

Mobility as a Right:

Ending Transit Exclusion in Seoul

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Abstract

Seoul's public transportation is often praised as one of the best in the world, yet for many disabled residents it remains out of reach. This paper looks at how that gap persists, from broken elevators and unsafe station access to a paratransit system split between dozens of local jurisdictions. These problems are not just inconveniences. They shape whether people can get to work, attend school, visit family, or take part in public life. The result is a system that treats mobility as a privilege rather than a right. Drawing on first-hand accounts, policy review, and examples from cities like London, Singapore, and New York, the paper explores how coordinated governance, universal design, and stronger enforcement could replace the current patchwork. At its heart, it argues that accessibility is about equal citizenship. Without it, the promise of freedom, dignity, and participation will remain out of reach for many.

Introduction

In Seoul, a city celebrated for its advanced public transportation network, the promise of mobility remains unfulfilled for hundreds of thousands of disabled residents. Park Kyung-seok, a wheelchair user, spent five years confined to his home because the transit system failed him entirely. His experience reflects a fundamental contradiction at the heart of Seoul's urban infrastructure: a world-class transportation network that systematically excludes those who need it most.

The gap between Seoul's transportation achievements and its accessibility failures reveals structural inequity. When Samgakji Station remains unusable for residents who cannot navigate stairs, when paratransit services strand passengers at jurisdictional boundaries, and when disabled advocates face public hostility for demanding basic access rights, the city's transportation system becomes an instrument of exclusion rather than inclusion. These are not isolated technical problems but

manifestations of a system that treats disabled people's mobility as optional rather than essential.

This study argues that genuine mobility justice for disabled people in Seoul requires integrated regional coordination, mandatory universal design implementation, expanded paratransit services, and meaningful inclusion of disabled voices in transportation policymaking. Only through such comprehensive reform can Seoul create a transportation system that guarantees equal citizenship for all its residents.

Transit Access is a Basic Freedom

For disabled and elderly individuals, public transportation is not a convenience but a basic condition for autonomy and dignity. Independent mobility opens the door to work, education, healthcare, and community life. When transit is unreliable or inaccessible, these everyday activities become stressful, unpredictable, or simply impossible.

In Seoul, many subway stations still lack elevators or step-free access. Samgakji Station, for instance, remains unusable for nearby residents who cannot navigate stairs. This forces

people to take long detours or cancel outings altogether, increasing missed opportunities and deepening social isolation.¹

Most able-bodied people leave home without worrying about these barriers. Disabled individuals, on the other hand, must book rides in advance, endure long wait times, or constantly change plans due to last-minute transit issues. These constant obstacles do more than inconvenience individuals; they erode their personal freedom and self-determination.²

Mobility Shapes Education and Employment

Transportation barriers also limit access to education and jobs. A 2021 Amnesty International report found that over 40 percent of disabled people in South Korea never finished primary school, and that this was often due to the school facilities being inaccessible.³ This lack of access restricts future employment options and financial independence for people with disabilities, which further marginalizes them.

Even those who graduate face limited opportunities. Without dependable transit, many cannot travel to job sites and are forced to

¹ Lee, S.-E., & Cho, J.-W. (2023, January 2). Disabled group insists the subway is its platform. Korea JoongAng Daily. <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2023/01/02/national/socialAffairs/korea-disabled-subway/20230102185024834.html>

² Son, J.-H., Lee, Y.-S., & Kim, M.-J. (2024). Investigating the spatiotemporal imbalance of accessibility to Demand-Responsive Transit (DRT) service for people with disabilities: Explanatory case

study in South Korea. *Journal of Transport and Disability Studies*, advance online publication.

³ Park, K. S. (2024, ? Month Day). If society is to change, people with disabilities must be included in the fight. *Amnesty International USA*. <https://www.amnestyusa.org/blog/if-society-is-to-change-people-with-disabilities-must-be-included-in-the-fight/>

turn down offers or leave the workforce entirely.⁴ The consequences go beyond individual hardship. Mobility shapes access to other rights such as education, employment, and healthcare. Without it, equal opportunity exists only on paper. Public transit must be recognized as the starting point for genuine participation in society.⁵

Isolation Through Transit Exclusion

The consequences of inaccessible transit stretch beyond lost job opportunities, as they cut people off from social life. Park Kyung-seok, a wheelchair user in Seoul, reportedly spent five years inside his home because transit options failed him.⁶

Social connection depends on physical access, and without it, visits with friends, family gatherings, and community events become impossible. Studies consistently link limited mobility to depression, anxiety, and chronic loneliness among disabled individuals.⁷

This cycle feeds on itself. Social isolation worsens mental health, which in turn reduces people's ability to leave home. What starts as a transport issue quickly becomes a public health problem. Expanding transit access is not just about Infrastructure but about protecting mental health and keeping people connected to their communities.⁸

The Emotional Costs of Being Excluded

Every broken elevator or blocked entrance sends a message: some people do not belong in public life. Over time, these experiences wear people down, creating lasting emotional exhaustion and feelings of humiliation.

