demographics and mobility needs of nondrivers. The study was conducted by Toole Design in partnership with Cascadia Consulting and Strategic Research Associates and released in 2023. Using US Census Bureau and Federal Highway Administration Highway Statistics data, the study estimated that Washington's nondrivers represent 30 percent of our state population. These are people who are either under the age of 16 (and not eligible for a driver's license) or who are 16 or older and either do not have a driver's license or do not have a car.

In addition to the data analysis, the project team conducted a market research survey in which they called over fifty thousand phone numbers and reached out to 100,000 people online and asked them screening questions to identify nondrivers. Of those who were contacted, 2,786 met the screening criteria of being a nondriver, were over the age of 18, and responded to the survey. The respondents were from a geographically representative sample of the population of Washington State.[5]

Among people with driver's licenses and vehicles in their households who responded to the survey, "women, those under 25,

and those with annual income under $56,000 are less likely to be the primary driver than males, those 25 years old and older, and those with income over $56,000."[6] By assuming that vehicle access among a household is equally distributed, the mobility needs of women, younger, and poorer individuals may not be evident.

Transportation mode is another common way to analyze how many people are drivers, but too often non-driving modes are undercounted when multiple modes are used on a single trip. Todd Litman from Victoria Transport Policy Institute writes that "commonly cited travel statistics, such as commute mode share, undercount active trips by ignoring shorter trips, non-commute trips, children's travel, recreational travel, and active links of trips that include motor vehicle travel. For example, a bike-transit-walk trip is often classified simply as a transit trip, and trips between parked vehicles and destinations are ignored even if they involve several blocks of walking."[7] Metrics that try to establish destination type or trip purpose struggle with how to measure these "chained" trips, which are more likely to be taken by caregivers, whose mobility needs have been historically ignored.

Technology to measure car traffic volumes is in use in most cities, but pedestrian and bicycle counts have not been prioritized. Cell phone signals are used to determine car traffic volumes and retime "adaptive" traffic signals to minimize backups. But because the pace of bicycle and pedestrian travel is so much slower and varied, the same technology cannot be used to count cyclists and pedestrians and retime signals to value their wait times and crossing needs.[8] Even with better pedestrian or bike counts, this data must be interpreted with caution. For example, very few people may choose to make a risky and highly unpleasant highway crossing to get from their apartment complex to a convenience store, but that doesn't mean there's not latent demand. The Washington

State Department of Transportation explains in its active transportation plan:

> WSDOT and other transportation agencies have historically focused on actual counts for decision making. That method does not account for barriers or places where there is a lack of infrastructure; for example, the sidewalk ends and the only option is to walk in the travel lane so fewer people use that sidewalk. It also does not account for the level of traffic stress in a place that discourages people who would otherwise use active transportation. In other words, focusing on counts of people already moving through a place does not account for the people who would be there if adequate facilities were provided.[9]

Alix Gould-Werth from the Washington Center for Equitable Growth and Dr. Alexandra Murphy, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Michigan, created a quantifiable metric for transportation that isn't focused on mode or trip purpose but rather on whether someone can get to the places they need to go in a safe or timely manner. The sixteen-question Transportation Security Index (TSI) is a valuable tool because it can provide data that measures transportation insecurity within households or between individuals who live on the same block. For instance, for someone who can drive, bike, or walk to the bus easily, a neighborhood might feel like it has good accessibility, but someone else who perhaps walks more slowly or doesn't feel safe waiting at a particular bus stop might not experience the same accessibility even though they live in the same household.[10]

When Gould-Werth and Murphy administered the TSI to a nationally representative sample of 1,999 adults in 2018, the researchers found that 1 out of 4 adults in the United States is transportation insecure. Fully half of adults experiencing poverty lacked

transportation security, and Black and Hispanic adults were more likely to be transportation insecure than White adults.[11]

The Transportation Security Index is a powerful metric, not only because it allows us to look at transportation access for the individual, a more detailed measure than household or census block, but also because it expresses transportation access with more nuance and is able to reflect how disability, income, and social networks may be just as important to access as geography, transit service, and physical infrastructure.

So, while I refer to "nondrivers" in this book, I understand that this isn't always a strict binary between being able to drive and not being able to drive, having a functioning vehicle or not being able to pay for the needed repairs until the next paycheck. Driving access may be transitory, and even among people like me who have disabilities that fully prevent us from driving, our transportation access will vary depending on financial resources and stability, race, language proficiency, immigration status, gender, caregiving responsibilities, and geography.

