

Travel Barriers for People Living with Spinal Cord Injury

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Objective: Research indicates that a disproportionately smaller number of people with disabilities fully participate in mainstream travel activities than the average population. Although much has been done to understand the environmental factors that contribute to lowered participation of people with spinal cord injury (PwSCI), the factors influencing their travel participation are rarely explored. Thus, this study aimed to understand the environmental barriers that prevent PwSCI from traveling more often.

Design/Method: In-depth individual qualitative interviews were conducted with different stakeholder groups: people living with SCI (39), their caregivers/family members (24), therapists (9) and travel professionals (11).

Results: Most respondents felt that the Americans with Disabilities Act has significantly contributed to improved travel accessibility. However, many indicated there is still much to be done in terms of universal accessibility, especially for wheelchair users. In addition, almost all respondents described long-distance travel as a hassle after the injury since it usually required extensive planning. Furthermore, respondents consistently reported a systemic ignorance toward people with disabilities. That ignorance ranged from the stereotypes defining people in wheelchairs as lesser than others, to travel services not understanding the needs of wheelchair users. For example, many respondents thought travel service's definitions of accessibility differed from their own: a hotel room that is classified as "accessible" may not actually be accessible to many wheelchair users.

Conclusion: Although inaccessibility encountered during travel was viewed as a major barrier, many respondents believed societal lack of understanding of disability needs was equally important. They considered this ignorance to be one of the primary reasons for a lack of accessibility in the travel industry. Our results suggest that travel service providers and policy makers should provide accessible services by differentiating between the needs of those with ambulatory and non-ambulatory disabilities.

Support: This project is funded by Craig H. Neilsen Foundation (Project #321788).