Advocates have repeatedly spoken out about this hidden cost. One wheelchair user described Seoul's transit system as "a test of patience and pride," where every blocked route feels like a personal rejection.⁹ These experiences are not rare incidents. They are everyday reminders that public spaces are built with exclusion in mind.

⁴ Groover (2025, May 15). *Bridging the Gap: Addressing Labor Challenges for Persons with Disabilities in South Korea*. <https://seo.goover.ai/report/202505/go-public-report-en-b8a82974-54b6-45a4-90e5-07ad9ece0acb-0-0.html>

⁵ Jo, C. (2024). Disability, accessibility, and inclusivity in mobility. *Journal of Transport and Disability Studies*. Advance online publication.

⁶ Amnesty International. (2024, December 3). If society is to change, people with disabilities must be included in the fight. *Amnesty International*

⁷ Emerson, E. (2020). Loneliness, social support, social isolation and wellbeing among working age adults with and without disability: Cross-sectional

study *national Institutes of Health (NIH)*, 17(21), 1–12. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32843311/>

⁸ Mattson, J. (2023). *Impacts of transit on health in rural and small urban communities* (Report No. SURTCOM23-17). Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute, North Dakota State University. <https://www.ugpti.org/resources/reports/downloads/surtcom23-17.pdf>

⁹ Bok, G. (2024, July 5). How Park Kyung-seok of SADD became a "bad disabled person". OhmyNews. https://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0003042352

The mental toll often discourages people from going out at all. Public spaces lose their meaning when individuals feel unsafe or unwelcome. Emotional well-being is closely tied to mobility, and any serious accessibility reform must address this reality.¹⁰

Accessibility is a Right, Not a Privilege

The freedom to move around one's city is a civil right, not an act of charity or goodwill. The phrase "Accessibility is a right, not a favor" reflects a simple fact: every person deserves the freedom to live independently.

South Korea has laws, like the Act on Guarantee of Promotion of Convenience for Persons with Disabilities, intended to protect these rights. In practice, they are often ignored or unevenly enforced.¹¹ Many disabled people are left navigating layers of bureaucracy just to access services that should already be guaranteed, like education, work, or healthcare.

No one should need to be lucky enough to live near accessible stations to enjoy basic rights. True equality demands legal accountability and public investment in transit infrastructure. Without them, the promise of equal rights is

meaningless, and full citizenship remains out of reach.¹²

Fragmented Governance in the Seoul Metropolitan Area

A Disconnected System

In the Seoul Metropolitan Area, which includes Seoul, Gyeonggi Province, and Incheon, paratransit services for disabled travelers are split between dozens of local jurisdictions. Each municipality operates its own "call taxi" or paratransit program with separate rules for eligibility, booking procedures, and operating hours. Although these services aim to support the same population, they often follow conflicting policies and rarely coordinate with one another.

This fragmented setup creates a patchwork of services where access depends more on crossing administrative borders than on individual needs. For example, a rider starting in Seoul but traveling to Gyeonggi Province may have to switch vehicles or locate a different provider altogether. Non-disabled riders face no such barriers; this disjointed system applies almost exclusively to disabled travelers.

¹⁰ Chon, D., Moon, J. Y., & Kim, J.-H. (2022). Participating in different activities and their association with mental health problems in the working disabled population in Korea. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(14), 8348. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19148348>

¹¹ United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. (2023, July). Harmonization

of national laws with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Country case study: Republic of Korea. United Nations ESCAP.

¹² Kim, M., Jung, W., Kim, S. Y., Park, J. H., & Shin, D. W. (2023). The Korea National Disability Registration System. *Epidemiology and Health*, 45, e2023053. <https://doi.org/10.4178/epih.e2023053>

These problems are not the result of technology gaps or a lack of funding. They reflect a governance failure that prioritizes bureaucratic boundaries over equitable access to transportation.

Daily Costs of Fragmentation

For many disabled residents, traveling across a city line means risking delays, cancellations, or outright service refusal.