But in a culture of car dependency, where our communities are almost always entirely built around vehicle mobility and speed, I think the binary of driver/nondriver is useful both in understanding access needs and in creating a cohesive political identity around which to mobilize for change. The fact that we have such insufficient knowledge of how people get around without driving, and how many of us and how frequently we travel or need to travel without driving ourselves, emphasizes how much this frame is needed.

We need to build a broad coalition, starting with nondrivers, to demand a different transportation and land use paradigm. This could be a powerful coalition given that car dependency is harming our public health and climate future. It could include advocates

who want streets where children can safely navigate to the park or school, people who want to undo the harms of structural racism in highway construction, and those who want to reduce carbon emissions, connect rural and tribal communities to transit and multiuse trails, and create abundant affordable housing in places where it is possible to get around without a car.

Why This Book?

I want to be clear that while I center disability and accessibility throughout this book, this is not a book about disability and transportation. Some disabled people do drive, and for some disabled people, driving is the most accessible form of transportation. I'm interested in describing a different collective experience, the experience of not reliably being able to depend on driving for access in a society based on cars.

What does it mean that we have designed a transportation system that doesn't serve so many of us, and how can we change it? Nondrivers are a diverse group—from disabled people who can't drive because of our disabilities, to low-income, Black, Brown, Native American, and immigrant communities, to seniors aging out of driving and young people too young to drive or choosing to delay the costs of car ownership. But even with these differences, I'll discuss how our mobility needs form a cohesive identity.

When talking about disabled people, throughout this book I use "identity-first" language instead of "person-first" language. For example, instead of saying "I am a person with disabilities," I lead with the disability: "I am a disabled person." I made this choice because it's how I, as a low-vision person, choose to identify, and it is more consistent with how we talk about other parts of our identities. I wouldn't say that I am a person with queerness, or a person with Whiteness, for example. I recognize that other people

prefer person-first language and that for many disabled people who for decades have fought to be recognized as deserving of the same respect as everyone else, person-first language is an important step toward recognizing that someone is not defined by their disability. So, if an interviewee expressed this preference, I honor that preference.

Using examples from our success in Washington State, I show how advocates working on climate change, safer roadways, environmental justice, and better transit and bike infrastructure can benefit from more intentionally seeking out collaboration with and leadership from involuntary nondrivers—people who can't drive or can't afford to—and how organizing across communities and across identities, we build bigger coalitions with more power.

Drawing from interviews with involuntary nondrivers from around the United States and from my own experience, I explain how nondrivers get around and the changes necessary to make our communities more accessible. These include sidewalk connectivity; reliable transit and paratransit; options for biking, scooting, and rolling; affordable and accessible housing; and the unrecognized burden of asking and paying for rides.

If there's one thing that you take from this book, I hope that it is the importance of listening to the knowledge of those who day in and day out rely on our network of sidewalks, on buses and paratransit, on rolling or biking, or on asking and paying others for rides. It is critical to include involuntary nondrivers in transportation planning decisions. I outline steps organizations can take to include and promote leadership of those who are most impacted—and too often excluded—by transportation systems designed and run by people with driving privilege. And if you don't work for an organization in the transportation or land use space, I've included a checklist of actions you, as an individual living in

a car-dependent society, can take in your own life to help all of us move beyond automobility.

When the needs of involuntary nondrivers are viewed as essential to how we design our transportation systems and our communities, not only will we be able to more easily get where *we* need to go, but the changes will lead to healthier, climate-friendly communities for everyone. So, what are we waiting for?

CHAPTER 1

Nondrivers Are Everywhere

What are the reasons people don't or can't drive? How many people don't drive as a lifestyle choice versus an economic necessity?

In the survey of adult nondrivers commissioned by the Washington State legislature and described in the introduction, 68 percent of respondents listed the cost of purchasing, operating, or insuring a vehicle as the barrier to driving. Nineteen percent of respondents said they couldn't drive because of a disability, and 14 percent because they didn't know how to drive or couldn't afford to get a driver's license. Seventeen percent of respondents reported that they preferred a lifestyle without a car, and 17 percent of respondents wrote in other reasons, like suspended licenses, anxiety around driving, or that someone else in their household uses the car.[1]

The "choice" nondrivers—people who have the financial resources, immigration status, and physical ability to own and drive a vehicle but choose not to—were more likely to be "male, younger,

urban, and higher income."[2] This tracks with who people often think of as nondrivers, the urbanist, White, male, nondisabled, and financially stable voices that tend to dominate bike advocacy, transit nerd, and city planning spaces. With the invisibility of involuntary nondrivers, advocacy priorities fail to address the needs of those of us who can't drive or can't afford to.

