

Comparison of Public Transit Modes

With the myriad of transit services available within many communities, it is helpful to have a general idea of how each service operates and of its potential advantages and drawbacks for the average passenger and for those people who have disabilities, including blindness or low vision. The following service descriptions are general in nature and do not reflect the characteristics, operating policies or nuances of any particular transportation service operating in any particular community. Readers should visit their local transit agency's website or contact the agency directly for more detailed information about any services that the agency operates.

Fixed-Route Transit

What Is It?

Fixed-route transit includes bus, light rail, streetcar, Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), and any other type of local transit service that operates for the general public. The key characteristics of fixed-route transit are that it operates on pre-determined routes and at pre-determined times during a specified period of time each day. The hours during which service is available and the frequency of service can vary from day to day. For example, many transit systems provide more service during a longer period of time on weekdays and much less service on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays, and some systems do not offer fixed-route transit at all during evenings, late nights, or on weekends and holidays.

Possible Advantages

- No need to book ahead. Just show up and ride.
- Operates on a preset schedule and at preset locations.
- Often the lowest cost option in any community.

Possible Drawbacks

- Must get to and from the stop or station. Need to know the route and allow time for the trip.
- Must share the ride with other passengers.
- May feel less safe at times.

ADA Paratransit

What is It?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires transit agencies to provide origin-to-destination (typically defined as curb-to-curb or door-to-door) service called

“paratransit” for eligible people with disabilities who are unable to independently use fixed-route transit for some or all trips. Paratransit is typically a shared-ride service that passengers must request at least one day in advance. By law, service must be available in the same areas and during the same hours of operation as fixed-route transit, and the fare cannot be more than twice the non-discounted cost of fixed-route transit for the same trip.

Possible Advantages

- Designed specifically for people with disabilities. Personnel receives training to provide appropriate assistance.
- Can wait for the vehicle at the pick-up location. Transported all the way to the drop-off location.
- Other passengers are also disabled and/or older adults. This environment may make it easier for passengers to feel safer and more comfortable, and this may allow for a greater sense of community.

Possible Drawbacks

- Must book trips in advance—typically at least one and up to fourteen days in advance. Although some agencies offer online booking, most customers must book their trips by phone, and long wait times can sometimes be a problem.
- Must be willing to negotiate the pick-up time up to one hour before or after the requested time.
- Must be ready to ride during an approximately 30-minute pick-up window.
- May be required to share the ride; travel times can be unpredictable.
- By law, may cost as much as twice the non-discounted fixed-route fare for a comparable trip.

Express Bus Service

What is It?

Express bus service typically operates during morning and afternoon rush hours and connects suburban areas with more central locations where large numbers of passengers wish to travel on a regular basis such as a downtown business district, a major transit center, or another location with lots of jobs and commerce. Express buses are often over-the-road buses with only one door for boarding and exiting and a number of steep steps which passengers must traverse in order to board or exit. Typically, there is also a lift for customers using mobility devices, but because of the height of the bus, using the lift is more difficult and may not be a suitable alternative for some individuals. By law, paratransit is not required in areas served exclusively by express bus service.

Possible Advantages

- Operates at a higher speed to connect suburbs with a downtown area or other major attraction.
- Vehicles are often relatively comfortable; may include reclining seats and/or WI-FI on board.
- Large percentage of other passengers are commuters. Service may feel safer.

Possible Drawbacks

- Service may only operate during morning and afternoon rush hours.
- Stops at suburban locations may be more difficult to reach and/or locate.
- Vehicles may be harder to board and exit for some riders.
- Fare may be higher than for fixed-route service.

Commuter Rail Service

What Is It?

Commuter rail service is train service that connects a major urban center with smaller communities and suburbs that surround it. Commuter rail services vary widely in terms of their level of accessibility, so appropriateness should be determined on a case-by-case basis. Issues that can impact its level of access include 1) the location of stations and whether or not there is a safe path of travel to and from boarding areas; and 2) whether there is level boarding or the requirement to climb steep steps to enter and exit the train.