In regions like Osong and the broader Chungbuk area, disabled residents regularly face service refusals or delays when crossing city lines. A 2022 report by The Hankyoreh noted that low-floor buses and accessible taxis are often unavailable, forcing wheelchair users to give up even essential trips. Similarly, KBS News highlighted how rigid service zones and inconsistent infrastructure around Osong Station prevent many from completing basic intercity journeys. For many, crossing a municipal boundary can mean being stranded mid-trip or missing critical life events.¹³

Situations like this expose how regional boundaries produce real, harmful consequences.

Inconsistencies between municipalities add to

the problem. Some cities run paratransit only on weekdays, while others reduce service on weekends or evenings. Even when a person begins their trip, they might be unable to return home if their destination falls within a jurisdiction with different service hours.

Many users report constant frustration: making multiple phone calls to book a trip, submitting repeated paperwork, or re-registering in each district they travel through.¹⁴ Non-disabled residents never face these obstacles. They travel freely without thinking about jurisdiction, while disabled people navigate a confusing and inefficient system that undermines their right to mobility.

Policy Failures and Legal Gaps

Although national laws acknowledge the right to mobility, no binding legal framework exists to coordinate paratransit services between municipalities. A model ordinance issued in 2018 by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport suggested standardizing eligibility and service rules. However, local governments were left free to decide operating hours, fares, and booking systems.¹⁵

Today, there are at least 21 different paratransit

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¹⁴ Jihye-rom, J. (2021, August 24). “Transferring taxis? Disabled individuals burdened by disabled call taxis [Issue Tang-Tang-Tang]”. TBS Seoul. Retrieved from https://tbs.seoul.kr/news/newsView.do?seq_800=20439623

¹⁵ Korea Disabled People’s Development Institute.

(2018, September 20). Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport establishes standard ordinances on special transportation services for mobility-challenged individuals (KODDI Issue). Korea Disabled People’s Development Institute. https://www.koddi.or.kr/bbs/news_koddissue_view.jspx?brdNum=7406214&brdTp=KODDISSUE02

systems in the Seoul region, each with its own set of regulations. Efforts to unify these services have failed, largely because local authorities could not agree on cost-sharing arrangements or operational standards.¹⁶ The result is a legal vacuum where people's transportation rights are determined by where they happen to live.

Without national oversight, enforcement is weak and accountability is minimal. Disabled residents face constant uncertainty about whether they will be able to complete even short trips across district lines. This fragmented governance structure directly conflicts with any meaningful commitment to equal access.

What Other Cities Have Done Right

Other major cities have shown that regional transit coordination is both practical and necessary. London operates all transit services, including paratransit, under Transport for London, a single agency that standardizes booking, coverage, and eligibility citywide. This approach ensures consistency regardless of

where a person lives or travels.¹⁷ New York City has introduced an e-hail system through the Metropolitan Transportation Authority that allows disabled riders to book taxis across all boroughs through a single app.¹⁸ Riders no longer have to transfer between services or rebook for different areas.

Toronto also offers a strong example. Regional transit agencies coordinate paratransit services across the Greater Toronto Area, allowing disabled passengers to travel across city borders without extra bookings or interruptions.¹⁹ These cities prove that equitable mobility is possible when governments prioritize coordination over bureaucracy.

A Way Forward for Seoul

Some improvements have begun in Korea, but they remain limited. Kakao Mobility has launched pilot programs that allow users to hail accessible taxis through one app, and this model has expanded to several cities.²⁰ However, technology alone is not enough. True

¹⁶ Griffiths, I. (2025, May 31). Notes from Korea: "Strong government" essential to delivering transformational change. Seamless Bay Area. Retrieved from <https://www.seamlessbayarea.org/blog/2025/5/31/notes-from-korea-strong-government-essential-to-delivering-transformational-change-rdw86>

¹⁷ Transport for London. (n.d.). Dial-a-Ride: Door-to-door transport for disabled and older people. <https://tfl.gov.uk/modes/dial-a-ride/>

¹⁸ Metropolitan Transportation Authority. (2024, May 22). MTA announces E-Hail pilot expansion as Access-A-Ride reaches record customer satisfaction and trips booked [Press release]. MTA New York City

Transit. Retrieved from <https://www.mta.info/press-release/mta-announces-e-hail-pilot-expansion-access-ride-reaches-record-customer-satisfaction-and-trips-booked>

¹⁹ Admin. (2025, June 30). Understanding the paratransit system in Greater Toronto Area: Registration, booking and cross-boundary tips. Precious Flower Healthcare. Retrieved from <https://www.preciousflowerhealthcare.org/post/understanding-the-paratransit-system-in-greater-toronto-area-registration-booking-and-cross-boundary>

²⁰ Kim, J.-A., & Kim, J.-Y. (2024, January 24). Kakao Mobility launches app tool for calling accessible taxis.

reform requires structural changes in how services are organized and governed.