The expertise and the lived experience that I highlight in this book comes from involuntary nondrivers, with an emphasis on the expertise of low-income, Black, Brown, immigrant, and disabled people, caregivers, and queer and trans people. Our exclusion from a world built around automobility means that we are deeply vested in rethinking car dependency, but because of poverty, racism, and caregiving responsibilities, ableism and language barriers, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, and long work hours, we continue to be largely invisible in the rooms where transportation priorities get set.

I recognize that many of you reading this book are likely choice nondrivers, or possibly drivers, who want to see more transit, walking, rolling, and riding mobility options available in your community. That's great! We welcome you as part of the nondriver movement! Because the changes we need to move away from car dependency will require the biggest, broadest coalition of allies we can convene. While you may not see your experiences reflected in this book, my hope is that by understanding the experiences of other nondrivers, you will become more dedicated to fighting for the changes we *all* need.

This chapter explores the different reasons *why* people are nondrivers—whether it's because of a disability, age, documentation status, poverty, or racist enforcement systems. And while I have separated these into subsections, it's critical to understand that these categories overlap and intersect. While someone might not

be able to drive because of a disability, their experience of mobility if they're a White, middle-class, disabled person will be very different than if they are disabled, Black, and poor. And while I touch on age, race, and immigration status, others have far deeper personal and professional expertise in these areas, and I encourage the reader to go deeper with the work I reference in these sections.

The stories and identities described in this chapter do not make up an exhaustive list of nondrivers. Every time I interview someone for our storymap project for Disability Rights Washington, their experience reinforces how many different ways people experience access and mobility and how that can be shaped by their identities, their wealth, their social networks, and the geography and resources of the communities in which they live. While there is no way for me to capture all this nuance in one chapter, my intention is for you to start to understand how many involuntary nondrivers are out there, in your town, on your street, and even within your own family and the reasons that communities built around driving cannot or do not serve our needs.

Nondrivers are Disabled

If you ask someone from the United States what image comes to mind when they think about disability, it's probably a disabled parking spot sign. These signs with a stick figure in a wheelchair are probably the most, if not the only, visible manifestation of disability in many public spaces. But the reality is that many disabled people can't drive or can't afford cars. People with disabilities are four times less likely to drive than nondisabled people, and two to three times more likely to live in a zero-vehicle household. We use buses, subways, and commuter rail for a higher share of trips than people without disabilities.[3]

There are many kinds of disabilities that can make driving impossible or unsafe. Some disabled people may be able to drive if they can afford a costly adaptive vehicle, but because many disabled people are unemployed or underemployed and live in poverty, even if their disability doesn't prevent them from driving, they may not be able to afford a vehicle. According to the Center for American Progress, disabled adults are twice as likely to experience poverty as their nondisabled peers.[4]

Because mobility in the United States is largely based around the ability to drive, this disparity results in far fewer opportunities for disabled people to participate in their communities. In a 2001 study by the Urban Institute, 29 percent of workers with disabilities cited transportation as a barrier to employment.[5] In 2021, the Department of Labor reported that for working-age people receiving disability payments, 51 percent of people who couldn't drive said transportation prevented them from working, compared to only 31 percent of people who could drive.[6] Lack of access is one of the factors contributing to much lower employment rates for disabled people. The Center for American Progress reports that in 2021, nondisabled workers were three times more likely than disabled workers to be employed.[7]

And while many nondrivers are disabled, many are not, or would not choose to identify as disabled, even though they may have physical or mental health conditions that prevent them from driving.

"Many people who may have health conditions or who would otherwise be covered under the ADA do not identify as disabled," explains Carol Tyson, the government affairs liaison for the Disability Rights and Education Defense Fund (DREDF) and current chair of the Consortium for Constituents with Disabilities. "Older

adults who age into disability, those who acquire a disability, and even those with lifelong conditions might not identify [as disabled] because of the continued stigma attached to being disabled, cultural differences, or not feeling reflected or comfortable in often majority-White disability rights' spaces."

Especially for people who do not present as disabled and people with so called "invisible disabilities," masking can feel like a wise choice. Devin Silvernail is a father and a nondriver who lives in Seattle. Like me, he has nystagmus and doesn't see well enough to drive. Until recently, Silvernail didn't want to disclose that he couldn't drive because of his vision. Instead, he would tell people he didn't have a car for environmental reasons.

"It was something that I always tried to hide," Silvernail told me. "We were trained to believe that it was a bad thing, like it was shameful that you couldn't drive, so I hid my disability from girlfriends, from coworkers, from people I met on the street."