Possible Advantages

- Operates at a higher speed to connect suburbs with a downtown area or other major attraction.
- Vehicles are often relatively comfortable; may include reclining seats and/or WI-FI on board.
- Large percentage of other passengers are commuters. Service may feel safer.

Possible Drawbacks

- Service may only operate during morning and afternoon rush hours.
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Bus Rapid Transit

What is It?

Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is a hybrid of bus and light rail service and typically operates in high-traffic areas with the goal of moving larger numbers of passengers through congested areas more quickly. BRT takes many forms, ranging from standard transit buses making limited-stop service along existing bus routes to purpose-

built vehicles resembling light rail vehicles that operate in dedicated lanes served by stations with raised platforms allowing for level boarding. Because BRT services look and operate so differently from community to community, its appropriateness should be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Possible Advantages

- Typically faster than fixed-route transit.
- May offer level boarding.

Possible Drawbacks

- Stations and stops may be more difficult to reach and may be in the median area of high-traffic corridors.

Neighborhood shuttles and circulators

What is It?

Neighborhood circulators and shuttles are typically operated with smaller minibuses or vans and connect smaller neighborhoods with a mix of residential and commercial destinations with transit stops and stations that allow connections to the rest of the community. Some of these services operate on fixed schedules, and others require the passenger to call ahead or book a trip request online. Some of these services use designated stops, and others require the passenger to “flag the shuttle down” as it approaches. Many of these services will deviate a short distance off route to pick up or drop off passengers and especially passengers with disabilities. Because these services vary widely by community, their appropriateness should be determined on a case by case basis.

Possible Advantages

- Typically available on-demand or at least within a short time after booking.
- May offer relatively short travel times within the areas they serve.
- Typically allow for convenient connections to the rest of the transit network.

Possible Drawbacks

- Generally must be booked ahead.
- Website/mobile app may not be accessible, and alternative procedures for calling in may not be convenient.
- Stop locations may not be easy to find.
- Some systems may require passengers to “flag down” the vehicle as it approaches. The ADA requires transit agencies to make “reasonable accommodations” for people with disabilities who cannot flag down the vehicle. For example: the agency can allow a person with a disability to call ahead so that the agency can alert the driver to be watching. However, these arrangements require extra effort on the part of the rider, and they may not always be effective.

Microtransit

What is It?

Microtransit is a new service type coming into popularity across the country. It serves a similar niche as neighborhood shuttles but with a couple of twists. First, service is typically provided within relatively small areas such as a neighborhood or area around a transit center or rail station. Vehicles are smaller minibuses and vans. Typically, there are no fixed stops. Instead, customers use a mobile app to identify their pick-up location and their desired drop-off location. The app then determines when and where the customer should proceed to meet a vehicle which is also dispatched to meet them. Recognizing that some customers may not be able to book through an app, most agencies also allow customers to call in trip requests by phone.

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Possible Drawbacks

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Mobility on Demand

What is It?

Mobility on Demand (MOD for short) works like paratransit. Customers call or visit a mobile app or website to request a trip. The agency then sends a vehicle to provide the trip. Sometimes, MOD services are available between a transit center and the surrounding neighborhoods. Sometimes, they may serve an area where transit is limited or non-existent. MOD services may be provided by traditional taxicabs or van operators, or they may be provided by rideshare services like Uber and Lyft. MOD service may be shared ride or not. In some instances, the transit agency simply gives customers a discount code which can be used to book directly on a service like Uber or Lyft. Because these services vary so widely from location to location, their appropriateness should be determined on a case-by-case basis.

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Possible Drawbacks

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This information is adapted from our course, [Gearing Up for Transit: Options and Advocacy Skills for People Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision](#). The course was developed by [Accessible Avenue, LLC](#).



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