A unified regional platform could replace the fragmented hotlines and paperwork that burden users. A centralized dispatch center could pool vehicles from multiple districts, assigning the nearest one without regard to city limits.

National policymakers should also use financial incentives to encourage cooperation. Subsidies could reward municipalities based on cross-regional service levels, successful ride completions, and rider satisfaction. Stronger national laws, backed by enforcement powers, are needed to make regional paratransit coordination a legal requirement rather than a policy suggestion.

Accessibility is a shared responsibility. Freedom of movement should not depend on municipal boundaries but should reflect a basic social commitment to inclusion and equality.

Inaccessible Urban Design in Public Spaces

The areas around public transit stations often present hidden yet serious barriers for disabled individuals. Although many countries

guarantee access to transportation, the routes leading to stations frequently fall short of accessibility standards. In Seoul and its surrounding areas, narrow sidewalks, broken pavement, missing curb cuts, uneven surfaces, and steep inclines are common. These conditions make travel difficult and sometimes dangerous for wheelchair users, elderly pedestrians, and people with visual impairments.

Crosswalks are another recurring problem. Many lack tactile paving or auditory signals, which are essential for blind or low-vision individuals. A 2021 audit found that fewer than 40 percent of crosswalks in major Korean cities met these basic requirements, despite legal obligations.²¹ These gaps increase the risk of accidents and restrict independent movement.

Poor maintenance makes the situation worse. A study by the Korea Institute of Civil Engineering and Building Technology found that broken sidewalks and inaccessible building entrances were key reasons elderly residents in Seoul struggled to get around.²² The last few hundred meters to a transit station are often riddled with obstacles, turning a simple walk

Korea JoongAng Daily. Retrieved from <https://www.koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2024-01-24/business/industry/Kakao-Mobility-launches-app-tool-for-calling-accessible-taxis/1964945>

²¹ Korea Blind Union. (2023, December 19). Walking accessibility for visually impaired people in local governments earns failing grades nationwide. AbleNews. [https://www.ablenews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?i](https://www.ablenews.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=209606)

dxno=209606

²² Kim, S. Y., & Da-Un, Y. (2024). Investigating walking environment convenience for mobility-challenged individuals utilizing walking aids in Seoul. *Journal of the Architectural Institute of Korea*, 40(3), 181–192. <https://doi.org/10.5659/JAIK.2024.40.3.181>

into a physically and mentally exhausting task.

When Everyday Travel Becomes a Burden

Individual stories reveal the daily consequences of these barriers. Mr. Ryu, a wheelchair user from Gwanak District, must navigate a 700-meter route to reach his subway station. His journey involves dodging broken sidewalks, curbs without ramps, and blocked entrances, forcing long detours. What should be a ten-minute trip takes over thirty minutes and involves considerable risk.²³

Ms. Kim, a blind resident near Dongjak Station, faces different but equally dangerous barriers. Her subway stop includes tactile guides, but the route from her home is blocked by parked scooters, construction debris, and trash bins. She has fallen multiple times and now depends on neighbors to accompany her during busy hours.

These challenges make even short neighborhood trips exhausting or impossible for many disabled individuals. What able-bodied people experience as routine errands becomes a source of anxiety and fatigue.²⁴

These barriers reduce not only access to transit but also participation in work, healthcare, and community life.

Why Barriers Persist

Much of the Seoul Metropolitan Area was built before the introduction of modern accessibility standards. A 2019 report by the Seoul Urban Planning Office found that more than 60 percent of sidewalks in older neighborhoods fail to meet basic width and slope standards.²⁵

The lack of required retrofits makes matters worse. New buildings must follow the Korean Building Act, but older sidewalks and buildings are often exempt. Responsibility for upgrades is left to local governments or private owners, many of whom neglect accessibility improvements.

Fragmented governance further undermines progress. Different agencies and private developers operate without meaningful coordination. As a result, accessible pathways are frequently interrupted, with one side of the street upgraded while the other remains hazardous.