For other disabled people, masking is not an option. Kimberly Glass was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, a congenital disability that causes brittle bones. Glass could drive with an assistive setup and modifications, but that setup costs upward of $60,000, far beyond her budget as someone living on disability income. She relies on the paratransit system in Reno, Nevada, but the unreliability of the system has really limited her ability to get to work or to take her daughter to activities, even things as basic as doctor's appointments. "I've lost jobs because I couldn't get there on time. People forget that just because we're disabled, that doesn't mean we don't have a life and children and families and things to do," Glass shared.

Glass's experience is not unique. For Erica Jones, who uses a battery-powered electric wheelchair (often called a powerchair), the cost of a wheelchair-accessible vehicle is prohibitive.

"I do sometimes use a personal car, but a lot of the time I can't," Jones explains. "Because of the nature of my disabilities, I need a heavy motorized wheelchair to get around. And that unfortunately does not fit in my personal vehicle." If she drives somewhere in her car, Jones can't get out, which limits her to drive-through or curbside services. As a result, she primarily uses the bus and light-rail to go places.

For people with chronic health conditions who experience flare-ups or have limited energy, driving can be feasible on some days and in some situations, but not in others. Grace Hope's chronic health condition meant they had to stop driving approximately eight years ago, after they lost "pretty significant" use of their hands. When they first lost the ability to drive, Hope was married and relied a lot on their partner for rides. "Once I went through my divorce about five years ago, it meant being a single parent who didn't have the ability to drive," Hope shared.

When their condition improved last year, Hope felt like they might be able to start driving again, so they bought a vehicle, but they quickly discovered that they couldn't safely drive on the freeway, and on some days they can't drive at all. On "good" days, though, Hope is able to drive short distances around town, which has greatly improved their commute time into their job in Seattle. Commuting by bus could take five hours a day, but when Hope can drive to the regional transit center to catch an express bus, their daily commute only takes two hours and forty-five minutes.

These stories show that having access to a vehicle doesn't always result in being able to drive regularly. A 2022 report from the Bureau of Transportation Statistics shows that just over 60 percent of disabled people with cars drive them on a regular basis, compared to nearly 92 percent of nondisabled respondents.[8]

Other disabled people have mobility disabilities that prevent them

from driving, regardless of the vehicle setup. Tanisha Sepúlveda is a powerchair user from Seattle who has a spinal cord injury and owns a wheelchair-accessible van, but because she cannot drive, she relies on her partner to drive her in it. When her partner isn't able, Sepúlveda takes the bus.

"It is a sense of freedom being able to pick up and go wherever, whenever you want," Sepúlveda reflected on her time as a driver.

Sepúlveda felt fortunate that she was living in Seattle and relying on transit before her injury. If she'd been living in Hot Springs, Arkansas, where she grew up, the lack of public transit options would have made her mobility much more challenging. "I was really surprised at the independence I still felt with Seattle public transportation," she said.

But with the rapid increase in Seattle rents, she was forced to move farther out. Sepúlveda now lives in Delridge, a historically redlined part of the city, where sidewalk connectivity is not as good as it is in downtown Seattle. As a result, she finds herself rolling in the street when curb ramps are missing or sidewalks aren't in good repair.

Some disabled people stop driving when a neurological condition like ALS, multiple sclerosis, or epilepsy means that it's no longer a safe option, or after a stroke or brain injury. Harry Kiick has had a seizure disorder his whole life, and for many years he drove. He knew it wasn't ideal, but he thought he didn't have a choice. In 1995, "I had a terrible accident that was caused by a seizure," shared Kiick. "I totaled the car, spent a week in the hospital, almost drove through somebody's living room. I decided, no, I shouldn't be doing this, obviously this condition was worse than I thought it was. Luckily, I only hurt myself and not anyone else, so I didn't have to live with that." Kiick now relies on transit and

has become a member of the citizens advisory committee for his regional transit agency.

Many disabled nondrivers are people like me whose vision doesn't allow us to drive safely. Researchers estimate that 3.2 million people in the United States are low vision or legally blind. Legally blind means having corrected vision of less than 20/100, meaning that even with glasses you see less than 20/100 on a vision chart. Low-vision people have corrected vision between 20/40 and 20/100.

While requirements vary from state to state, many states require at least 20/40 vision to pass a driver's license test. Sometimes, if a low-vision person is close to passing the DMV vision test, they can get a restricted license that allows them to drive only on local roads during daylight hours. Some states permit vision scopes and other aids that can help low-vision drivers to read signs.[9] For myself, and for many other low-vision people I've spoken to, the fear of causing serious injury or death because we didn't see something keeps us from seriously considering attempting to qualify for these restricted licenses.