²³ Kim, H., Kweon, J., Lee, S., Kim, K. (Kenny), & Cha, J. (2025). Analysis of activity and mobility characteristics of disabled people using wheelchairs: Using GPS trajectory data and travel surveys. *Journal of Korean Society of Transportation*, 43(2), 121–144. <https://doi.org/10.7470/jkst.2025.43.2.121>

²⁴ Rantakokko, M., & Wilkie, R. (2017, June 30). The role of environmental factors for the onset of restricted mobility outside the home among older adults with osteoarthritis: A prospective cohort study. *BMJ Open*, 7(6), e012826.

<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2016-012826>

²⁵ Seoul Metropolitan Government. (2021, December 13). Regulations on the final road structure design standards.

https://www.codil.or.kr/policy/read.do;jsessionid=Df qDw7H9oftJMiRj531ewzua8YF2aaiOCeERWgFUaO Qy20jMxsX9tSqTG32N1RjD.codil_servlet_engine1?bbsId=BBSMSTR_900000000006&nttId=12758&searchWrd=

Why Enforcement Matters

South Korea's disability laws prohibit physical barriers in public spaces, but these laws are not consistently enforced. The Disability Discrimination Act relies heavily on individual complaints rather than proactive government oversight.²⁶ This system forces disabled people to bear the burden of reporting violations, creating a slow and uneven process.

Other countries have taken stronger action. In the United States, local governments must regularly assess sidewalk conditions under the Americans with Disabilities Act. When New York City failed to comply, a lawsuit led to a legal settlement mandating the installation of over 100,000 accessible curb ramps.²⁷

Treating accessibility as optional guarantees slow progress. Like building safety codes or food regulations, accessibility should be treated as a basic public safety obligation. Without legal deadlines, penalties, and public accountability, improvements will continue to stall.

²⁶ Jo, J. (2023). Public enforcement and disability law: A United States–South Korea comparison. *Hastings Law Journal*, 75(1), 199–232. Retrieved from https://repository.uclawsf.edu/hastings_law_journal/vol75/iss1/6/

²⁷ Disability Rights Advocates. (2019, July 23). Judge approves settlement that dramatically improves accessibility of New York City's sidewalks [Press release]. Disability Rights Advocates. Retrieved from <https://dralegal.org/press/judge-approves-settlement-that-dramatically-improves-accessibility-of-new-york-city-sidewalks/>

²⁸ Building and Construction Authority. (2024,

Global Models That Work

Many global cities have shown that accessibility improvements are achievable. Singapore offers subsidies covering up to 80 percent of the cost for private owners who install ramps, elevators, or tactile guides. This has driven major improvements in both homes and businesses.²⁸

London uses a digital curb audit system, which tracks accessibility gaps and helps prioritize repairs.²⁹ Public reporting tools and scheduled benchmarks keep progress on track and reduce neglect.

New York City was forced to adopt a citywide accessibility plan after legal action from disability rights groups.³⁰ The plan includes regular progress updates, mandatory curb ramp installations, and penalties for non-compliance.

Seoul should follow these examples. Accessibility upgrades should not stop at transit stations but should extend to sidewalks, crossings, and all surrounding public spaces. Mandatory legal deadlines and enforcement

October 7). Accessibility fund. BuildSG—Accessibility & universal design. Building and Construction Authority Singapore. Retrieved from <https://www1.bca.gov.sg/buildsg/universal-design/accessibility-fund/>

²⁹ Transport for London. (2023). Curbside management and digital auditing for accessibility. <https://tfl.gov.uk/transport-accessibility/>

³⁰ Scalise, E. (2019, August 8). Where the sidewalk ends for disabled New Yorkers. *City & State New York*. Retrieved from <https://www.cityandstateny.com/policy/2019/08/where-the-sidewalk-ends-for-disabled-new-yorkers/177053/>

mechanisms are essential to ensure comprehensive retrofits across the entire city.

Overloaded and Unequal Paratransit Services: Structural Barriers to Mobility Justice

Paratransit services in South Korea were created to meet the transportation needs of disabled individuals, but their current design falls short. Services like call taxis and wheelchair-accessible vans are chronically underfunded, with long wait times, rigid service areas, and outdated booking systems. In 2021, only about 10 percent of people with severe disabilities in Seoul used special transportation regularly, with average waits exceeding 50 minutes.³¹

At the root of these problems is a fragmented governance model that treats mobility as a local issue rather than a basic right. Each municipality in the Seoul Metropolitan Area, including Seoul, Gyeonggi Province, and Incheon, runs its own paratransit program. Vehicles rarely cross administrative borders, turning jurisdictional lines into mobility barriers. In one case, a wheelchair user was denied access to a family funeral simply because her destination fell outside the service area.³² This is not just poor coordination; it denies

people the right to participate in public life.