Driving isn't a possibility for the more than one million people in the United States who are legally blind. Among working-age adults, vision loss from diabetes is the leading cause of blindness,[10] and there is a higher risk of vision loss among people who are Black and/or Latino than people who are White.[11]

As an adult, Teaera Turner lost her vision from diabetes. Like many people who lose their vision as adults, Turner participated in an orientation and mobility training to learn blindness skills, including how to use a white cane to safely navigate sidewalks, cross streets, and use public transit. But for Turner, getting from her home to the nearby light-rail station still feels too dangerous

because it requires crossing high-speed roads. So, she must preschedule and wait for paratransit rides.

"I miss so much about driving," Turner reflected. "Not having to wait for somebody to get you, not having to be on somebody else's time, arriving just when you want to arrive somewhere because you can do the timing and map things out yourself."

Less visible, and less widely discussed, is when anxiety or mental health conditions keep people from driving. Melanie Perry lives in Spokane, and she normally gets around by the bus, but she also bikes or walks shorter distances in nicer weather. She has tried to get a driver's license a few times but never felt comfortable enough to take the test. "It was anxiety and depression that prevented me from getting to the point of taking the driver's test. And my mom's anxiety made it difficult for her to teach me," Perry shared.

Neurodivergent people may also experience difficulty driving. Noor Pervez, the community engagement manager for the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), explains that overstimulation can be a significant barrier: "Particularly with a new generation of cars, the LED lights are so much brighter than the previous versions. It's not the best thing for all types of brains." While some people with autism can drive, and some may find driving to be more accessible than relying on transit or rideshare, for other neurodivergent people, driving is not an option.

Nondrivers Can't Afford to Drive

Pervez emphasized how many neurodiverse people don't drive simply because they can't afford to: "A lot of people, even among the relatively low statistically amount of us that are employed and not underemployed, can't afford a car. Those of us that can afford a car usually can't afford a new one, a lot of us can't afford upkeep and maintenance." And the cost of owning a car doubles or triples

if you need a powerchair van or other adaptive vehicle, he added, and gets even more complicated if you live in a more rural area where getting an adaptive vehicle serviced is near impossible.

Black disabled Americans are more likely to live in poverty than their White disabled peers. The Century Foundation reported that in 2020 one in four disabled Black adults lived in poverty compared to just over one in seven of their White counterparts. And this disparity hasn't narrowed much in recent years. "The Black-White poverty gap among working-age people with disabilities was only 1.6 percentage points smaller in 2020 than it was in 2013," the report notes.[12]

Many people who are disabled must remain in poverty in order to qualify for needed health care or home care support, support services that wouldn't be covered even with "good" health care coverage from an employer. Tamara Jackson, a policy analyst for the Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities and co-chair of the Wisconsin Non-Driver Advisory Committee, explains: "The reality is that you have a system where pre-poverty is a prerequisite." A 2020 report on employment and disability from the National Council on Disability describes this "poverty trap," explaining that many disabled people "agonize over the choice between maintaining the health care that they need to live and work, or a job that they are qualified for and desire, given the asset limitations imposed by means-tested programs that are attached to health care."[13]

Of course, it's not only disabled people who can't afford to drive. In a 2011 report, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics found that low-income households earning under $25,000 are nine times less likely to own a car than households earning more than $25,000.[14] A lack of transportation access further limits opportunities to earn money.

In the survey of Washington State nondrivers, when asked why they did not drive, cost was the most frequently cited barrier: "Forty percent said the costs of purchasing, operating, and maintaining a vehicle are too high, while another 28 percent stated that the costs of vehicle registration and insurance are too high."

The researchers found that more than 40 percent of nondriver survey respondents had an annual household income of less than $28,000. Of the total Washington State population, only 15 percent of households make less than $25,000 a year. The survey also found that 53 percent of survey respondents rent a house or apartment compared to 37 percent of the Washington State population who rent a house or apartment.

Nondrivers Are Black, Native American, and Native Alaskan

Using 2019 data, the National Equity Atlas found that 18 percent of Black households lacked access to a vehicle, compared to only 6 percent of White households.[15] In Washington State, while African Americans make up 4 percent of the state population, 9 percent of the nondriver survey respondents identified as African American. And Native Americans make up 1 percent of the state population, yet 7 percent of the nondriver survey respondents said they are Native American.[16] According to the Equity Atlas, 48 percent of Native American and Native Alaskan households lack access to a vehicle, and a 2016 study found that close to a third of households participating in the federal food assistance program on reservations lacked access to a vehicle.[17]

The racial disparities in household vehicle access, which hold constant in both more urbanized and more rural states, are a result of the racial wealth gap and the high cost of vehicle ownership. The disparities are exacerbated by the fact that auto loans and car

insurance are often more expensive for Black and Hispanic/Latino owners, even when controlled for credit scores.[18]

Black drivers are also more likely to be pulled over in discretionary traffic stops, resulting in compounding court fines and fees and the potential for license suspension. More than half the states in the US still allow license suspensions for unpaid fines and fees,[19] and a study that examined data from New Jersey found nondriving-related suspensions to be seven times more likely in low-income, as compared to high-income, census tracts.[20] In Washington State, around 4 percent of driver's licenses were suspended in 2022;[21] nationally, 2.59 percent of licenses are suspended, though the rates of license suspensions in some cities are over 10 percent.[22]

As a White person, I have not experienced the kind of "arrested mobility," that Charles T. Brown describes in his work on the policing of the movement of Black and Brown people. Brown's podcast, research, and educational resources describe the ways enforcement and race interact and create inequitable, and often dangerous or deadly, outcomes.[23] Sara A. Seo's *Policing the Open Road: How Cars Transformed American Freedom* offers a legal history of the policing of automobility and is also helpful in understanding racist policing practices that underpin so much of how we conceptualize road safety.[24]

I had a small window into the intersection of policing and mobility when, in 2016, I worked on a contract for the American Civil Liberties Union to investigate if courts in and around the Memphis area were acting as debtors' prisons: booking people in jail when they showed up for court dates if they couldn't pay fines or fees associated with court costs. I spent a week observing court proceedings in Memphis, where most of the cases involved minor traffic infractions, such as broken taillights, missing tags, tinted

windows, or not using a seatbelt. Aside from the judges, pro-bono lawyers, and court staff, I was the only White person I saw in court.

"They pull you over for anything—they claim they can't see your tags, and it's just the angle they were looking at your car," one of the plaintiffs, a young mother, told me. She had received a citation for improperly displayed tags, and the compounding fines and fees and missed court dates resulted in her license being suspended. She was in court that day to try to get her license restored, but the compounding court fees and fines meant she wasn't going to be able to pay off the debt. Like many of the other people in court that day, she would continue to drive without a valid license and risk being arrested again, because without driving, she wouldn't be able to work or get her kids where they need to go.

Nondrivers Are Immigrants

Because most states require valid immigration documentation to receive a driver's license, undocumented immigrants often cannot legally drive in the US. Fortunately, eighteen states and the District of Columbia have enacted laws that allow people without legal US residency to apply for a driver's license by showing identification from their country of origin.[25] In 2013 California was the first state to pass this type of legislation.[26] But for immigrants who worry about having their home address and photo in a government database, driving without documentation may feel safer, especially in states where the driver's licenses databases are searchable by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).[27] For many, riding public transit, biking, walking, or relying on friends and family for rides feels like the safest option.

Even for immigrants with documentation or the ability to get a driver's license, the cost of car ownership can be a burden. The National Equity Atlas notes that "immigrant households for all

racial and ethnic groups, except Black households, are more likely to lack access to a vehicle compared to their US-born counterparts."[28] Low-income immigrants have to make difficult choices between car ownership and affording other essentials. Because we have made driving a prerequisite for employment and full community participation in so many parts of our country, too often this doesn't feel like a choice.

In interviewing nondrivers in Washington State for our storymap project, I partnered with Living Well Kent, a nonprofit serving Iraqi and Afghani families resettled in the Kent area, a suburb south of Seattle. Rajwinder, Khadija, and Nabaa are all mothers and were recent immigrants when I met them through this program.

"Availability of public transportation in the area is one of the biggest barriers as there are not many bus services," Rajwinder shared. "A lot of the routes have been cut so I must walk long distances to catch multiple different buses to get to a destination. Sometimes I get late because of routes changing and I have to walk for too long and miss the bus."[29]

Where bus service does exist, the low frequency of service makes it far less convenient than driving. Bus stops can be far apart and often lack shelters. King County Metro conducted an equity analysis of existing transit service in 2020 and identified the parts of Kent and Auburn where many immigrant families live as areas of high unmet need. Although the areas are high density, home to "a high proportion of low-income people, people of color, people with disabilities, and members of limited-English speaking communities," they have "limited mid-day and evening transit service to schools, jobs, and childcare centers and other ways to build wealth and opportunities."[30]

Relying on transit here can be particularly difficult when waiting with children, as Khadija pointed out: "We wait for a long

time, sometimes it rains, sometimes it's sunny. It's not great for the kids because of the conditions." And for some, language barriers and understanding how to navigate a new community on the bus is extremely stressful. For many families, saving to afford a car and getting US driver's licenses is an immediate priority, though when a family can afford only one car, access must be negotiated. Nabaa described feeling frustrated about having to rely on her husband to drive: "Always my husband driving me and my kids—to school, to shopping, to have fun outside, to the park—anything."