Technology and service design issues make matters worse. Booking systems often rely on phone reservations, limited operating hours, and outdated interfaces. Many platforms are inaccessible to older adults, non-Korean speakers, and people with limited digital literacy. These design flaws further marginalize already vulnerable groups. As scholar Anna Lawson has noted, inaccessibility is not an accident of poor planning but a built-in feature of unequal systems.³³

Paratransit services need fundamental reform. Regional integration, technological modernization, and universal design must replace the current patchwork approach. A unified dispatch system with real-time tracking, centralized booking, and cross-jurisdictional service should be the standard. Most importantly, the system must be backed by legal guarantees of mobility rights, not left to local discretion. Without these changes, paratransit will continue to operate as a segregated system, blocking rather than enabling full participation in society.

³¹ Seoul Tourism Organization. (n.d.). Accessibility. Visit Seoul: The official travel guide to Seoul. Retrieved August 5, 2025, from <https://english.visitseoul.net/accessibility>

³² Son, J.-H., Kim, D.-G., Lee, E., & Choi, H. (2022). Investigating the spatiotemporal imbalance of accessibility to demand responsive transit (DRT) service for people with disabilities: Explanatory case study in South Korea. *Journal of Advanced*

Transportation, 2022, Article 6806947. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/6806947>

³³ Lawson, A., Eskyté, I., Orchard, M., Houtzager, D., & De Vos, E. L. (2022). Pedestrians with disabilities and town and city streets: From shared to inclusive space? *The Journal of Public Space*, 7(2), 41–62. <https://doi.org/10.32891/jps.v7i2.1603>

Exclusionary Transit Design and Policy

Despite official rhetoric about “inclusive mobility,” Korea’s public transportation system remains structurally inaccessible. Subways and buses routinely exclude disabled users through physical barriers, confusing procedures, and inconsistent policies. As of 2021, over 30 percent of Seoul’s subway stations lacked full elevator access, and many platforms had unsafe gaps that prevented wheelchair and blind passengers from boarding safely.³⁴ Bus ramps are frequently broken or absent, and drivers often ignore waiting wheelchair users.

This inaccessibility is worsened by a lack of consistency. Some stations are accessible, but others nearby are not, forcing disabled travelers to obsessively plan routes and backup options. This undermines the basic principle of universal design, which requires environments to be usable by everyone without special adaptations.³⁵ Other countries, including

Japan, Germany, and the United States, have adopted enforceable national standards for accessibility. South Korea has not.

Policy failures also contribute. Elevators have been installed in some stations, but these improvements are often incomplete, serving only one platform or lacking backup systems during outages.³⁶ Retrofitting proceeds slowly, with no binding timelines or legal consequences for delays. As a result, Infrastructure technically improves while remaining structurally unfair.

Advocacy efforts to challenge this exclusion have faced backlash. In 2022, disability rights group SADD held peaceful subway protests but faced public hostility and political condemnation. Media coverage framed their actions as inconveniences to commuters, not civil rights demands.³⁷ This reaction reveals a deeper cultural ableism that goes beyond poor

³⁴ Seoul Metropolitan Government. (2021, April 20). Seoul Metro updates mobile app to help people with disabilities to use subway [News release]. Visit Seoul (Seoul Metropolitan Government). Retrieved August 5, 2025, from <https://english.seoul.go.kr/seoul-metro-updates-mobile-app-to-help-people-with-disabilities-to-use-subway/>

³⁵ Lee, S. Y. (2022, April 2). Seoul Metro’s long, open, ugly war against disabled protesters. S(substack)-Bahn. Retrieved from <https://www.substack-bahn.net/p/seoul-metros-long-open-ugly-war-against>

³⁶ Kim, H. (2024, January 13). Seoul subway stations where one station–one route is not secured for mobility-challenged riders [데일리안]. Dailian.

Retrieved from [https://www.dailian.co.kr/news/view/1317071/\(dailian.co.kr\)](https://www.dailian.co.kr/news/view/1317071/(dailian.co.kr))

³⁷ Lee, H.-C. (2022, April 20). Wheelchair users block the Seoul subway as the right takes power. The Nation. Retrieved from <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/korea-disability-protest/>

허지원. (2022, 2월 15). 욕하고 밀쳐도 “무관심이 더 무섭다”...장애인 지하철 시위 왜? [CBS 노컷뉴스]. 노컷뉴스. Retrieved from [https://www.nocutnews.co.kr/news/5707129\(nocutnews.co.kr\)](https://www.nocutnews.co.kr/news/5707129(nocutnews.co.kr))

policy to shape public attitudes.