When our communities are designed to work best for, and only for, car-based mobility, the cost of not driving is unemployment and foregoing basic needs. So, people will choose to buy and maintain a vehicle, despite it being a significant financial burden and stressor.

It's also important to remember that many disabled people rely on low-wage and immigrant workers who serve as caregivers, personal care attendants, or direct service providers. These service providers often allow people to remain in their own homes with their family and loved ones instead of in an institution. Before their work in disability advocacy, Carol Tyson from DREDF spent decades working for economic justice and worker rights. They offer the reminder that the mobility of disabled people is dependent on the mobility of the caregivers and service providers many disabled people rely on to live in the community. "Caregivers are often low income or a recent immigrant and may not have access to a car," they shared.

Nondrivers Are Seniors

Most driving adults don't want to consider this, but on average, Americans will spend the last seven to ten years of their life unable to safely drive.[31] Danielle Arigoni, author of *Climate Resilience for*

an Aging Nation, notes that 18 percent of people 65 and older don't drive.[32] Arigoni points out that while people can make modifications inside their home to accommodate changing needs, "it's much more difficult to jump into and instantly modify your transportation opportunities if you don't live in a walkable or bikeable community, or if you don't live near public transit."

And we know that our population is aging: the AARP Livable Communities initiative states that by 2034, for the first time, the United States' population will have more older adults than children.[33] In fact, the number of potential drivers over the age of 65 will increase 77 percent by 2045.[34] But instead of ensuring that seniors can transition to walkable, rollable, and transit-rich living situations, it is far more common to move them into assisted living facilities that may provide some group transportation options, but not a connected sidewalk network or easy access to public transit options that would make independent mobility possible.

Arigoni emphasizes the importance of building more housing in proximity to transit, housing that's well supported by bike and pedestrian infrastructure. Because housing in urban areas is so expensive, for many seniors, it may not be possible to afford housing that is well served by transit or in walkable communities. Roughly 12 percent of older adults rely on Social Security payments alone, and half of older people who live alone are struggling to get by on less than $27,000 a year.[35]

Too often, affordable communities for retirees are farther from urban centers with health care facilities or reliable transit, and so service to more rural areas, even if it's only once a day or runs only a few days a week, can be a lifeline.

After she lost much of her vision, Nancy Perron, who raised her family and then retired in a rural river valley outside of Aberdeen, Washington, had to stop driving. (Yes, the Aberdeen where Kurt

Cobain grew up, which continues to be one of the poorest cities in the state after the lumber industry began to collapse in the 1980s.) Perron had no desire to move into the city, having a strong network of family members nearby. "I can tell you that moving to town is not an option for most of us that live in the country," Perron said, explaining that expecting individuals to move from their communities and networks of support was "putting the responsibility for a community service on one individual." Also, she added, "for the average person living on Social Security, you don't just get to move around." She knew she couldn't afford a place in town, and also knew that the waiting list for Section 8 housing opened up so infrequently that she was unlikely to ever get a spot.

But then the bus route that served the valley where she lived was reduced due to funding cuts. Perron had worked as the deputy county coroner and had seen what could happen when older adults lost transportation in rural areas. "When you go to people's houses where they've been isolated for too long, it's not a healthy situation whatsoever. We shouldn't be making choices for other people, but we should make sure they can make their own choices and get out of there, go to town, get food instead of eating the cat food or the dog food, which I have seen," Perron insists.

Luckily, Perron was able to convince the local paratransit agency to continue to offer service to her family and so she's been able to remain in her home, but she worries every year as transit budgets are stretched and routes reorganized that she could lose this critical service.

For some seniors, especially people diagnosed with progressive chronic health conditions, and with the resources to move, planning for a future where they can't drive is critical. This is a strategy Arigoni endorses. By moving into housing with more

transportation options before they can no longer drive, seniors can build new "transportation muscle memories" and learn how to use alternatives before they lose the ability to drive.

When John Frasca retired and moved to the coastal community of Port Townsend, Washington, he sought out a home with a bus stop close by. He has ALS, and as it progressed, Frasca stopped driving. He's more limited now that he can't pop out quickly and drive to the grocery store because he forgot an ingredient for dinner, but he is able to live independently. (Although he can no longer drive, Frasca still has a valid driver's license, which he uses for identification, so in estimations of drivers based on license status, he would still be counted.)

"I have been a strong proponent of bus transportation and was happy to find that Port Townsend has a system that works for me," Frasca shares. "I am grateful for the Dial-A-Ride paratransit service provided by Jefferson Transit, and I rely on that to get to local medical appointments and events that are beyond the range of my power wheelchair."