Fixing these failures requires more than infrastructure projects. It requires enforceable legal protections, mandatory universal design standards, and widespread public education. Transit workers should receive regular disability awareness training. Without systemic change, accessibility will remain a hollow promise.

The Emotional and Social Impact of Inaccessibility

For disabled people, transportation barriers create daily emotional strain and social isolation. Each journey is filled with uncertainty: Will the elevator be working? Will the bus driver stop? Will I be stranded far from home? These constant calculations lead to chronic stress. As disability advocate Kim Ji-yeon put it, “I am not trapped by my wheelchair. I am trapped by this city’s refusal to move with me.”³⁸

Research backs this up. A 2019 Seoul National University study found that disabled people who faced regular transit barriers were three times more likely to experience major depression.³⁹ Constant dependence on

caregivers or transit staff further erodes autonomy and dignity. One respondent described, “It’s not the stairs that hurt me the most. It’s the look of pity from strangers.”⁴⁰

These harms extend beyond the individual. Inaccessibility excludes disabled people from public spaces, workplaces, schools, and social events. Many report going weeks without leaving home. Young disabled people miss critical peer interactions, and low-income or immigrant disabled individuals are often cut off from public services altogether.

The cost of inaccessibility cannot be measured in infrastructure budgets alone. It is felt in lost potential, social exclusion, and the erosion of trust and dignity. Treating transit purely as logistics ignores its role in citizenship and belonging. As long as disabled people are excluded from mobility, the emotional burden will fall hardest on those already most isolated.

Lessons from Other Cities

The failures of Korea’s transit system are not inevitable. Other cities have shown that accessible transit is achievable when backed by

³⁸ Lee, H.-C. (2022, April 20). Wheelchair users block the Seoul subway as the right takes power. The Nation. Retrieved from <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/korea-disability-protest/>

³⁹ Choi, Y., Nam, K., & Kim, C. Y. (2019). Association between convenience of transportation and unmet healthcare needs of rural elderly in Korea. Journal of Preventive Medicine and Public Health. [https://jpmph.org/journal/view.php?page=355&vol=](https://jpmph.org/journal/view.php?page=355&vol=52&year=2019)

[52&year=2019](https://jpmph.org/journal/view.php?page=355&vol=52&year=2019)

⁴⁰ Wright, E. (2019, August). The power of pity: The offensiveness of using disability to gain sympathy. Conscious Life (Medium). Retrieved August 5, 2025, from <https://medium.com/conscious-life/the-power-of-pity-the-offensiveness-of-using-disability-to-gain-sympathy-74b29b614974>
en.wikipedia.org+8medium.com+8uxdesign.cc+8

political will and structural reform.

London provides a strong example. Every black cab must be wheelchair accessible, and Transport for London enforces standardized rules and driver training across the city.⁴¹ Unlike Seoul's fragmented taxi services, London guarantees disabled riders the same access across neighborhoods.

Singapore has fully transitioned to a low-floor, step-free bus system, with tactile paving and automated ramps across all routes.⁴² This was achieved through a national timeline with clear targets, not optional local projects. Rider satisfaction, especially among elderly and visually impaired users, has significantly improved.⁴³

New York City's paratransit system was overhauled following legal action from disability rights groups. Reforms included app-based booking, real-time vehicle tracking, and mandatory compliance audits.⁴⁴ Progress came not from goodwill, but from enforceable legal requirements and sustained public pressure.

What these cities have in common is simple:

accessibility is treated as a governance priority, not a public relations slogan. They use clear laws, enforcement mechanisms, and centralized oversight to drive change.

Seoul now faces a choice. It can adopt similar reforms, with binding timelines and integrated services, or continue relying on symbolic improvements and fragmented systems. Accessibility must be treated as a fundamental part of urban citizenship, not an afterthought.

Centering Disabled Voices in Policy

Transport reform cannot succeed without the direct participation of disabled people. Accessibility is not just a technical issue. It is about lived experience, power, and whose perspectives shape public space. The disability rights movement's phrase, "Nothing about us without us," is not a slogan. It is a call for structural inclusion.