Not too far from Frasca's condominium, Port Angeles Councilmember Lindsey Schromen-Wawrin has noted this incongruence: "On the Olympic Peninsula, a lot of people move here and retire here. Why would we be building car-dependent urban spaces, when we shouldn't expect people to drive as they become elders? And so, we're not really creating a space that's accessible for people, whether they're older, or whether they're younger. And that's really, I think, a disservice to our population as a whole."[36]

But for many seniors, it's too difficult to imagine a future without driving, and the stigma around identifying as disabled or admitting they can no longer drive is a barrier to action. In their survey of nondrivers in Washington State, researchers found that "senior nondrivers were more likely to have a driver's license and

more likely to have a vehicle in their household compared to the nondriver survey respondents under 64 years old."[37]

The researchers noted that they likely undersampled older nondrivers in their survey: "While the screening criteria sought to capture the group of older adults that have a driver license and primary access to a vehicle, but do not drive most places, the low response rate for phone surveys (yet high rate of older adults that took the phone survey versus the online survey) indicates there may have been a difficulty in either reaching older adults that met the criteria or controlling for responses on this topic that can be one of frustration and anxiety for older adults."

For many, raised in our culture of ableism, there are deep fears about what it means to get older and to lose the ability to do things independently. But not being able to drive shouldn't have to limit the ability to participate in your community. It is important to normalize nondriving so that we can start building communities that work better for everyone, including the increasing number of seniors who cannot safely drive themselves.

Nondrivers Are Children and Youth

The largest segment of nondrivers are children. Almost 20 percent of US residents are 15 or younger.[38] I often get pushback about counting children as nondrivers. Because children can't travel independently, they shouldn't count, I often hear. But I disagree fundamentally.

First, because many children can and do travel independently, and in the right environments, children don't need to be accompanied by adults for every trip. In Japan, as evident in the much-discussed Japanese reality TV show *Old Enough*, young children safely navigate streets that are designed for slower car speeds. And

while allowing children to ride public transit by themselves may seem unreasonable in many middle-class, suburban communities, in New York City, many schoolchildren ride the subway or public bus on their own for transportation by seventh grade.[39]

More importantly, whether or not someone can make every trip by themselves, mobility should not be tied to whether someone has the ability to travel independently. For some disabled adults with cognitive disabilities or who need support from a health care aid, traveling alone may not be safe or practical.

No matter your age, no matter your physical or cognitive access needs, you should have the right to be mobile and get to the places you need to be part of your community. Trying to draw a line between people "deserving" of mobility and those too young or "too disabled" to have this right only leads to unnecessary exclusion and ugly assumptions around whose life has value. No matter your age, whether or not you can travel by yourself, it can and should be possible to get to the places you need to go without driving.

"Transportation access underpins everything," reflects Judy Shanley, PhD, co-chair of the Transportation Research Board Committee on Accessible Transportation and Mobility. Shanley began her career as a special education teacher and helped youth with disabilities and their families to develop "transition plans" to identify the supports each student needs to move from high school into the workplace or to higher education. "If students, their families, and the transition professionals working with them don't think about transportation and mobility, student attainment of postschool goals will never be realized." At Easterseals, Shanley works with state educational agencies and school districts to identify transportation services to support student access to safe and reliable transportation services when they leave high school.

Additionally, when we design communities that require children to be driven, the burden of transporting children falls on caregivers, and not all caregivers have a vehicle, the ability to drive, or the schedule flexibility to provide transportation. It's why our public school systems so often provide transportation—because they recognize that without busing access, the families with the least resources or with caregivers who are nondrivers wouldn't be able to get their children to school.

According to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, the majority of children from low-income families take the school bus. For families that are not low income, the majority of children are driven in a private vehicle.[40] But the school bus system is struggling to meet the mobility needs of students. A national bus driver shortage means that many districts are having difficulty serving routes. Busing is also expensive. Nationally, we spend $25 billion a year on school bus service.[41] In the city of Seattle, transportation costs are more than $3,000 per student annually.[42]

Facing budget shortfalls and driver shortages, many school districts are looking at how to make it safe and accessible for more children to walk, roll, or bike to school. Seattle started staggering start times between schools so the limited number of bus drivers can cover two routes.[43] Philadelphia is paying parents $300 per month to drive their own kids.[44] But since the 1970s, the rate of children walking, rolling, or biking to school has decreased from 50 percent in 1969 to 11 percent today.[45]

Kori Johnson, program and engagement manager at the Safe Routes Partnership, attributed some of these decreases to an increase in school choice, where students have the option to attend an out-of-boundary school instead of their neighborhood school. That means students might be traveling to schools that are far away from where they live. She also called out another major challenge

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