Too often, disabled individuals are treated as passive recipients of services rather than experts in their own mobility. Design failures, such as elevators placed at the far ends of stations, inaccessible transit apps, or ramps too steep to

⁴¹ Transport for London. (n.d.). Passengers and accessibility – Taxi & private hire. Retrieved August 5, 2025, from <https://tfl.gov.uk/info-for/taxis-and-private-hire/passengers-and-accessibility>

⁴² Land Transport Authority. (n.d.). An inclusive public transport system. In A better public transport experience. Retrieved August 5, 2025, from https://www.lta.gov.sg/content/ltagov/en/getting_around/public_transport/a_better_public_transport_experience/an_inclusive_public_transport_system.html

⁴³ Land Transport Authority. (2019). Land Transport Master Plan 2040 [e-report]. https://www.lta.gov.sg/content/dam/ltagov/who_we_are/our_work/land_transport_master_plan_2040/pdf/LTA%20LTMP%202040%20eReport.pdf

⁴⁴ Eyewitness News. (2018, January 22). Audit finds problems in handling complaints about Access-A-Ride service. WABC. Retrieved from <https://abc7ny.com/post/audit-finds-problems-in-handling-complaints-about-access-a-ride/2974201/>

use, are symptoms of planning without user input.⁴⁵ Infrastructure might appear accessible on paper, but it fails when it ignores those who use it. Lived experience is not an afterthought; it is essential knowledge.

Current policy structures rarely offer real influence. Disabled people are often invited to consultations after decisions are already made or included in focus groups without decision-making power. This is tokenism, not genuine participation. Cities like Toronto have done better by establishing the Advisory Committee on Accessible Transit (ACAT), a permanent body with voting rights and direct influence on transit operations.⁴⁶ Seoul needs to move in this direction, giving disabled representatives equal standing in planning, budgeting, and oversight processes.

Inclusion is also about practical governance. Co-design leads to better policies that meet real needs, reduces the risk of expensive mistakes, and builds public trust. Systems that involve disabled users from the start see higher satisfaction, increased use by vulnerable groups, and fewer complaints after implementation.⁴⁷ Accessibility must not be handed out as a favor.

It must be built through shared authority.

Seoul's next step is clear: disabled citizens should not be "consulted" but embedded within the decision-making structures that shape transit. Only then will inclusion become standard practice, not a rare exception.

A Transit System that Respects Equal Citizenship

The barriers described throughout this paper, fragmented paratransit, inaccessible stations, weak policy enforcement, and the emotional cost of exclusion, are not isolated problems. They are symptoms of a system that regularly denies disabled people equal access to city life. The message is clear: mobility remains a daily battle, not a guaranteed right.

But these outcomes are not inevitable. London, Singapore, and New York have proven that structural reform is possible when accessibility is treated as a matter of governance and accountability. These examples show that transit can either deepen inequality or dismantle it, depending on whose rights are prioritized.

At its core, this is a question of citizenship.

⁴⁵ König, A., Seiler, A., Alčiauskaitė, L., & Hatzakis, T. (2021). A participatory qualitative analysis of barriers of public transport by persons with disabilities from seven European cities. *Journal of Accessibility and Design for All*, 11(2), 295–321. <https://doi.org/10.17411/jacces.v11i2.353>

⁴⁶ Toronto Transit Commission. (n.d.). The Advisory Committee on Accessible Transit. Retrieved August 5, 2025, from

<https://www.ttc.ca/about-the-ttc/the-advisory-committee-on-accessible-transit/>

⁴⁷ König, A., Seiler, A., Alčiauskaitė, L., & Hatzakis, T. (2021). A participatory qualitative analysis of barriers of public transport by persons with disabilities from seven European cities. *Journal of Accessibility and Design for All*, 11(2), 295–321. <https://doi.org/10.17411/jacces.v11i2.353>

Mobility is not a bonus reserved for the privileged. It is the foundation of participation in work, education, family life, and community. When transit systems treat disabled people as afterthoughts, they deny them more than access to transportation. They deny them the right to belong and thrive. True inclusion means seeing disabled people as co-creators of the city, not burdens to be managed.

Seoul faces a choice. It can continue with piecemeal improvements or commit to full, structural reform. This means adopting binding universal design standards, unifying regional transit systems, and placing disabled leadership at every level of policymaking. Anything less will keep equal citizenship out of reach.

A transit system reveals what a city values. The time for empty promises is over. It is time to build transportation that guarantees freedom, dignity, and equal participation for all. Mobility justice is not charity. It is a foundation of democracy.